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Excursus: The Nephite Understanding of God

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Abstract: Before we worry about how to explain how the Book of Mormon to make it fit our current descriptions of God, we really should understand how the Nephites described and understood God. To do this, we must approach the question not only critically, but historically.

Excursus: The Nephite Understanding of God¹

The change from “mother of God” to “mother of the son of God” (see commentary accompanying 1 Nephi 11:15–18) might suggest that the Book of Mormon originally confused God the Father with Jesus Christ. Therefore, Robert Millet argues against what he sees as the erroneous interpretation of the change: “One need only read Nephi’s words in 2 Nephi 25, regarding the necessity of the Jews believing in Christ and worshiping the Father in his name (v. 16) to appreciate the distinctness of the members of the Godhead in the minds of Nephite prophets. In addition, in 2 Nephi 31 we note the constant reference to the ‘words of the Father’ as opposed to the ‘words of the Son.’”²

Some Book of Mormon passages separate the Father and the Son (1 Ne. 11:24; Alma 5:50; 3 Ne. 9:15, 3; 11:7), but these occurrences do not answer the essential question of why this phrase was in the original manuscript at all. The problem is that when we focus on the *fact* of the change, we automatically ask the wrong questions. Millet is answering the question of how to read this passage compatibly with current LDS understanding. While that question is important, it overlooks our first obligation—to understand what this passage tells us about Nephite theology. Before we worry about how to explain the Book of Mormon to make it fit our current descriptions of God, we really should understand how the Nephites described and understood God. To do this, we must approach the question not only critically, but historically.

As I argue in 1 Nephi, Part 1: Context, Chapter 1, “The Historical Setting of 1 Nephi,” Lehi was living at the time of the Deuteronomic reforms. The very existence of a reform confirms the presence of at least two traditions in Israel’s religious world at the time of King Josiah. Indeed, it is probably simplistic to assume that there were only two, but the contrast between the reformers and what they reformed provides a convenient way to discuss what must have been a very complex situation. The multiple strands of Israelite religion had been present for at least a

¹The analysis in this section is updated from a paper presented at the August 2003 conference sponsored by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research. Brant A. Gardner, “Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon’s Book.” The original paper is posted at http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2003_Monotheism_Messiah_and_Mormons_Book.html (accessed January 2006).

²Robert L. Millet, “Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 168. See also commentary accompanying 2 Nephi 25:29–30.

century before Josiah, because his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, unsuccessfully attempted a similar reform. Clearly the Deuteronomic reform operated against a previously acceptable tradition. In doing so, he 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.

Israel's religion prior to the Deuteronomic reform contained several ideas that Lehi and his family transported to the New World. Elements of that pre-reform religion visible in the Book of Mormon include:

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

These ideas provide the conceptual background that allows us to understand the references to God, the Son, and the Father in the Book of Mormon. As part of Nephi's vision of the tree of life is this episode: "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*" (1 Ne. 11:6).

Given the context of the possible theologies in Jerusalem at the time of the family's departure, here is a rephrasing of the text that highlights 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 part of Hebrew thought when the Book of Mormon began, this particular description of the Father and the Son is best explained as a continuation of that particular strand of Hebrew theology.

Another element of pre-reform Hebrew theology is that of the heavenly council consisting of the sons of God. These sons of God were assigned to be the gods of various nations, and the most prominent of these national gods was Yahweh, the "Son of God." Less of this idea appears in the Book of Mormon than in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that Book of Mormon prophets understood it. For instance, Alma₂ "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" (Alma 36:17). Jesus is not *the* Son of God, but *a* Son of God.³

³I checked to see whether the presence of the article "a" in this verse might have been the result of a copy error. It is in both the original and the printer's manuscripts without any indication of change. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, THE CRITICAL TEXT OF THE BOOK OF MORMON* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), Vol. 1, 323, and Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, THE CRITICAL TEXT OF*

Alma₂ confirms Nephi's differentiation between "the Most High God" and "the Son of God." Twelve verses after the spirit who is speaking to Nephi declares the Messiah to be the Son of God, the same spirit shows Nephi that same Messiah and declares him to *be* God (1 Ne. 11:18). What happened in those twelve verses? Absolutely nothing. Nephi's understanding has not changed. The apparent contradictions are resolved if we comprehend Nephi's view of deity.

By the time Lehi was born, the movement elevating Yahweh to the position of preeminent God was nearly finished. Israel retained at that time an understanding of the father-god 'El, but worship focused on Yahweh. In many cases, old epithets and stories that has been associated with El were now applied to Yahweh. 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. That title continued to be associated with 'El.

Based on what I argue was Nephi's plausible worldview, let's rephrase 1 Nephi 11:18 using the more distinctive name: "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 "retranslation" cast the text more clearly in 600 B.C. cultural terms, but it is also important in 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,⁴ but it did violence to an essential part of the Nephite understanding of God. The Nephites understood—as an absolutely essential element of their theology—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. (1 Ne. 19:7–9; emphasis mine)

THE BOOK OF MORMON (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), Vol. 2, Part 1, 574.

⁴The clear definition of *Elohim* as a reference to the Father and *Jehovah* as the pre-mortal designation of Jesus Christ was the result of a development process in early LDS theology. Boyd Kirkland, "Jehovah as the Father," *Sunstone* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1984): 38 notes: "Brigham likewise sometimes combined the names *Elohim-Jehovah* or used them interchangeable as designations for God the Father." See also Thomas Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, edited by Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 58–59 and Boyd Kirkland, "Elohim and Jehovah in Mormonism and in the Bible," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 77–93.

Unquestionably, the individual referred to here is Jesus Christ, whom Nephi declares is “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.⁵ Those equivalencies are the bedrock of Nephite theology.

However, the Nephites also understood that Yahweh was the Son of God, in the context of *El Elyon*, or the Most High God. If the Nephites understood that *El Elyon* and Yahweh were separate individuals, why is it also true that the text frequently equates the Messiah and the Father? While such questions led to the Christian arguments in the fourth century about trinitarianism and modalism,⁶ a much different process is at work in the Book of Mormon.

The problem begins with 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!*” (1 Ne. 11:21). This statement appears only three verses after verse 18 where the virgin is “the mother of God” in the original manuscript. Now Nephi, using “Lamb of God,” a title symbolizing the Messiah’s atoning function, here declares the Messiah to be the Eternal Father. The equation of Messiah and Eternal Father also occurs in the Title Page, 1 Nephi 13:40, Mosiah 15:4, and Alma 11:38–9.

Even more confusing, the Messiah is not only Father but also the Son when Mormon is writing a thousand years later: “And because of the fall of man came

⁵Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 53, suggests that this very understanding informed earliest Christianity: “The Christians were identifying the Messiah as the Lord, the God of Israel. ‘Jesus is Lord’ was a fundamental affirmation—but the implications of this are rarely noticed. The first Christians were declaring that the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to Abraham, spoken to Moses and guided Israel through the desert, had been incarnate in Jesus. The Old Testament God of Israel was not God the Father but God the Son.”

⁶Concerning Trinitarianism, Daniel N. Showalter, “Trinity,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 782–83, notes: “Later believers systematized the diverse references to God, Jesus, and the Spirit found in the New Testament in order to fight against heretical tendencies of how the three are related. Elaboration on the concept of a Trinity also serves to defend the church against charges of di-or tritheism. Since the Christians have come to worship Jesus as a god . . . , how can they claim to be continuing the monotheistic tradition of the God of Israel? . . . This issue is debated over the following centuries and is only resolved by agreement and exclusion during the christological disputes and creedal councils of the fourth century and beyond.”

Concerning modalism, J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 119, states: “[Modalism] was a fairly widespread, popular trend of thought which could reckon on, at any rate, a measure of sympathy in official circles; and the driving-force behind it was the twofold conviction, passionately held, of the oneness of God and the full deity of Christ. . . . Any suggestion that the Word or Son was other than, or a distinct Person from the Father seemed to the modalists . . . to lead inescapably to the blasphemy of two Gods.” Kelly, *ibid.*, 115, dates the emergence of modalism to “the closing decades of the second century.” The creedal councils settled on trinitarianism as their preferred method of dealing with this problem of multiple designations for one God.

Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son; and because of Jesus Christ came the redemption of man” (Morm. 9:12). The explanation for this conflation of Father and Son cannot be found in post-Christian theologies of modalism or trinitarianism. However, by reading these passages against the Nephite cultural context, we can understand why Nephi could hold what appear, to modern readers, to be contradictory beliefs about God.

When Margaret Barker describes the heavenly council, she also provides the explanation that resolves the problems in understanding Nephi’s terms for Yahweh 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.”⁷ There are two “fathers” here. 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. The two fathers operate in different realms. There is a heavenly realm that exclusively refers to heavenly beings. In this realm we find *El Elyon*, Yahweh, and the hosts of heaven. As Mark S. Smith notes, there are family relationships among this heavenly host.⁸ These relationships may be considered horizontal, for they are relationships that remain inside that heavenly sphere.

The second realm is earthly. There are still “family” relationships with God, but those relationships may be described as vertical. They cross the boundary from earthly to heavenly and that shift in context creates a shift in the reference for “father.”

When the context is a horizontal relationship in the heavens, the “father” is *El Elyon* and Yahweh is his son. When the context crosses the boundaries of the heavens to create a relationship with humanity, the “father” is *defined* by this vertical deity-to-human sphere. In the vertical context, the father is Yahweh.

This differentiation is the key to disentangling the various “son of God” references in the Old Testament as well as solving our theological problems with the Book of Mormon. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, professor emeritus of biblical studies at the Catholic University of America, examined the occasions when the Old Testament notes a father-son relationship with God. He found that there are two different types. One openly states that there are “sons of God:” “The plural expressions in Hebrew, *bene ha elohim*, ‘sons of God’ (Gen. 6:2, 4; Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7) *bene ’elim*, ‘sons of God’ (Ps. 29:1, 89:6), and *bene ’elyon*, ‘sons of the Most High’ (Ps. 82:6) are found in the Old Testament as names for angelic beings in the heavenly court of Yahweh.”⁹

⁷Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 5.

⁸Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54–61.

⁹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins*, Vol. 1 in *STUDIES IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND RELATED LITERATURE*, general editors Peter W. Flint and Martin G. Abegg Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 65.

These members of the heavenly court are the literary descendants of the earlier Israelite religious tradition that was similar to Ugaritic mythology. The historical context of “sons of God” is the heavenly council. These beings who exist in the heavens are part of the horizontal, or purely heavenly, family relationships. In the context of those horizontal relationships these are the sons of the heavenly father (*'El Elyon*, Most High God).

Fitzmyer's second type of “son of God” relationship is where the sons (or children) are human. For example:

Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, *Ye are* not my people, there it shall be said unto them, *Ye are the sons of the living God*. (Hosea 1:10; emphasis mine)

Ye are the children of the Lord your God: ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead. (Deut. 14:1; emphasis mine)

In contrast to the sons of God who are angelic beings, these sons of God are mortal. This is the vertical relationship where the father of these sons is Yahweh. The historical conflation of Yahweh with El leads to some untidiness in the Hebrew labels for the father in these two different types of relationships. Hosea uses *bene El* and Isaiah has *bene Yahweh*. Nevertheless, it is the context that defines the particular relationship, not the name.¹⁰ The different conceptual father for the horizontal or vertical relationships survived the theological pressures that merged Yahweh with El.

The Book of Mormon identifies the various divine personages in the same way. In the Book of Mormon as in the Old Testament, the heavenly or earthly context serves as the defining field of operation which informs the reader (or listener) about the appropriate definitions of “father” and “son.” This variation works for all the texts I have examined in the Book of Mormon.

The most curious texts, however, are those that equate the Father and the Son. How can the same person be both Father *and* Son? Genealogy tells us that this

¹⁰A similar shift in relationships with a shift in operational sphere occurs in Aztec mythology. Brant A. Gardner, “Quetzalcoatl's Fathers: A Critical Examination of Source Materials,” <http://www.ku.edu/~hoopes/aztlan/tripart.htm> (accessed September 2003).

This celestial relationship between Camaxtli, Tezcatlipoca, and Quetzalcoatl helps explain the curious passages in both Torquemada and Las Casas which indicate that Quetzalcoatl and Camaxtli were the same god (Torquemada, 1943, 2:288, and Las Casas, 1969, 1:196). While it could simply be an error, there may be a more important cultural context in which the information is essentially correct (though partly misstated).

The correlation seems to be based on a ceremony in which the idols exchange clothing and thus indicate their interchangeableness. Torquemada states that they are the same god, yet still records that Camaxtli is the father of Quetzalcoatl. Given the nature of Camaxtli and Quetzalcoatl as celestial deities who also live on the earth in a somewhat altered form, the problem simply becomes one of contexts. When the context is that of the earthly affairs, the two are parent and child. Once the context shifts to the other-worldly, as it does in the sacred rites, they are once again sons of Tonacatecuhtli, brothers, and hence equals in position. Thus they may exchange ritual clothing as equals, not equivalents.

concept is not unusual. A man is a father to his son, yet a son to his own father. We understand which role he fills based on which family supplies the context. While the generational explanation might be used to describe Yahweh as Father (related to humanity) and Son (related to his father), it is more likely in this case that the horizontal or vertical context provides the explanation rather than genealogy.

The premortal Messiah spoke 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*” (Ether 3:14). Yahweh declared his identity to the brother of Jared, much as he declared his identity (“I Am”) to Moses from the burning bush (Ex. 3:14). In both cases God identified himself to a prophet. He declared his name to Jared, and (in Joseph Smith’s translation) that name is Jesus Christ. (See commentary accompanying 2 Nephi 25:19 for the “name.”)

The nature of Hebrew names obscures the self-naming to Moses. Semitic names were typically verbal phrases, often simply shortened to verbs.¹¹ Frank Moore Cross concludes: “The accumulated evidence thus strongly supports the view that the name *Yahweh* is a causative imperfect of the Canaanite-Proto-Hebrew verb *hwy*, “to be.”¹² It may therefore be that when humans refer to God he is “he is/caused to be.” However, when God speaks of himself, the verb must change to “I Am/Caused to Be.” Regardless of how we transcribe or translate the name, God identified himself to both the brother of Jared and Moses. God declared his name to both of these prophets, and he is the God we know as Yahweh.¹³

To understand how Yahweh is both Father and Son we must deal with each term separately. Yahweh is Father because he is divine and establishes a vertical relationship with humanity. It is in this divine or heavenly position that he acts as father when he “begets” the king of Israel. A coronation poem is preserved 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.* (emphasis mine)

In verse 6 Yahweh is speaking and is the one who “sets” the king on the throne. In verse 7 the king declares what Yahweh said to him on that occasion. Yahweh becomes the symbolic father of the king. The king has been transformed into a son of God by the “begetting” of his father, Yahweh. This is the same divine relationship that Benjamin claimed for his people when they covenanted to take upon themselves the name of the Christ (or Messiah, or Yahweh): “And now,

¹¹Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 62, “West Semitic personal names normally begin in transparent appellations or sentence names and shorten or disintegrate. Divine epithets and often divine names follow the same patterns of formation and shortening.”

¹²*Ibid.*, 65.

¹³When the Lord commands Moses to go to Pharaoh, he makes it clear that his name is Yahweh: “And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by *the name of God Almighty (el shadday)*, but by my name Jehovah was I not known to them” (Ex. 6:3).

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” (Mosiah 5:7; emphasis mine). Yahweh becomes the father as he acts in the vertical deity-to-mortal realm: in both the Psalm and Mosiah, the begetting occurs “this day.” The king’s anointing and the people’s covenant create a new relationship with God.

Note, however, that while the context dictates how we should understand “Father,” there is a parallel change in the way we must understand “Son” when Yahweh is both Father and Son. The horizontal or heavenly context sees Yahweh as the son of the Most High, but in Ether Yahweh is “Son,” not “Son of God.” The difference is intentional. “Son of God” usually means the horizontal/heavenly relationship. In Ether, “Son” means a vertical relationship. Yahweh appears to the brother of Jared on earth, therefore he appears in the prescient form of his earthly mission where he too is the “son” or one who belongs to this earth. “Son” therefore is defined by the context, just as the term “Father” is defined by the context.

Only when we understand how the meaning shifts according to context (whether horizontally within heaven, or vertically, crossing from heaven to earth) can we make sense of Yahweh’s other self-declaration 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.”

When Yahweh says, “the Father because of me,” he is declaring his heavenly relationship to humanity. He 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 of earth,” a term exclusively applied to Yahweh in the Book of Mormon. (See the commentary accompanying Mosiah 3:8.)

Because the context in 3 Nephi is clearly vertical, crossing the boundary between heaven and earth, Yahweh explains that he is also the Son, “because of my flesh.” This somewhat cryptic phrase is actually a very apt definition of a different meaning based on a shift of context. Accompanying the physical change in location from heaven to earth is a change in how Jesus describes himself and, incidentally, an explanation for “Son of Man,” one of the enigmatic titles Jesus applies to himself.¹⁴

For example, Matthew 16:13–14 reports: “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son

¹⁴Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957–66), 1:11, suggests that it is an abbreviation for “Son of the Man of Holiness.” He explains: “We have received other definite information in the counsel the Lord gave to Adam, as recorded in Moses 6:57, which is as follows: ‘Wherefore teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God, for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence; for, in the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name, and the name of his Only Begotten is the Son of Man, even Jesus Christ, a righteous Judge, who shall come in the meridian of time.’ Here the Father speaks to Adam of himself as a Man, whose name is ‘Man of Holiness.’ Therefore, we are justified in saying of Jesus when referring to himself as Son of Man, he means that he is verily the Son of God who is Man of Holiness, or Holy Man.”

of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.” Part of the confusion stems from the fact that “Son of Man” in the Old Testament is a synonym for “human male”—not deity but mortal. For instance, Numbers 23:19 reads: “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent” (Num. 23:19). The symmetry of the verse requires that “man” and “son of man” be read as synonyms. Both terms are contrasted with God, who is “not a man.” It would make no sense to try and read “son of man” as a messianic title in this verse.

Similarly, these verses also use “son of man” as a synonym for “human being”:

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with
glory and honour. (Ps. 8:4–5)

Her cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man
dwelleth, neither doth any son of man pass thereby. (Jer. 51:43)

In these examples, “son of man” follows “man,” creating a literary parallel that emphasizes the meaning of generic human being. Nevertheless, a passage in Daniel describes another meaning attached to “Son of man”:

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, *one like the Son of man came with the clouds of
heaven*, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.

And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations,
and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not
pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13–14; emphasis mine)

Most likely this verse is the basis for Christ’s use of the title. It also explains how this Messianic title works. “Son of man” always refers to a man on earth—the son of a mortal. When it is a Messianic title, it refers to Jesus in his role in mortality, born as the son of a mortal. Jesus is quite literally and appropriately the “son of man” in that he was sufficiently human to be subject to death. Even though his literal father was not “man,” the phrase does not refer to his father, but to his earthly existence. Jesus is the “Son of Man” because he is on earth as a mortal. Importantly, however, the very fact of this title implies the need to define deity-on-earth. While declaring that Christ was on earth as human, it necessarily implies that he was also much more.

“Son of Man” as a title for Jesus appears eighty-seven times in the New Testament.¹⁵ Remarkably, it appears only once in the Book of Mormon, in spite of the many times that Joseph Smith used New Testament phrases or verses in his translations of the Book of Mormon. That single occurrence is a quotation from Isaiah 51:12 (2 Ne. 8:12). Why is this title never used? I believe that it is because Book of Mormon peoples never experience the Messiah as the “Son of Man,” or as a human. They experience him only as a God—either as Yahweh in heaven, or as the resurrected and clearly more-than-man Messiah in Bountiful.

¹⁵The term is used thirty-two times in Matthew, fifteen in Mark, twenty-four in Luke, and twelve in John. The other four are found in Acts and Hebrews (once each) and twice in Revelation.