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The Christ of the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon presents a clearer understanding of Jesus Christ than does the Bible. It teaches regarding his pre-earth life, his Godhood, his godly attributes, and his appearance to the Nephites.

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**The Christ of the Book
of Mormon**

By John Henry Evans

Jesus Christ is the outstanding historical figure in our annals—greater than Confucius, or Buddha, or Aristotle, or Mohammed, or Moses, or Shakespeare, or Luther, or Washington or Lincoln. And these were the foremost men of their time. Yet, largely as they bulk against the horizon, each in his individual setting and work, these figures shrivel into insignificance when we mention their names in the same breath as that of the mighty Galilean. His influence is felt more or less in every good thought we think and every good deed we do today after nearly two thousand years, and that influence promises to be greater in the coming years. Any document, therefore, that can help us to visualize more clearly this greatest character among men, is valuable beyond estimation.

Now, the Book of Mormon does this very thing. It gives us a closer and a fuller view of the Jehovah of the Old Testament, and during a longer period than does the Old Testament. It supplies us with fresh, first-hand, and some extremely picturesque details of his ministry on earth. And it brings into greater clearness what is merely hinted at or vaguely suggested in the Hebrew Scriptures respecting his relation to us and the world.

I purpose, then, in this article to assemble the ideas and scenes, now scattered throughout the Nephite Record, which bear in any way on the subject of the Christ, whether before or during or after his appearance in the flesh, so as to show what light that volume throws upon the personality and work and position of Jesus in the history of this planet. Of course, such a presentation can hope to be nothing more pretentious than a sketching in of these newer details. But it will serve to show that the Book of Mormon has something of real worth to contribute to our picture of the Master.

I

His Pre-earth Life—The Bible

And first let me speak of the light which the Nephite Record throws upon the pre-earth life of our Savior.

Clear as is the idea in the mind of the informed Latter-day Saint that Christ had a spirit-existence before he tabernacled in the flesh, yet the clearness of this notion comes, not from the Hebrew writings, but mainly from the Book of Mormon.

The Old Testament, as a matter of fact, is all but silent on the point. In the biblical account of the creation the word "Elohim" is used, which is plural. This fact implies—but it is only an implication—that there were more than one person taking part in that event. Who were they? For an answer to this question we must go to John's Gospel. One of them was Jesus, for he is there spoken of as having been with the Father "in the beginning." But we should never have come by this light from the account of the event in Genesis alone. That is about as clear a reference as we have in the Old Testament of the ante-mortal existence of Christ. It is true, also, that we have the name Jehovah employed constantly by the writers of the Old Testament as the title of the God of the Israelites. But here again it requires the application of other passages before we can conclude that this is Christ, not to speak of the difficulty of inferring how he could have existed before he was born! Hence we are justified in saying that the pre-mortal life of Jesus is only vaguely hinted at in the pages of the Old Testament.

That existence is clearer, but not much clearer, in the New Testament. The passage in John's record of Christ's life I have already called attention to. The exact wording of that passage will show just how clearly the idea is set forth. "In the beginning," John says, "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. * * * All things were made by him. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. * * * And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." This, as we shall see later, is not the clear, direct statement that we find in the Book of Mormon. Yet it is the clearest we have in the New Testament, if we except the one we have by the Son of God himself, in which he prays for the glory he had with the Father "before the world was." These two references are by far the most specific and positive, made quite incidentally of the pre-earth life of the Christ.

His Pre-earth Life—Book of Mormon

Contrast these with the record of incidents and the pos-

itive declarations on the subject in the Nephite Record.

The first reference comes from the account of Ether in that volume. Moriancumer, the brother of Jared, is in need of some means of lighting the eight barges he has made under divine direction for crossing the ocean. He ends by taking sixteen small stones, "white and clear and transparent as glass," up to a mountain. These he prays for the Lord to "touch with his finger and prepare them that they might shine forth in darkness." When the Lord does so, the "veil is taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he sees the finger of the Lord, that it is as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood. And he falls down before the Lord, for he is struck with fear."

"Why hast thou fallen?" inquires the Lord.

"Because," answered Moriancumer, "I saw the finger of the Lord, and I feared lest he should smite me. For I knew not that the Lord had flesh and blood."

And the Lord said, "Because of thy faith thou hast seen that I shall take upon me flesh and blood. Never has man come before me with such exceeding faith as thou hast. For were it not so, thou couldst not have seen my finger. Sawest thou more than this?"

"Nay, Lord. Show thyself unto me!"

And "the Lord showed himself unto him," saying, "Because thou knowest these things, thou art redeemed from the fall. Therefore thou art brought back into my presence, and I show myself unto thee. Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. I am Jesus Christ. In me shall all mankind have light and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name, and they shall become my sons and daughters. * * * Seest thou that thou art created after mine own image? This body, which thou now beholdest, is the body of my spirit. Man have I created after the body of my spirit. Even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit, will I appear unto my people in the flesh."

It is clear from this luminous incident, first, that Jesus Christ existed before his incarnation in the flesh and his appearance on the earth in a physical body; secondly, that the form in which he existed was the same as that which he took in the fleshly tabernacle, only it was spirit instead of flesh; and, thirdly, that he created man in spirit-form, the same form that his own spirit bore, and the form, moreover, of which man's physical body is the counterpart, leaving us to infer that man also, as to his spirit, had a pre-earth life. This incident, therefore, throws a spotlight upon what has hitherto been a very dark area.

Another striking passage, almost as luminous and equally clear and definite, is from the account in the Book of Mormon of the predictions of the Lamanite prophet Samuel and their fulfilment.

Those who are acquainted with the circumstances will recall that Samuel went to Zarahemla for the purpose of preaching to the Nephites there, who were fast dwindling in their religious faith, and that, failing to regain entrance into the place, he delivered his message in a picturesque fashion from the ramparts that surrounded the town. In five years, he told the people, "the Son of God cometh to redeem all those who shall believe on his name." And he gave them a sign by which they might know that Christ was born across the waters among the Jews. It was that there should be "one day and a night and a day as if it were one day, without darkness between daylight, that is, for a period of about thirty-six hours. Also a new star should appear, one that had not been seen before, with "many signs and wonders in heaven."

As the time approached for the sign to appear, and it did not appear, the unbelievers scoffed and threatened, and the believers, on their part, became alarmed for their very lives. At this time a prophet named Nephi, "cried mightily unto his God" in behalf of the faithful.

He was answered by the voice of the Lord—"Lift up your head and be of good cheer, for, behold, the time is at hand. On this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. 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."

No language could be clearer or more definite and specific as to the pre-earth existence of the Christ than this passage and the passage from the Jaredite record, previously given. The fact of that existence is stated beyond all possibility of quibble or misunderstanding—which is not the case, as we have seen, in the Hebrew Scriptures. To be sure, one may dispute the authenticity of the assertion itself for the divine inspiration claimed for it, but one may not deny its clearness, or its positiveness, or its definiteness of utterance.

II

The Book of Mormon also throws a flood of light on the deityship of Jesus Christ. And, as in the case of his ante-mortal existence, the value of this additional light is not that

it gives anything altogether new but that it brings into relief and greater plainness what is rather suggested than asserted in the New Testament.

Christ's Godhood—The Bible

On this subject of the godhead of Christ there are only implications in the Old Testament—the use of the word “Elohim” in the account of the creation, for instance, and of the word “Jehovah” as the designation of the God of the Hebrew people. Nor is the New Testament altogether unambiguous on the point. Christ speaks of himself as greater than Abraham and Moses, but one need not infer from this that he was divine in the accepted sense. Also John, as we have seen, declares that “the word was God” and that “all things were made by him.” And Jesus says after his resurrection, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” These passages, and others not so clear, are interpreted to mean that Christ is God.

Nevertheless, there have been devout believers all down the ages since our era began who understood these statements as not asserting Christ's Godhead. Beginning in the fourth century after his birth, Arianism in one form or another has been in existence—that is, the denial of Christ's divinity, without a denial of his greatness, his creative powers and work, and his teachings. And there have been sects established on this theory of his humanity.

The Book of Mormon, however, is not susceptible to this double meaning when it speaks on the subject. On the contrary, its declarations on the point are clear, distinct, and emphatic.

Christ's Godhood—Book of Mormon.

On the fly-leaf of that volume is the statement that “Jesus is the Christ, the eternal God, manifesting himself unto all the nations.” Indeed, to “convince” both Jew and Gentile of this fact, that Christ is very God, is specifically declared to be one of the purposes in revealing the Nephite Record to the world in this age.

Says Abinadi, one of the early prophets of the Nephites, “God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in the flesh, he shall be called the Son of God, having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father.”

The first Nephi tells us that “the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, yieldeth himself as a man into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up and

crucified and buried in a sepulchre." Lehi speaks of the Jews as the only people who would crucify their God.

Benjamin, who was both a king and a prophet, declares, "the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power the Lord omnipotent, who reigneth, who was and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth among men, working mighty miracles—healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases."

These men—Abinadi, Nephi, Lehi, and Benjamin—all lived before the Christian era. But the passages to be found in the Book of Mormon after Christ are equally specific and positive on the point under consideration.

Jesus himself, when he appeared among the Nephites after his resurrection, told them, "I am the God of Israel and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the whole world." And Moroni speaks of Christ as distinctively the God of the land of America, whom its inhabitants must serve if they would not be destroyed. Referring to the land we now call America, he says, "Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it, shall be free from bondage and from captivity and from all other nations under heaven—if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ."

Again, the truth of these statements may be called in question, but not their clearness or their positiveness. He who runs may read and understand the import of them. It is impossible to twist them into a double meaning or to involve them in a cloud of mist. They are either true or not true in the meaning they bear on their face.

Attributes of God Ascribed to Christ

Not only is Jesus Christ expressly called God in the Nephite Record, but the character and attributes ascribed to God in the Hebrew Scriptures are applied to our Savior in the Book of Mormon.

He is declared to be omnipotent. Says King Benjamin, "I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God omnipotent, may seal you his." Christ is specifically termed in the Book of Mormon a "God of miracles." Also he is called Creator. "There is a God," says Lehi, "and he hath created all things, both in the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon." That Lehi understood this creative act to have been

performed by Jesus is evident from another passage a little later on, in which he says, "Thus saith the Lord, when the day cometh that they shall believe in me, that I am Christ," and so on. Jesus himself said to the Nephites after his resurrection, "I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father in the beginning." Several of the Nephite writers during the national existence of that people speak to the same effect. So, then, there can be no misunderstanding the Book of Mormon that Jesus Christ is omnipotent in the sense that it is usually applied to God in sacred literature.

The Nephite Record also ascribes other attributes to our Savior, such as are applied in the Bible only to God—self-existence, justice, holiness, unchangeableness, goodness, grace and mercy, and love.

King Benjamin declares that Christ "exists from all eternity to all eternity." Says Lehi, "O the wisdom of God! His mercy and grace! For, behold, if the flesh should rise no more, our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the eternal God, to rise no more." Another writer, Jacob, the son of Lehi, importunes his readers to "remember the greatness of the Holy One of Israel," whom he elsewhere calls "that holy God," and also to bear in mind that "his paths are righteous." The first Nephi represents Jehovah as saying, "Behold, I am God; I am a God of miracles; and I will show unto the world that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever." To quote again from Jacob, "O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster, death and hell!" In a word, every attribute that in sacred literature is ascribed to God, the Nephite writers apply to Jesus Christ, both before and after his incarnation in the flesh.

III

And so we come now to those incomparable scenes where Jesus Christ in person, after his resurrection, ministered to the people on the American continent.

It is unnecessary here to do anything more than recall to mind the impressive spectacle which preceded that appearance of the Master—the furious storms, the thunderings and sharp lightning, the upheavals and sinkings of the earth's crust, the destruction of entire cities, the carrying away of men and women in the whirlwind, the agonized cries of the survivors, and finally the voice from the heavens that pierced into the hearts of those who had gathered to exchange horrified feelings and words over what had taken place, a "small

voice," indistinct at first as of an approaching sound, but becoming clearer, till the astonished multitude understood it. Said the voice:

"Behold my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name. Hear him."

Christ Appears to Nephites

Casting up their eyes again toward heaven, whence came the words, they beheld a man descending out of the air, clothed in a white robe. This man came down and stood in the midst of the people; "the eyes of the whole multitude," says the historian with the evident air of a spectator, "were turned upon him, and they durst not open their mouths, even one to another," because "they wist not what it meant," believing it to be "an angel that appeared unto them."

The man "stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people: Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified should come into the world. I am the light and the life of the world. I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in which I have suffered the will of the Father from the beginning."

The whole multitude "fell to the earth" in adoration, for they remembered the prophecies concerning the Christ.

"Arise," said Jesus, "and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel and the God of the whole earth."

So "the multitude went forth," the narrative goes on, "and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet, going forth one by one, until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes, and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety, and did bear record, that it was he of whom it was written by the prophets that he should come."

This done, they cried out in one voice, "Hosannah! Blessed be the name of the most high God!" And they fell down at his feet and worshiped him.

Nephi, one of the prophets who had spoken of Christ's appearance and who had "departed out of the land" a little before this, was in the crowd. He "arose and went forth and bowed himself before the Lord and kissed his feet."

Main Teachings Reiterated

Jesus then taught the people the main doctrines he had already proclaimed among the Jews. For some reason—most

likely because he found the Nephites more believing and sympathetic than the Jews—he spoke with greater freedom and plainness than he appears to have done in Palestine.

He taught them concerning baptism. “Ye shall go down and stand in the water,” he said, “and in my name shall ye baptize. And ye shall say, calling them by name, ‘Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!’ Then shall ye immerse them in the water, and come forth again out of the water.”

This was to be done only in the case of those who repented of their sins and who desired to be baptized in the name of Christ. And these explicit directions were given, Jesus told them, that there might be “no contentions” among the people. For whoever had the “spirit of contention,” he explained, was not of Christ, but of the devil, “who is the father of contention,” because he “stirreth up the hearts of men to contend in anger one with another.”

“It is not my doctrine,” he further said, “to stir up the hearts of men in anger, one against another. But this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.” A luminous statement, when you come to get at the heart of it, and a distinct contribution to the utterances of the Christ. There are not many difficulties known to man that do not have their root in a “stirring up of the heart in anger” one way or another.

This idea of peaceableness, coupled with the teachableness of a little child, after one has had faith, has repented of his sins, has been baptized for the remission of them, and received the gift of the Holy Ghost, Christ declared to be his doctrine. “Whoso buildeth upon this, buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against him.” Here is epitomized the puzzling variety of things we are required to do in life—a codification, so to speak, of the laws and statutes of religion. As members of the Church everything depends on our being uncontentious and teachable.

A Unique Scene

Also more plainly than to the Jews he spoke about the law of Moses. “I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel. Therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfill the law—therefore it hath an end. Not all the covenant which I have made with my people is fulfilled, but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me.”

After repeating the teachings which we have in what is

known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the multitude that his "time was at hand" to go to the Father and also to show himself "unto the lost tribes of Israel." And "the people were in tears" at the thought that he was going to leave them! They looked at him "steadfastly" as if they would ask him to stay a little longer.

Perceiving their desires, he said, "My bowels are filled with compassion and mercy towards you." Then, "Have ye any that are sick among you? Bring them hither. Or any that are lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leprous, or withered, or deaf, or afflicted in any manner?"

Thereupon "all the multitude, with one accord, did go forth with their sick, and their afflicted, and their lame, and their blind, and their dumb, with all that were afflicted in any manner. And he did heal them every one as they were brought forth unto him. And they did all, both they who had been healed and they who were whole, bow down at his feet, and did worship him. And as many as could come for the multitude did kiss his feet, insomuch that they did bathe his feet with their tears."

Then he commanded that their little children be brought to him. And when they had been brought, he "sat them down upon the ground round about him, and he stood in the midst of them," the multitude giving way till all the children were together. He commanded all the people to kneel down upon the ground. When they had done so, "Jesus groaned within himself, and said, Father, I am troubled because of the wickedness of the House of Israel.

"And when he had said these words, he himself also knelt down upon the earth, and, behold, he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written, and the multitude did bear record who heard him." So powerfully were the people affected by what they had heard in that prayer, that they "were overcome." On rising from his knees, he bade them rise also, after which he said, "Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now, behold, my joy is full."

And he wept.

Then he took the children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed to the Father in behalf of them.

And he wept again.

"Behold your little ones!" he said.

As the people looked, they saw the heavens open, and angels descending in what appeared to be fire, and ministering to the children, who were themselves encircled by fire.

After this unparalleled scene there "came a cloud and overshadowed the multitude, that they could not see Jesus.

And while they were overshadowed, he departed from them, and ascended into heaven.”

IV

Just what is the value of this additional light thrown upon the Christ by the Book of Mormon? In what way and to what degree is Christian theology advanced by these new ideas and the greater clearness given to old ideas that were vague?

But first let us summarize this information. The main and subordinate points we have already considered are as follows:

Main Points Summarized

First, Jesus Christ had a conscious existence before his incarnation in the flesh—an existence, that is, in which he was able to think and to feel and to act. Secondly, he existed in a form that, although spiritual in substance, is the same as the form we have come to know as the human, with all the organs and dimensions that the physical tabernacle of man has in mortality. Thirdly, he was very God in that state of existence, having all the nature and characteristics which the race from the beginning has ascribed to the Power that created man and the world and that governs the universe. Fourthly, he now has, since his incarnation and death and resurrection, a body of flesh and bone, the same in effect that was crucified and afterwards laid in the tomb in Palestine.

These, all, are main propositions, stated in a way which it is impossible to misunderstand. There are numerous and important corollaries, also, such as—that Jesus was the Jehovah of the Old Testament, watching over and directing the destinies of the Hebrew people, impaling them by means of bitter experiences and keeping them in line for a specific purpose; that he was with the Father in the beginning, creating the earth and man with everything pertaining thereto; that he hears with infinite patience and love, the same patience and love he manifested in the flesh, for the salvation of all mankind, irrespective of color or conditions in life; that man too had a pre-earth life, a life of the spirit, which, in form, is the exact counterpart of the physical body that we see in mortality; and finally, that life as we know it here is but a section, a very small section, of life as it is, and was, and will be.

These ideas take us up, as it were, to the top of a high pinnacle, from which we may view mortality in its relation to the illimitable stretch of life both before and after this.

Value of This New Clearness

And we need this outlook very much indeed. Life proves to most of us a very perplexing thing. There is so much of it! And it is so intricate, so complex! It is a great ocean, on which we are afloat, not to say adrift, and we are unable by ourselves to swim into any of those powerful undercurrents that would sweep us onward to a Somewhere. It is a giant forest, in which we are, all of us, lost, with no halo to lead us out of its shadowy depths into the clearing. We hear, it is true, an occasional "Lo here!" and "Lo there!" But these are vocal mirages, which only add to our bewilderment. Not the greatest philosophers have been able to reduce the multitudinous and confusing events and facts of life to anything like a simple and orderly process working towards a goal. And so we must look outside our own thought for a plan that will show the general push of life, that will relate one thing to another, that can bring into full view the "one increasing purpose" running through the ages.

Such a plan, such a view, we have in the revealments of the Book of Mormon, where it speaks of the Christ. In its white light a new meaning is given to such traditional phrases as "divine guidance," the "love of God," "obedience," and many others. And we are helped in our faith and trust in him.

Flowers

By Sarah Leggett Phelps

The following tribute to flowers was written by Mrs. Sarah Leggett Phelps, a woman 82 years of age, who has been an invalid for fifteen years, from paralysis.

Place them by my bedside so that I may see their display of beautiful colors and their sweet faces. What great power they have! They soften and make the heart glad. They brighten those who are lonely and sad. They make one feel the influence of the giver, who arranged them so artistically in their beds that they might go on their joy-giving journey.

Although far away, you feel near by the sweet message the flowers bring. They make me feel that I would like to see the kind face of the giver and gently take her by the hand. They make me happy to know that somewhere someone is thinking of me. Although flowers fade, they leave a sweet remembrance behind that lasts forever.