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## Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon's Book

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# Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon's Book



**Brant Gardner**

In 1837 Joseph **Smith** made several editorial changes in the Book of **Mormon**. Many are relatively innocuous, but one of them is much more substantial. In the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, the verse we know as 1 Nephi 11:18 reads:

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh.

For the 1837 edition, Joseph inserted “the Son of,” so that the verse has read ever since:

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the **mother of the Son of God**, after the manner of the flesh.

There is no way to know just what was on Joseph Smith’s mind when he made that change, but that hasn’t stopped a lot of people from trying.

However, when we focus on the *fact* of the change, we inherently begin to ask the wrong questions. Several authors have discussed this change as evidence of an evolving LDS theology of God. That very question implicitly supposes Joseph Smith as the author of the Book of Mormon by assuming that the Book of Mormon is evidence of Joseph’s early thought. If we believe the Book of Mormon, it isn’t. The Book of Mormon doesn’t represent Joseph’s theology—it represents Nephite theology. To understand Nephite theology, our focus should be on explaining why the verse is there in the first place, not on what happened to it later. For the Book of Mormon, understanding theological

evolution will in fact be the key to our understanding of this text, but it will not be the evolution of LDS theology that will explain it. It will be the evolution of Israelite theology.

The Book of Mormon begins its history in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah in Jerusalem, or 597 B.C. While this is our first dated event, the figures in the story are obviously alive at that time, and as the text opens, Lehi has four sons and some daughters. Lehi is clearly old enough to have experienced certain events that took place before 597 B.C., but which were not recorded. The invasion of Jerusalem by Babylon is certainly the most obviously catalytic event for the Book of Mormon as it sets the stage for Lehi's call as a prophet and the command for his family to flee the coming destruction. However, another earlier event may prove to have been the most lasting influence on Book of Mormon history. Lehi lived through the time of the Deuteronomic reform.

In a forum presentation at BYU in 2003, Margaret Barker noted:

King Josiah changed the religion of Israel in 623 B.C. According to the Old Testament account in 2 Kings 23 he removed all manner of idolatrous items from the temple and purified his kingdom of Canaanite practices. Temple vessels made for Baal, Asherah and the host of heaven were removed, idolatrous priests were deposed, the Asherah itself was taken from the temple and burned, and much more besides. An old law book had been discovered in the temple, and this had prompted the king to bring the religion of his kingdom into line with the requirements of that book. There could only be one temple, it stated, and so all other places of sacrificial worship had to be destroyed. The law book is easily recognizable as Deuteronomy, and so King Josiah's purge is usually known as the Deuteronomic reform of the temple.<sup>1</sup>

The serendipity of finding a lost book right at the beginning of series of reforms has raised the question of the authenticity of that book. Even though the timing is still suspicious, we need not dismiss the entire work as a politically exigent construction. Norman Gottwald writes of this in his introduction to Deuteronomy for the *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*:

The one hard date is the year of Josiah's reform, 622. But the origins of Deuteronomy are older than the reform. Levitical reading and preaching of the law did not begin in 622; considering the allusions to Shechem the practice must have extended back at least a century into Northern Israel. The shock of the discovery of the law in 622 does not mean that such traditions were unknown in Israel previously; it means rather that the Judean monarchy had lost touch with them for as much as 50 or 75 years (assuming that Hezekiah knew of them and used them in his reforms)...

Was the law written specifically for the purpose of “planting” it in the temple? Perhaps-if we assume that only in this way could its claims be brought to the king convincingly and without danger of the law’s advocates. Yet it is striking that even with the written law before him Josiah was unconvinced until specific supporters of the law had assured him of its validity (2 Kings 22:8-20)...

It is more likely that the writing and rewriting of Deuteronomic laws and admonitions was going on under-ground throughout the reign of Manasseh (ca. 687-642). If we visualize the Yahwistic cultic calendar as lapsing or at least suffering from neglect, the old patterns of cultic renewal of covenant and law would be strained and even threatened with extinction. Oral materials remembered from year to year would no longer be recited, and authoritative texts of the laws inscribed at cult sites would become defaced or even destroyed. Thus both oral and written records of [Deuteronomic] traditions were driven underground and fostered there until they broke to the surface in 622.

This interpretation does away with the view that the planted Deuteronomy was a “pious fraud.” No one needed to concoct a book purporting to be by Moses; all he had to do was collect materials long attributed to Moses, through the device of the cult functionary speaking on behalf of Moses, and to assert that these traditions should once again be binding in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond understanding how Deuteronomy might be both new and old and the same time, Gottwald’s explanation highlights the idea that there were multiple strands of religious understanding in Israel for at least one hundred years prior to Lehi. Very clearly the Deuteronomic reform operated against a previously acceptable tradition. In doing so, it did not invent something new, but elevated an available, if not then dominant, tradition. This multiplicity of traditions within the same culture is absolutely essential to our understanding of the religious climate that produced Lehi, and influenced Nephi.

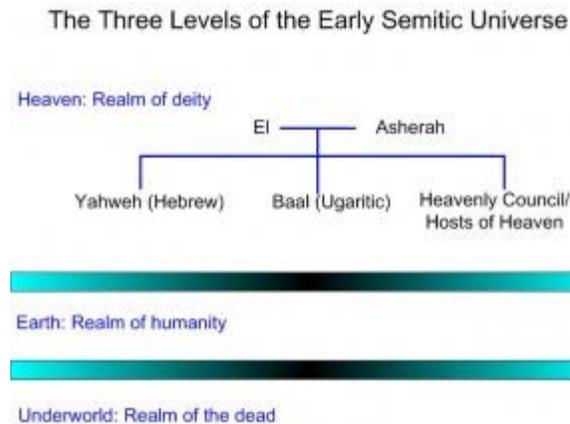
As we attempt to understand the multiple lines of thought that were present in Jerusalem on the eve of the Deuteronomic reform, the figure of Asherah becomes an important gauge of both theological change, and the time reference for that change. In the Bible, the term Asherah may refer simultaneously to the mother-goddess of that name, or to her image (such as was removed from the temple).<sup>3</sup>

What was the image of the mother-goddess Asherah doing in the temple in Jerusalem? She was there because she was the wife, or consort, of Yahweh. Several inscriptions have been discovered that

specifically speak of “Yahweh and his Asherah.” Scholars accept this as an indication that Asherah was the consort of Yahweh.<sup>4</sup> Some seventy years before the Deuteronomic reform, King Hezekiah initiated a similar reform that removed Asherah from the temple. Unlike the Deuteronomic reform, that of Hezekiah did not last. In fact, it did not survive even to his son. Speaking of Manasseh’s reversal of his father’s reform, Raphael Patai conjectures:

If Manasseh did not bother to replace the Brazen Serpent, the other image removed from the Temple by his father, this was probably due to the fact that with the passage of time the worship of a deity symbolized or represented by a serpent figure had become obsolete. Not so Asherah, whose motherly figure must have been dear to many worshipers and whose restoration to her traditional place in the Temple was therefore considered a religious act of great importance. It is tempting to conjecture that the mythical motivation behind Manasseh’s act was the conviction that Yahweh’s consort, the great mother-goddess Asherah, must be restored to her old and lawful place at the side of her husband.<sup>5</sup>

What makes Asherah such a key in understanding the threads of Israelite thought about deity is the discovery of a set Ugaritic (or Canaanite) texts in 1928. Among these texts is a treasure trove of information about religion in the time period of about 1350-1150 B.C. C.L. Seow notes: “the value of the Ugaritic texts goes beyond the horizons of Canaanite faith. The evidence suggests that Israelite theology was not as radically discontinuous with Canaanite religions as was once thought.”<sup>6</sup>

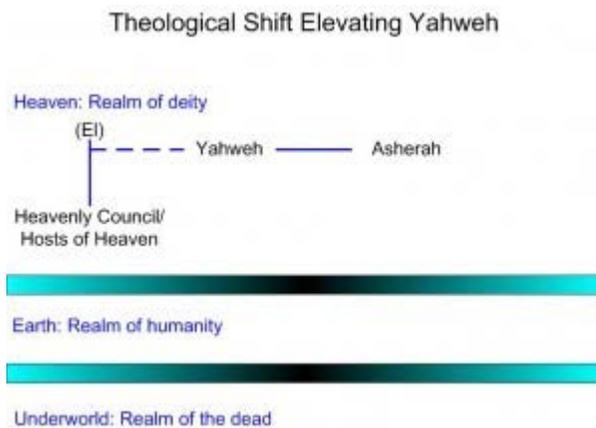


What those texts make clear is that the early Semitic religion worshipped a pantheon structured as a divine family, with a Father god, El and his consort, this very Asherah.<sup>7</sup> These two are at the head of a heavenly council. Daniel C. Peterson synthesizes the relevant information:

The council is known by various names in the Ugaritic materials, including “the assembly of the gods” and “the assembly of the sons of ‘El.” According to Canaanite belief, ‘El was the creator-god.

Evidence strongly suggests that he was the original chief god of the Semites generally. As creator, however, he also stood at the head of the pantheon as the “father of the gods” or the “father of the sons of God” and was called the “ancient one,” the “patriarch,” and the “eternal one.” Consequently, the gods as his sons, were designated collectively as “the sons of ‘El.”<sup>8</sup>

Yahweh was preeminent among the sons of El in the Israelite conception. The gods of this heavenly council were assigned to be the gods of various nations (Deuteronomy 32:8), and Yahweh was the god of Israel. As Israelite thought developed, El as the Father receded into the background, and Yahweh continued to gain in prominence. This process of the elevation of Yahweh was in full force by the eighth century B.C. when Asherah appears as Yahweh’s consort, not El’s. Mark S. Smith suggests:



Asherah, having been the consort of El, would have become Yahweh’s consort only if these two gods were identified by this time. Indeed, it is evident from texts such as Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh surrounded by the Seraphim (Isaiah 6), and especially the prophetic vision of the divine council scene in 1 Kings 22:19 that Yahweh assumed the position of presider by this time.<sup>9</sup>

This gives us both an evolutionary trajectory and a timeframe. The heavenly council with El as the father, and Yahweh as preeminent son, plausibly dates to the same timeframe as the Ugaritic texts, that is, 1350 – 1150 B.C. After that time, there is a developing theology in Israel that increases the importance of Yahweh and elevates him to a position where he begins to take over the functions previously assigned to his celestial father, El. This process is in nearing its completion around 700 B.C. when we find that Yahweh has not only taken over El’s place in the council, he has taken El’s consort as his own.

In spite of this elevation to prominence and proto-monotheism, Yahweh’s relationship to the council and to his father was not entirely severed by this process. Parallel strands, perhaps reinforced

by other Semitic religions, maintained the stories of El and the heavenly council. Dr. Peterson continues:

The Canaanite terminology of “the assembly of the gods” and “the assembly of the sons of ‘El” finds its parallels in the Hebrew Bible. In Psalm 29:1, which has long been recognized by scholars as an Israelite adaptation of an older Canaanite hymn, members of the council are referred to as *bene ‘elim*. The King James translation renders this phrase as “the mighty.” The same Hebrew phrase occurs at Psalm 89:6, where the King James Version has “the sons of the mighty.” Neither rendition is adequate. In both passages, the New Jerusalem Bible, to choose one of the best of the modern translations, gets things precisely right by translating *bene ‘elim* as “sons of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Equally as important to our understanding of Yahweh in the council is the identification of Yahweh as the one who would atone as the Messiah. Margaret Barker’s *The Great Angel* examines at length hundreds of passages from texts ranging from Jewish to Christian to Gnostic that, as she interprets them, identify Yahweh as the future Messiah and Jesus, in his Messianic role, as equated with Yahweh. As she describes the heavenly council, headed by the Father-God:

Yahweh was one of the sons of *El Elyon*; and Jesus in the Gospels was described as a Son of *El Elyon*, God Most High. In other words he was described as a heavenly being. Thus the annunciation narrative has the term “son of the Most High” (Luke 1.32) and the demoniac recognized his exorcist as “son of the Most High God” (Mark 5.7). Jesus is not called the son of Yahweh nor the son of the Lord, but he is called Lord. We also know that whoever wrote the New Testament translated the name Yahweh by *Kyrios*, Lord. (See, for example, the quotation from Deuteronomy 6.5: “You shall love Yahweh your God...” which is rendered in Luke 10.27 “You shall love the Lord [*Kyrios*] your God.”) This suggests that the Gospel writers, in using the terms “Lord” and “son of God Most High”, saw Jesus as an angel figure, and gave him their version of the sacred name Yahweh.<sup>11</sup>

Of course this particular connection comes from New Testament usage. Dr. Barker suggests that it was nevertheless a continuation of an old strand of thought that became obscured through the Deuteronomic reforms. Barker examines an interesting Old Testament passage about this Messianic expectation that appears to have suffered some obfuscation:

The clearest evidence for its survival [the anthropomorphism of the God/Messiah], however, is in the widespread tradition of interpreting words of “man” as references to the Messiah, or of designating the Messiah simply as “the man.” This can best be seen by examining the various translations of the Balaam oracles, which were believed to predict the Messiah

(Numbers 24.3-9; 15-24). Thus Numbers 24.7a, where the Hebrew has the curious lines: “Water shall flow from his buckets and he shall rule over many nations” became in the LXX [the Septuagint]: “And there shall come *a man* out of his seed and he shall rule over many nations,” while both the *Fragment* and *Pseudo-Jonathan* Targums have: “*Their king* shall rise from among them and *their saviour* shall be from out of them.”

Philo quotes the lines as messianic prophecy: “There shall come forth from you one day *a man* and he shall rule over many nations” (*Life of Moses* 1.290). The unanimity of both translation and Targums suggests strongly that the Hebrew may once have said something other than “water shall flow from his buckets.”<sup>12</sup>

Could an old strand that expected Yahweh-as-Messiah have survived the Deuteronomic reforms to form the basis of Christian understanding of Jesus as Messiah and Yahweh? This is at least suggested by an Aramaic text from Qumran Cave 4 (4Q246 – translated by Joseph A. Fitzmyer):

Col. 1 lines 7-9

7 [then shall arise a king, and he shall be] great upon the earth.

8 [All peoples sh]all make [peace with him]; they shall all serve

9 [him. For] he shall be called [the holy one of] the [G]reat [God], and by His name shall he be named.

Col 2 line 1

1 He shall be hailed **Son of God**, and they shall call him **Son of the Most High**.<sup>13</sup>

This text is dated to around 25 B.C.<sup>14</sup> At that time it appears that there is arguably a continuation of the definition of the Messiah as the Son of God, particularly, the Son of the Most High.

When we reconstruct the religious climate at the time of Lehi we find that there is no single, unified theology. In fact, what we find is multiple strands of theological thought that are in conflict, with the Deuteronomic reform elevating a particular strand of thought in contradiction to what had been acceptable though much of Israel’s history.

The theology of the Book of Mormon suggests that Lehi is not only a product of this time period, but that his theology, and therefore Nephi’s, is mostly likely an attempt to preserve some of the

theology of God that was being denied in the Deuteronomic reforms. The following are elements of the pre-reform religion that we will see in the Book of Mormon text:

- A Father god, 'El who is also called *el elyon* or "Most High God."
- Yahweh as the son of God (El).
- Yahweh as preeminent God of Israel.
- Yahweh as Messiah.

I suggest that the particular prominence of God as Messiah in the Book of Mormon is a reaction to the reduction of that strand of Israelite religion. What Lehi and Nephi believed to have been removed in the Deuteronomic reform receives compensatory emphasis in Nephi's foundational theology for his people, and continues through to the end of the Book of Mormon. This is the reason that the Book of Mormon is so consistently and adamantly a witness for the Messiah.

We begin our examination of God in the Book of Mormon just a few verses before 1 Nephi 11:18 with which we began this discussion. In 1 Nephi 11:6 we find:

And when I had spoken these words, the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, **the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all.** And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the **Son of the most high God.** . . .

Placed in the context of the possible theologies in Jerusalem at the time of the family's departure, this verse is quite understandable. We can perhaps understand it a little better if we "retranslate" the text to highlight the parallels.

Hosanna to *El Elyon*; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in [Yahweh] the Son of *El Elyon*...

Because the understanding of El as Father and Yahweh as son was still an available concept in Hebrew thought when the Book of Mormon begins, this particular description of the Father and the Son finds its best explanation as a continuation of that particular strand of Hebrew theology. While there is even less of the heavenly council remaining in the Book of Mormon than in the Old Testament, nevertheless it is plausible that such an idea continued with the Book of Mormon prophets. Note the interesting language with which Alma describes the Messiah in Alma 36:17:

...I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, **a Son of God**, to atone for the sins of the world.

Jesus is not *the* Son of God, he is *a* Son of God. Assuming that this is translated correctly, we have Alma placing Jesus Christ in the same divine company as did the New Testament authors cited by Margaret Barker—in the heavenly council as *a* Son of the Most High God. Thus Alma appears to confirm Nephi’s distinction between the Most High God and the Son of God. That brings us forcibly back to 1 Nephi 11:18. In our modern versification, 12 verses after declaring the Messiah to be the Son of God, the spirit shows that same Messiah who is declared to *be* God. What happened in 12 verses? Absolutely nothing. Nephi has not changed his understanding. The problem we might see as a conflict between verses 6 and 18 lies in our modern imperative of monotheism, a problem Nephi did not have.

In the Jerusalem that Lehi’s family left, Yahweh had been elevated to the position of pre-eminent God. This proto-monotheism, if I may call it that, did not eliminate the strand of thought that understood El as the Most High God. It did, however, proclaim that Yahweh was God. Not *Most High God*, but God. Based upon Nephi’s plausible worldview, let’s perform our exercise of retranslation again for verse 18:

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the **mother of [Yahweh]**, after the manner of the flesh.

Not only does this “rettranslation” return the text more clearly to its appropriate 600 B.C. cultural context, it is absolutely essential to understanding the theology of the Messiah in the Book of Mormon. From the perspective of Nephite theology, the 1837 change in this text might have helped the Latter-day Saints with *their* understanding of God, but it did violence to an essential part of the *Nephite* understanding of God. For the Nephites, it is absolutely essential that they understand that Yahweh was the Messiah who would come. Nephi himself notes:

For the things which some men esteem to be of great worth, both to the body and soul, others set at naught and trample under their feet. Yea, even **the very God of Israel** do men trample under their feet; I say, trample under their feet but I would speak in other words—they set him at naught, and hearken not to the voice of his counsels.

And **behold he cometh**, according to the words of the angel, in six hundred years from the time my father left Jerusalem.

And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; **wherefore they scourge him**, and he suffereth it; and **they smite him**, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men.<sup>15</sup>

There can be no doubt nor confusion that the person referred to here is Jesus Christ, and this Christ is the person that Nephi declares to be “the very God of Israel.” This meaning is also essential to Abinadi’s argument in Mosiah 15:1:

And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that **God himself shall come down** among the children of men, and shall redeem his people.

For the entire Book of Mormon, Yahweh is the God of Israel, and Yahweh is the Messiah. Those equivalencies are absolute and important to Nephite theology. However, there is still an understanding that Yahweh was the Son of God, in the context of *El Elyon*, or the Most High God.

We now have one remaining explanatory task. If the Nephites understood the separate nature of *El Elyon* and Yahweh, why is it *also* true that the text frequently *equates* the Messiah and the Father? While this is the stuff that led to the Christian arguments about trinitarianism and modalism, there is a much different process at work in the Book of Mormon. The problem begins with our good friend Nephi, who seems to personally present us with every possible confusing statement about God:

And the angel said unto me: Behold the **Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father!**<sup>16</sup>

If you haven’t noticed, we are only a couple of verses later than verse 18 where the virgin is the mother of God. Now we have a new identification. The Lamb of God is a title that is particularly symbolic of the atoning function of the Messiah, and here we have the Messiah declared to be the Eternal Father. This is not the only location where this happens. In other texts, the Messiah is not only Father, he is also Son. Mormon writes a thousand years after Nephi:

...And because of the fall of man came **Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son**; and because of Jesus Christ came the redemption of man.<sup>17</sup>

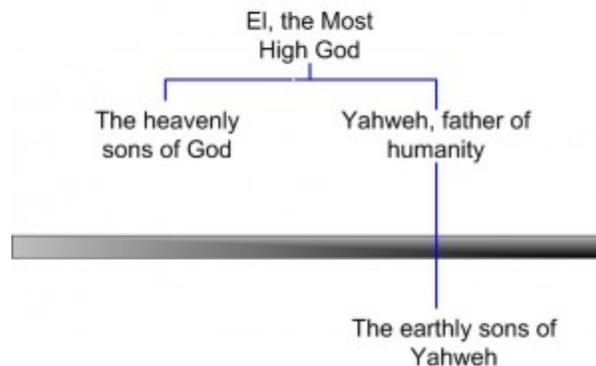
The explanation for this conflation of Father and Son is not to be found in post-Christian theology, because that perspective cannot explain all of the various references to God in the Book of Mormon. Returning to our historical perspective, however, we can replace the cultural contexts that allowed Nephi to hold what appear, to modern readers, to be contradictory beliefs about God.

When Margaret Barker describes the nature of the heavenly council, she also notes the key that resolves our problems in understanding Nephi and the subsequent Nephite theology.

There are those called sons of El Elyon, sons of El or Elohim, all clearly heavenly beings, and there are those called sons of Yahweh or the Holy One who are human.<sup>18</sup>

There are two “fathers” here, and the difference is that in the stories, or myths—to use the anthropological term—the sons of one father are heavenly, and the sons of the other are human. This creates a distinction in the realm of operation of the two fathers, a conceptual space that might be described as either horizontal or vertical. In the horizontal conception, we are in the heavens, and the heavenly father begets heavenly sons. In the vertical conception, we now have a heavenly being focusing on earth, a vertical relationship that crosses the boundaries that separate heaven and earth. This second “father” is *defined* by this vertical deity-to-human sphere.

### The Horizontal and Vertical Father/Son Relationships



This is precisely how we can disentangle the various “son of God” references in the Old Testament. Joseph A. Fitzmyer points out that: “the plural expressions in Hebrew, *bene ha elohim*, “sons of God” (Genesis 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) *bene ’elim*, “sons of God” (Psalms 29:1; 89:6), and *bene ’elyon*, “sons of the Most High” (Psalms 82:6) are found in the Old Testament as names for angelic beings in the heavenly court of Yahweh.”<sup>19</sup> These members of the heavenly court are literary descendants of the earlier Israelite layer that was more similar to the Ugaritic mythology. In this context we have horizontal relationships, and therefore heavenly sons of a heavenly father.

Fitzmyer also notes that there are several times when God indicates a relationship to Israel where Israel is considered as a “son” (Hosea 1:10; Deuteronomy 14:1; Isaiah 30:1). In these cases we have declared “sons,” with an implied father. What Fitzmyer does not ask, is whose sons are whose? The angelic beings harken back to an earlier conception, and the frame of reference is always celestial, and always horizontal. They are sons of the Most High God.

In the other references Fitzmyer notes, various humans are declared to be in a relationship to God where they are “sons.” If the humans are sons, God is therefore father. Most prominent and powerful is the declaration in Psalms 2:6-7:

Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, **Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.**

In this verse the Lord declares that he has begotten the king as his son. The question that we must ask is: who is the Lord? This is a special relationship between the king in heaven and the king on earth, but it still crosses the bounds from heaven to earth. It is a vertical relationship, and therefore “the Lord” is Yahweh.

The historical conflation of Yahweh with El leads to some untidiness in the Hebrew words used to label these positions, but the horizontal and vertical contexts will always predict the appropriate father. In horizontal references, the phrase is typically spelled out as “sons of God” and that phrase functions as a label for the relationship. In the vertical relationships, the term is frequently only “son” or “sons,” and the relationship is implied rather than declared. When humans are involved, their sonship is a relation to the father-God of Israel, Yahweh. When heavenly beings are the reference, the relationship is to the Most High God, or El, the father of the gods.

The Book of Mormon is a precise parallel to this usage. In the Book of Mormon as in the Old Testament, the heavenly or earthly context serves as the defining field of operation which clues the reader (or listener) to the appropriate meanings of father and son. This variation works for all the texts we have examined so far in the Book of Mormon.

We are now left with the most curious texts, however—those that declare that the Father and Son are the same. So far there have been clear distinctions between father and son. How, then, is the same person Father *and* Son? Genealogy should tell us that this is not a foreign concept. A man is father to his own son, yet he is a son in the context of his father’s family. We understand the two roles of the man based upon his conceptual presence in either of the two possible families. For Yahweh as Father and Son, however, genealogy is not the explanation. Nevertheless, the same concept of a shift in frame of reference is.

The premortal Messiah declares to the brother of Jared:

Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, **I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son.**<sup>20</sup>

Here we have the self-identification of the premortal Messiah. This is the declaration of Yahweh, similar to the self-declaration of I Am from the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Notice, that while Jesus Christ makes it very clear that he is both Father and Son, the context of this relationship is explicitly vertical. This tells us that the “father” designation indicates a relationship between Jesus Christ-as-God and man. Yahweh-as-father is precisely the relationship that Benjamin declares for his people when they covenant to take upon themselves the name of the Christ (or Messiah, or Yahweh):

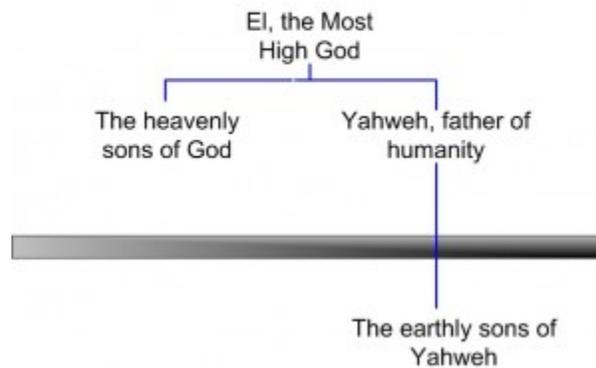
And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye **shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters**; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you.<sup>21</sup>

The language of Benjamin’s Christian covenant is similar to the anointing covenant the Lord makes with the King in Psalms. “This day” God has begotten the king or the covenanters. Note, however, that while the context alters the way we should understand the term “Father,” there is a parallel change in the way we must understand “Son.” In Ether Yahweh is “Son,” not “Son of God.” The difference is intentional. “Son of God” is a reference to a horizontal relationship. The presence of the simple term “son” in a vertical context, defines the appropriate understanding of “son,” just as the term father is defined by that context. Only with this understanding of how the terms shift their context when they reference the cross-plane relationship between heaven and earth, can we make sense of Yahweh’s other self-declaration, found in 3 Nephi 1:14:

Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfil all things which I have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of **the Father and of the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh.**

The phrase “the Father because of me” is the declaration of Yahweh’s heavenly relationship to humanity. He is Yahweh, and is our father in the sense of his guardianship over all of the natural and adopted branches of Israel. He is our father in the same way that he is the Father of heaven and earth, a term exclusively applied to Yahweh in the Book of Mormon.

## The Horizontal and Vertical Father/Son Relationships



Because the context is now very clearly vertical, and crossing the bounds between heaven and earth, Christ explains that he is also the Son, “*because of my flesh.*” This somewhat cryptic phrase is actually a very apt definition of this contextual shift in meaning.

The essential Nephite revelation of the Messiah was that he was Yahweh, and that “God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people” (Mosiah 15:1). When Jesus declares that he is Father and Son in 3 Nephi, he is not only on earth, he is in a physical body that he allows to be touched. He declares that he has made that vertical transition from heaven to earth. Thus he is Father to us while he is in heaven, and in the essence of his being. However, when he came down, he became as we are, and therefore a son, as we are sons. The change in *place* creates a change in symbolic relationship. It *is* his flesh, or his mortality, that *makes* him the son. Jesus Christ is Father and Son because he is the God who came down among the children of men. Alone of sons of God, he was also a son of man.

When we approach the Book of Mormon text from the viewpoint of the historical context that it declares to be its origin, we find an absolutely consistent theology of God. The Nephites knew of and believed in a Most High God, known as El in Biblical and Ugaritic literature, but unnamed in the Book of Mormon. That Most High God is father to Yahweh, and the relationship between Yahweh and the Most High God is indicated by the title Son of God.

Yahweh is the God of Israel, and therefore the God of the Nephites. In Yahweh’s relationship to humans, he is our Father, and we are sons of Yahweh. When Yahweh descends to live on earth, he is in that part of the vertical relationship that is appropriate for mortals. He is–Son. Yet he can never cease to be who he is. He is “the Father because of me,” as he declares in 3 Nephi 1:14. He is, therefore,

Father and Son. For the Nephites, any possible confusion in the similarity of terms used for deity was clarified by the horizontal or vertical contexts in which they were used.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" Brigham Young University Forum address, May 2003, 1. Photocopy of typescript in my possession.

<sup>2</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, "Deuteronomy," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1971), 102-103.

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> C.L. Seow, "Ugaritic," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 785.

<sup>7</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel C. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods:' Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind," *The Disciple as Scholar. Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, edited by Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 487.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, "Yea are Gods," 490.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101; emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature*, general editors Peter W. Flint and Martin G. Abegg Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 54.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Nephi 19:7-9.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Nephi 11:21.

<sup>17</sup> Mormon 9:12.

<sup>18</sup> Barker, *The Great Angel*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ether 3:14.

<sup>21</sup> Mosiah 5:7.