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"Never Have I Showed Myself Unto Man": A Suggestion for Understanding Ether 3:15a

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Abstract: Ether 3:15a contains a statement from the Lord that sets the brother of Jared apart from everyone who had lived on earth up to his time: “Never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast.” The uniqueness of Mahonri Moriancumer’s faith justified the uniqueness of the Lord’s revelation to him. Never, the Lord told him, had anyone experienced such a manifestation—a statement made even more remarkable when we consider that such great individuals as Adam, Eve, Enoch, and Noah had preceded the brother of Jared, and each of these, according to the scriptures, had conversed with God. In this brief essay I will present some ideas concerning the Lord’s statement in Ether 3:15a. After sketching the common explanations proposed for the verse, I will suggest an alternative point of view that is, in my opinion, true to the text and consistent with what we know of the doctrine of God.



“Never Have I Showed Myself unto Man”: A Suggestion for Understanding Ether 3:15a

Kent P. Jackson

Ether 3:15a contains a statement from the Lord that sets the brother of Jared apart from everyone who had lived on earth up to his time: “*Never* have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for *never* has man believed in me as thou hast.”¹ The uniqueness of Mahonri Moriancumer’s faith justified the uniqueness of the Lord’s revelation to him.² Never, the Lord told him, had anyone experienced such a manifestation—a statement made even more remarkable when we consider that such great individuals as Adam, Eve, Enoch, and Noah had preceded the brother of Jared, and each of these, according to the scriptures, had conversed with God.

In this brief essay I will present some ideas concerning the Lord’s statement in Ether 3:15a. After sketching the common explanations proposed for the verse, I will suggest an alternative point of view that is, in my opinion, true to the text and consistent with what we know of the doctrine of God.

In response to the brother of Jared’s efforts to provide light for the Jaredite barges, the Lord first revealed to him His finger (Ether 3:6) and then finally His entire person (Ether 3:13–16). In the process He taught him much concerning the nature of Deity and revealed His own identity as well: “Because of thy faith thou hast seen that I shall take upon me flesh and blood” (Ether 3:9); “Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; . . . and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh” (Ether 3:16). Moroni, the narrator of the account, provided a valuable summary and makes clear the identity of the deity who spoke: “Jesus showed himself unto this man in the spirit, even after the manner and in the likeness of the same body even as he showed himself unto the Nephites” (Ether 3:17).³

Mahonri was speaking with the premortal Jesus Christ, who would be born on earth over two thousand years later, receive a

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physical body, and while in the flesh, atone for the sins of the world. We cannot tell from the account what Mahonri knew about the nature of God or the mission of Christ prior to his vision, but it appears in verse 8 that he was startled to see what he thought was a body of “flesh and blood.” The Lord’s comments in verse 16 seem to make it clear that it was a body of spirit that the prophet saw.

The unprecedented faith of the brother of Jared is mentioned both by Jesus and by Moroni as the factor that led to the unprecedented revelation. The Lord said, “*Never* has man come before me with such exceeding faith as thou hast” (Ether 3:9). Moroni added further emphasis: “Having this perfect knowledge of God, he *could not* be kept from within the veil. . . . The Lord *could not* withhold *anything* from him, for he knew that the Lord could show him all things” (Ether 3:20, 26). The key statement from the Lord is found in Ether 3:15a: “Never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast.”

Whatever the first clause of verse 15 means, it is clear that there was something extraordinary about this appearance of the Lord to the brother of Jared. Yet we know from the scriptures that others had in fact seen God. Adam and Eve conversed with the Lord in “the presence of the Lord God” while in the Garden of Eden (Moses 4:14–27); Adam and many others saw him in a great meeting not long before Adam’s death (D&C 107:53–54); Enoch “saw the Lord” and spoke with him “even as a man talketh one with another, face to face” (Moses 7:4); and Noah and his sons “walked with God” (Moses 8:27). Our problem, then, is to determine the meaning of the Lord’s statement to the brother of Jared in light of what we know of these other pre-Jaredite theophanies.

The most common approach to understanding Ether 3:15a proposes that the Lord’s statement has reference to the *degree* to which he revealed himself to the brother of Jared. President Joseph Fielding Smith stated this position as follows:

I have always considered Ether 3:15 to mean that the Savior stood before the Brother of Jared plainly, distinctly, and showed him his whole body and explained to him that he was a spirit. In his appearance to Adam and Enoch, he had not made himself manifest in such a familiar way. His appearances to earlier prophets had not been with that same fulness.

The scriptural accounts of talking face to face and of walking with God should not be interpreted in the sense that the Savior stood before those prophets and revealed his whole person. That he may have done so at later periods in the cases of Abraham and Moses is possible, but he had not done so in that fulness in the antediluvian days. For the Brother of Jared he removed the veil completely. He had never showed himself to man before in the manner and way he did to that prophet.⁴

Elder Bruce R. McConkie interpreted the verse by restating it as follows: “Never have I showed myself in the manner and form now involved; never has there been such a complete revelation of the nature and kind of being I am; never before has the veil been lifted completely so that a mortal man has been able to see my spirit body in the full and complete sense of the word.”⁵ This approach is expressed in similar terms by other Latter-day Saint commentators.⁶

As another possible interpretation, Sidney B. Sperry suggested that the word “man” in Ether 3:15a may mean “unbelieving man.” Never had the Lord shown himself to those who did not believe on his name, whereas to the faithful—presumably including individuals like Adam and Enoch—he had indeed shown himself as he did to Mahonri Moriancumer.⁷

Daniel H. Ludlow pointed out one aspect of the brother of Jared’s experience that perhaps was unprecedented and may have something to do with the statement in Ether 3:15a. Emphasizing verses 19, 20 (“he could not be kept from within the veil”), and 26 (“the Lord could not withhold anything from him”), Ludlow wrote that the Lord “never *had* to show himself unto man before.”⁸ This explanation probably tells us more about *why* the Lord gave him this unique experience than what was unique about it.

These proposals are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and a correct understanding of the verse may entail elements of more than one of them. A starting point for interpretation is the idea that the Lord showed himself to the brother of Jared to a greater *degree* than to any earlier prophet. Yet that interpretation requires the addition of several modifiers to the Lord’s seemingly unequivocal and absolute statement, “Never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created.” I would like to propose an explanation that builds on this interpretation yet allows us to take the Lord’s statement literally as it stands.

In order to avoid ambiguity in the following discussion, I will follow traditional Latter-day Saint usage and employ the name “Elohim” exclusively for God, the Father of our spirits, and “Jehovah” exclusively for the Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ This approach is necessary for clarity because the scriptures refer to Christ as both “God” and “the Father.”

In Ether 3 the brother of Jared was speaking with Jehovah, who, according to King Benjamin, is “the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, . . . the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning” (Mosiah 3:5, 8; see also Alma 11:39). Under the direction of Elohim, Jehovah is God of the universe, presiding over all things. Having been endowed by Elohim with infinite power, glory, and

authority, Jehovah *is* the Father, as the Book of Mormon designates him frequently.¹⁰ He is God who speaks to the prophets, who establishes and reveals laws for the blessing of the world, and who directs the affairs of the human family.

We know also that Jehovah is the same being who later was born into the world as Jesus Christ. He became a being of dual nature: he is both *Father* and *Son* as he is also both *God* and *Man* (see D&C 93:3–4).¹¹ Prior to his birth, he was the Lord Jehovah (Father, God); while he walked the earth, he was also the mortal Jesus Christ (Son, Man).¹²

The standard Latter-day Saint view of Jehovah's role as God was expressed by President Joseph Fielding Smith:

All revelation since the fall has come through Jesus Christ, who is the Jehovah of the Old Testament. In all of the scriptures, where God is mentioned and where he has appeared, it was Jehovah who talked with Abraham, with Noah, Enoch, Moses and all the prophets. He is the God of Israel, the Holy One of Israel; the one who led that nation out of Egyptian bondage, and who gave and fulfilled the Law of Moses. (1 Ne. 19:10; 3 Ne 11:10, 14; 15:2–9.) The Father [Elohim] has never dealt with man directly and personally since the fall, and he has never appeared except to introduce and bear record of the Son.¹³

He noted further: "The Father [Elohim] has honored Christ by placing his name upon him, so that he can minister in and through that name *as though he were the Father*; and thus, so far as power and authority are concerned, *his words and acts become and are those of the Father*."¹⁴ When the Lord appeared in ancient times, he did so as the Father, and when he gave revelation to prophets, he spoke of the mortal mission of Jesus Christ in the third person, with the words of and from the perspective of God the Father, as though Jesus Christ were someone else. This explains Jehovah's words concerning Jesus in difficult passages such as Moses 1 and Isaiah 53.¹⁵

Each of the above-mentioned explanations of Ether 3:15a presupposes a theology similar to that of Joseph Fielding Smith: "All revelation since the fall has come through Jesus Christ. . . . The Father [Elohim] has never dealt with man directly and personally since the fall, and he has never appeared except to introduce and bear record of the Son."¹⁶ Assuming that such is the case, this appearance to the brother of Jared is the first recorded manifestation of Jehovah in which he appeared and identified himself as *the Son*. Elsewhere the scriptures record him appearing or speaking as God the Father (for example, Moses 6:50–52, 58–59; 7:4, 32–33, 39; see also 1:1–6). But to the brother of Jared he said, "Behold, *I am Jesus Christ*. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and

they shall become my sons and my daughters. And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast” (Ether 3:14–15).

The uniqueness of this situation lies in the fact that Jehovah appeared to Mahonri Moriancumer in his role as Jesus Christ—rather than as the Father. Never before, as far as we can tell from the scriptures, had *Jesus Christ* shown himself unto man. (And, interestingly, nowhere else in the scriptures do we have a clear example of Jehovah appearing as Jesus until his coming in the flesh.)¹⁷ As Moroni reported, “Having this perfect knowledge of God, he could not be kept from within the veil; *therefore he saw Jesus*” (Ether 3:20). To the brother of Jared, Christ revealed his complete nature: God who would become Man—Jehovah, the Father, who would become Jesus, the Son.

Perhaps the unprecedented nature of this appearance is a reason why the Lord commanded that the account not be made known in the world until after his mortal ministry (Ether 3:21).

NOTES

¹All italics in scripture citations in this article are my own emphasis.

²Our earliest source for the name Mahonri Moriancumer is George Reynolds, who reported a reminiscent account of the Prophet Joseph Smith identifying that as the name of the brother of Jared (“The Jaredites,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 [1 May 1892]: 282n.). As the name is commonly used in the Church, I will use it in this article for the sake of convenience, though I am not unaware of the late, secondhand nature of the story.

³Moroni was writing at least twenty-five hundred years after the experience of the brother of Jared (depending on when one dates the Jaredites, which I will not attempt here) and about four centuries after Christ’s coming to Lehi’s children.

⁴Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:37. See also Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957–66), 2: 123–26.

⁵Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 599–600.

⁶Sidney B. Sperry cited President Smith’s *Doctrines of Salvation* quotation and presented it as one of two possible interpretations (*Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967], 48; published earlier under the title, *Problems of the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964]; see also pp. 47–51). Daniel H. Ludlow repeated President Smith’s statement from *Answers to Gospel Questions* (see n. 4 above) in *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 318–19. The most recent *Book of Mormon Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Supplement* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987), 173, cites President Smith’s *Doctrines of Salvation* statement, and the Church Educational System *Book of Mormon Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 137–38, cites the quotation from *Answers to Gospel Questions*.

⁷Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, 48–49. This is Sperry’s preferred explanation in his *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 467–68. Sperry mentioned but did not endorse another possibility in which the Lord appeared in vision to the brother of Jared in the very body that he would have when he later came in the flesh (*Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, 49–51). A statement by President Harold B. Lee may shed additional light on this approach: “And then he was amazed because he said he saw not only the finger of a spiritual being but his faith was so great that he saw the kind of a body that He would have when He came down to the earth. It was of flesh and blood—flesh,

blood and bones. And the Master said, 'No man has had this kind of faith'" ("To Be on Speaking Terms with God," devotional address, Salt Lake Institute of Religion, 12 October 1973, 8–9).

⁸Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study*, 318; italics in original.

⁹See "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve," in James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 466–73; James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 38. See also Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 32–41; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 224, 392; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 59, 61, 66–67.

¹⁰Some important Book of Mormon passages that discuss Jesus as God, or the Father, are the Title Page; 1 Ne. 19:10; 2 Ne. 9:5; Mosiah 3:5–9; and Alma 11:38–39.

¹¹This is precisely the point that Abinadi made in Mosiah 15:1–5. Rodney Turner describes Jehovah's father-son roles as follows: "Literally possessing his Father's name and powers, the Son was worthy and able to act as the Father's divine surrogate. To this end, he became the Only Begotten Son in the flesh when he was conceived by Mary, a mortal woman. Begotten of an immortal Father and a mortal mother, Jesus possessed *two natures* (one divine, one human) and, therefore, *two wills* (that of the Father, and that of the Son). He could manifest either nature 'at will.' . . . The atonement required the subjection and sacrifice of the fleshly will of the 'Son' to the spiritual will of the 'Father.' . . . The Son willed to let the cup pass; the Father willed that it should be drunk to its dregs. Abinadi described Jesus' submission as 'the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father' (Mosiah 15:7; see also Luke 22:42; 3 Ne. 11:11). In a sense, it was not the Son as Son, but the Father *in* the Son who atoned. That is, Jesus not only did the will of his Father *in heaven*, but the will of the Father *in himself*. The Father and the Son—being 'one God'—came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. 'God himself'—in perfect unity—atoned for the sins of the world" ("Two Prophets: Abinadi and Alma," in *Studies in Scripture: Volume Seven, 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987], 245–46; italics in the original).

¹²Paul described Christ's movement from God to Man to God in Philip. 2:5–11; see also Col. 1:12–20.

¹³Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1:27.

¹⁴Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1:29–30; italics added.

¹⁵For a detailed discussion of the role of Christ as Father, see Robert L. Millet, "The Ministry of the Father and the Son," in *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 44–72.

¹⁶Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1:27. If it was Elohim, rather than Jehovah, in the earlier appearances, then Ether 3:15a is easily understood: "Never have I [Jehovah] showed myself unto man."

¹⁷Obviously our scriptural record does not contain an account of every sacred event. We do not know all that transpired in the recorded theophanies, nor what the prophets understood when they experienced them. See, for example, 2 Ne. 11:2–3. The voice of Christ is heard in 2 Ne. 10:7; 31:12, 14; Mosiah 26:14–32; 3 Ne. 1:12–14.