

THE PREMORTAL  
GODHOOD OF CHRIST:  
A RESTORATION PERSPECTIVE

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Latter-day Saints declare that all human beings are literally children of God our Heavenly Father, born as spirit sons and daughters of Elohim, the Supreme Being of eternity. The First Presidency of the Church has stated that "all men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity." And yet as noble as that heritage is, there was one who far transcended all the rest, who through the eons and ages of a premortal existence stood "like unto God" (Abraham 3:24). This was the firstborn spirit child of all the Father's creations—the birthright son—whom we know as our Savior.

THE FIRSTBORN

In 1833 the Savior Himself testified of His position as the Firstborn with unmistakable clarity: "And now, verily I say

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1. James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 4:203.

unto you, I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the Firstborn" (D&C 93:21). Many of the Lord's chosen servants have also taught in unequivocal terms that the mortal being known as Jesus Christ was the Firstborn in premortality. The Apostle Paul wrote that Jesus was "the image of the invisible God [meaning the Father], the firstborn of every creature" (Colossians 1:15), the "firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), and the "firstbegotten into the world" (Hebrews 1:6).

That Paul had in mind Jesus' preeminent role as the literal firstborn offspring among a myriad of spirit children, and not simply a symbolic reference to Jesus' earthly existence, is made clear by Elder Orson Pratt:

Have you not read, in the New Testament, that Jesus Christ was the first-born of every creature? From this reading it would seem that he was the oldest of the whole human family, that is, so far as his birth in the spirit world is concerned. . . . Have you not also read in the New Testament that he is called our elder brother? Does this refer to the birth of the body of flesh and bones? By no means, for there were hundreds of millions who were born upon our earth before the body of flesh and bones was born whom we call Jesus. How is it, then, that he is our elder brother? We must go back to the previous birth, before the foundation of this earth; we have to go back to past ages, to the period when he was begotten of the Father among the great family of spirits.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of the Savior's status as firstborn has been reemphasized for our benefit in more recent times by an official pronouncement of the First Presidency and Quorum of

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2. Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-86), 18:290.

the Twelve given in 1916: "Among the spirit children of Elohim the first-born was and is Jehovah to whom all others are juniors."<sup>3</sup>

Not only is the term *Firstborn* a declaration of Jesus' status, it is also a significant name-title, one so important, in fact, that the Savior's most faithful followers in mortality will share it throughout the eternities. Elder Bruce R. McConkie has stated that just as The Church of Jesus Christ is the name of the Savior's earthly church, "so *The Church of the Firstborn* is his heavenly church, albeit its members are limited to exalted beings, for whom the family unit continues and who gain an inheritance in the highest heaven of the celestial world. (Hebrews 12:22-23; D&C 93:22.)"<sup>4</sup> Truly, the term *Firstborn* connotes family life and is an apt symbol for those exalted persons who themselves have the privilege of possessing a continuing posterity; for exalted beings will be both members of the Church of the Firstborn as well as Gods, blessed with eternal posterity (see D&C 76:58-67; 132:19-20). In an exalted family with numerous children there always has been and always will be a firstborn. Through the atonement of the Firstborn, all of us have the opportunity to become like our Eternal Parents. If we are faithful to the Firstborn, we will gain eternal families of our own that are "patterned after the family of God the Father"<sup>5</sup> who had a Firstborn Son.

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3. "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve," in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:33. Also quoted in James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1964), 471. The entire text of the document is quoted on pages 465-73.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 47.

5. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 166.

## PREMORTAL GODHOOD

Because Jesus Christ was indeed the firstborn of heavenly parents and is, as pertaining to our first estate, our "elder brother," that means He also possessed a spirit body that had a definite birth or time of organization just like every other spirit child of God. Elder McConkie taught that implicit in Jesus' birth as a spirit child is the fact that "he had a beginning; there was a day when he came into being as a conscious identity, as a spirit entity, as an organized intelligence." And yet, as scripture and modern prophets teach, He "is himself also the Eternal One."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Jesus Christ's spirit body had a beginning, but He is also an eternal being *without* beginning, who is coexistent with God, and, more importantly, was Himself God in our premortal realm.

President Joseph Fielding Smith stated emphatically that Jesus Christ was "a God before he was born into this world."<sup>7</sup> He was like His Father. Analogous to family organization and family roles described in Old Testament culture, we might say that as the Firstborn, Jesus possessed all the rights, interests, and inheritance of the Father. He was the Birthright Son. He was in premortality the inheritor and rightful heir of all the Father possessed. He was the Father's agent and executor, the "Word," or "messenger of salvation" (D&C 93:8). Thus, Latter-day Saints believe that the words of John's introduction to his Gospel should be taken literally, at face value:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was  
with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

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6. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 165.

7. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 1:32.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

To say that Jesus was Himself God—even “the Eternal God” as the Book of Mormon title page puts it—but that He was also born as a son of God, having a beginning, is no contradiction when one understands the true nature and order of existence as revealed by enlightened prophets; and any confusion over this matter may be tied to the false notion of creation *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”).

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the word *create* used in the scriptures beginning with Genesis 1:1 (Hebrew *bara*<sup>8</sup>) more correctly has the meaning of “organize,” and thus, creation was an organizing of existing matter.

You ask the learned doctors why they say the world was made out of nothing; and they will answer, “Doesn’t the Bible say He *created* the world?” And they infer, from the word *create*, that it must have been made out of nothing. Now, the word *create* came from the [Hebrew] word *baurau* which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence, we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.”

That the original meaning of the Hebrew phraseology in Genesis 1:1 conveyed the notion of God organizing matter

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8. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 350-52.

rather than creating something out of nothing (the former true doctrine losing out to the later Christian idea of *ex nihilo*) is confirmed not only by ancient rabbinic thought but also the grammar of the Hebrew text itself. As one well-known commentary states:

Does this verse [Genesis 1:1] speak of creation *ex nihilo*? Yes, if the rendering of the RSV (cf. KJV) is correct: **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.** But the Hebrew *beréshith* seems to mean "in the beginning of" rather than **in the beginning**, and this requires that vs. 1 should be taken with vs. 3 . . . and rendered, "In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth, God said, etc." . . . Vss. 4, 5, indeed, imply that when God said, "Let there be light" (vs. 3), there was already darkness in existence, and vss. 6, 9 presuppose the existence of waters with land already formed beneath them.\*

The Prophet Joseph Smith further taught that the idea of Deity organizing eternally existent matter also applied to the spirits of God's children as well. He stated, "The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Lord revealed to the Prophet in 1833 that "man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can it be. . . . For man is spirit. The elements are eternal" (D&C 93:29-30, 33). In 1839 Joseph taught, "The Spirit of man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity & will exist to eternity. . . . & earth, water, &c. — all these had their existence in an elementary State

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9. *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 1:466; bolded phrases in original.

10. Smith, *Teachings*, 353. See also the entire section titled "The Immortal Spirit," 352-54, and the editor's footnotes.

from Eternity."<sup>11</sup> On another occasion, he said, "Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the substance from which the spirit bodies of God's children were formed is eternal just as God is eternal. As one scholar said, "Creation is never totally original; it is always a combination of prior realities."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in terms of time, Christ was coeternal with God; in terms of space, he was coexistent with God.

Given what we know about the true nature of both creation and procreation in our premortal existence, one might ask if there was ever a time when Jesus was not God. Mortal minds cannot conceive of such a time, and the scriptures themselves do not explicitly speak of such a time—only of Christ's obedience to the Father as well as His greatness and glory. The Savior Himself prayed to His Father on the eve of Gethsemane, "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). We are reminded, however, that prophets have taught that, as with all spirit children, Christ Himself had a beginning; that the principles of agency, obedience, and progression operated in the premortal state of our existence; and that the Savior honored and followed these foundational concepts of the Father's plan until He stood like unto God. Thus, the answer to our question is yes. But perhaps a far more important question to ask for our purposes is how or in what ways did Jesus manifest His godhood before He came to earth as the mortal Messiah? Let me suggest at least three significant ways.

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11. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 9.

12. Smith, *Teachings*, 354.

13. Truman Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 26.

## AN EXPERIENCED CREATOR

First of all, the premortal Jesus was a powerful and experienced creator during His premortal existence. It will be remembered that the Apostle John declared in his testimony of the Lord that, as the Word, "all things were made by him" (John 1:3). This simple statement is, in fact, the testimony of all scripture as well as modern prophets and apostles. To Joseph Smith it was revealed that ancient prophets knew far more about Christ's sweeping and magnificent creative role than traditional Christianity had ever supposed. In the book of Moses, for example, we read:

And behold, the glory of the Lord was upon Moses, so that Moses stood in the presence of God, and talked with him face to face. And the Lord God said unto Moses: For mine own purpose have I made these things. Here is wisdom and it remaineth in me.

And by the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth.

And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose; and by the Son I created them, which is mine Only Begotten. (Moses 1:31-33)

Elder James E. Talmage noted that "the Father operated in the work of creation through the Son, who thus became the executive through whom the will, commandment, or word of the Father was put into effect. It is with incisive appropriateness therefore, that the Son, Jesus Christ, is designated by the apostle John as the Word; or as declared by the Father 'the word of my power' [Moses 1:32]."<sup>14</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith bore a similar powerful witness

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14. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 33.



of the Savior's mighty acts of creation, as did the lawgiver Moses:

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. (D&C 76:22-24)

The Prophet's singular witness of the Lord's living reality, His divine sonship, and His creative workmanship also suggests that the Creation is still going on. Joseph Smith learned what God had revealed to Moses: "For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them" (Moses 1:35). Such power and wisdom exercised by the premortal Jesus are beyond the grasp of mortals. The written declarations of prophets about the creation of millions of earths by Christ through the same power as is held by the Father is testimony enough of Jesus' stature before His birth as the mortal Messiah. But such testimony is given visual impact when one stands outdoors on a clear, cloudless night to gaze into the star-filled heavens with the realization that the vast expanse of the visible universe is only a small part of the Savior's realm.

Astronomers tell us that our solar system is located in a spiral arm of the Milky Way Galaxy, a flat, disc-shaped cluster of stars approximately 100,000 light-years across at its widest point. A light-year is the distance light travels in one year.

Moving at the speed of 186,000 miles per second, a beam of light traverses 5.7 trillion miles in 365 days! The size of our galaxy in number of miles then is a staggering 5.7 trillion times 100,000 and is estimated to contain 200 billion stars, 50 percent of which (100 billion) possess solar systems like our own. The next closest galaxy is Andromeda, a star system much like our own Milky Way, approximately 2.2 million light years away from us. Furthermore, our best telescopes can probe outward into space to a distance of approximately 5 billion light years and view about 500 million galaxies, each of which possesses billions of stars. And these galaxies are only the ones we can detect with the present state of our technology. Truly, the observation made by Enoch the Seer is literally one of the grandest *understatements* of all time: "And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still" (Moses 7:30). Such are the sweeping and incomprehensible powers of Jesus the Creator.

Undoubtedly, this is why several passages in the Book of Mormon speak of Jesus Christ as creator of the heavens, the earth, and all things upon it: "And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning" (Mosiah 3:8). Some passages even speak explicitly of Jesus Christ as the creator of humankind (see Mosiah 26:23; Alma 5:15; Ether 3:16). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the one area of creation in which the Savior did not participate as primal Maker or Organizer was the procreation of spirit children. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught this concept with clarity:

In the ultimate and final sense of the word, the Father is the Creator of all things. That he used the Son and others to perform many of the creative acts, delegating to

them his creative powers, does not make these others creators in their own right, independent of him. He is the source of all creative power, and he simply chooses others to act for him in many of his creative enterprises. But there are two creative events that are his and his alone. First, he is the Father of all spirits, Christ's included; none were fathered or created by anyone else. Second, he is the Creator of the physical body of man. Though Jehovah and Michael and many of the noble and great ones played their assigned roles in the various creative events, yet when it came time to place man on earth, the Lord God himself performed the creative acts. "I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them." (Moses 2:27)<sup>15</sup>

Still, even when one excludes the creation of man, the number and kind of creations which have come into existence as a result of the Savior's power are mind-boggling. And what is more, these creations are maintained and renewed on a continual basis by that very same power inherent in the Savior,

As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made.

As also he is in the moon, and is the light of the moon, and the power thereof by which it was made;

As also the light of the stars, and the power thereof by which they were made;

And the earth also, and the power thereof, even the earth upon which you stand.

And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings;

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15. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 63.

Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—

The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things. (D&C 88:7-13)

Truly, Jesus was and is an experienced creator whose godhood and greatness were clearly demonstrated in premortality. The premortal Jesus was, as Abinadi declared, "the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth" (Mosiah 15:4).

### THE GREAT JEHOVAH

A second way Jesus' godhood was demonstrated in premortal life was through His position as the Great Jehovah, the God of ancient Israel, the Divine Being graphically described in the pages of the Old Testament who gave laws to His covenant people and sustained them in the promised land. As recorded in 3 Nephi, Jesus testified to the Nephites when He appeared to them that He and Jehovah were one and the same being.

Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses.

Behold, 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 fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. . . .

For behold, the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me.

Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life. (3 Nephi 15:4-5, 8-9)

No greater witness can be invoked than this testimony from the resurrected Savior himself. He was Jehovah, and every law by which the universe was framed, as well as those laws given to the people of Israel, issued forth from Him (see D&C 88:42). No law is above Him or greater than He is, for, as He declared, He is the law!

One notes the number of times in the above-quoted passage the Savior used the phrase "I am" in connection with His self-identification as the Great Jehovah who guided the prophet Moses. This is no accident, since Jehovah was known in ancient times by the name-title I AM. When Moses spoke with Jehovah face to face on Mount Sinai and received his divinely appointed commission to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage, the prophet asked how he should identify the one true God to the Israelites, a people who had been living in a polytheistic land teeming with gods and deities (Pharaoh himself, for example, was regarded as the god Horus when he was alive and as the god Osiris once he was dead).

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say to them?

And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations. (Exodus 3:13-15)

The name-title I AM is the English rendering of a first-person singular future-tense form of the Hebrew verb *hayah* ("to be," "to exist"). It is directly related to the name Jehovah,

which is a Germanized form of the Hebrew *Yahweh*, which in turn is a *third-person* singular future-tense form of the same Hebrew verb *hayah*. This divine name is referred to as the Tetragrammaton and connotes continual or eternal existence, something like "He that exists or will always exist." This relationship between divine names is even more clear and dramatic when viewing them written in Hebrew.

It is interesting to note that in Exodus 3:15 Jehovah indicated that the Tetragrammaton (Hebrew *Yahweh* or Jehovah and usually translated as LORD—with small capital letters) is the name by which He would be known forever, as a "memorial unto all generations." Thus, it would seem that while that name is the name by which God was to be known formally among the people (*Yahweh* or Jehovah), the form of the name He often used to testify of Himself and His very essence was the first-person form, I AM. Significantly, the expression I AM is a name-title the mortal Jesus of Nazareth used to testify of His divinity, both before and after His resurrection.

During His mortal ministry to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Jesus announced to a significant audience in Jerusalem, perhaps at the temple, that He was the Great I AM. When some of the people openly disputed Jesus' messianic testimony and claimed for themselves preeminent status over Him because they were Abraham's children, the Savior declared: "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). As indicated in the footnote to this verse in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible, the term I AM used here in the Greek manuscripts of this passage is identical with the Septuagint usage in Exodus 3:14 that identifies Jehovah.<sup>16</sup> Among the Savior's audience, there was no misunderstanding. By claiming for Himself divinity using the explicit name-title of God,

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16. The Septuagint is the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament.

He gravely offended some of the people, who "took . . . up stones to cast at him" (John 8:59), believing Him to be guilty of blasphemy. There are many other examples of Jesus' use of the term I AM when He testifies of His own divinity, but one of the most powerful and expressive statements comes from a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in January 1831:

Hearken and listen to the voice of him who is from all eternity to all eternity, the Great I AM, even Jesus Christ— . . .

The same which came in the meridian of time unto mine own, and mine own received me not. (D&C 39:1, 3)

### DIVINE INVESTITURE OF AUTHORITY

A third way in which Jesus' premortal godhood was manifested was in His role as spokesman for God the Father or, more specifically, His right and commission to speak as though He were Himself God the Father. Jesus said many times in mortality, as well as after His resurrection, that He and His Father were one, not in personage or physical form but in purpose, intention, and thoughts (see John 10:30; 14:10; 17:22). But even more than that, as Jesus told the Nephites, "I am *in* the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one" (3 Nephi 11:27; emphasis added; compare 3 Nephi 9:15; 19:23; 28:10). This is certainly true of Jesus and the Father in premortal life as well as during and after the Savior's mortal sojourn. In other words, God the Father and His first-born spirit son, whether acting as the premortal Jehovah or later as the resurrected Lord, were so unified in mind and will that what one thought, said, and did, the other one thought, said, and did—exactly.

This concept has been described by modern prophets as the principle of divine investiture of authority. That is, God the Father invested, or placed, in His Son His very own power

and authority. The earliest use of the term *divine investiture of authority* is found in the 1916 statement entitled "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve." It is a most significant document for many reasons and sets forth the distinct ways in which Christ is rightfully known as the Father, which include His role as creator of the heavens and earth, His actions in making eternal life possible for His followers, and His power through the principle of divine investiture of authority. "In all His dealings with the human family," the Brethren declared, "Jesus the Son has represented and yet represents Elohim His Father in power and authority. This is true of Christ in His preexistent, ante-mortal, or unembodied state, in which He was known as Jehovah; also during His embodiment in the flesh; and during His labors as a disembodied spirit in the realm of the dead; and since that period in His resurrected state."<sup>17</sup> Thus, God the Father, to whom we reverently refer as Elohim, has authorized Jesus Christ "to speak in the first person as though he were the original or primal Father."<sup>18</sup>

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught the doctrine in these words: "The Father 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."<sup>19</sup> Elder McConkie also taught the doctrine of divine investiture in clarity:

Both the Father and the Son bear the name the Most High (Deuteronomy 32:8-9; Isaiah 14:14; Mark 5:7; D&C 36:3; 39:19; 76:57). This designation connotes a state of

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17. Quoted in Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 470-71.

18. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 63.

19. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:29-30.



supreme exaltation in rank, power, and dignity; it indicates that each of these Gods is God above all. Obviously the Father is the Most High God in the literal sense for he is the God of the Son as well as the God of all men (John 20:17). The Son, however, is the Most High God in the sense that by divine investiture of authority, he is endowed with the power and authority of the Father, speaks in his name as though he were the Father, and therefore (having the fulness of the Father) he thinks it "not robbery to be equal with God" (Philippians 2:6).<sup>20</sup>

It wasn't simply exalted status, superior knowledge, or intense power and influence that made Jesus God in our premortal existence. If that were so, Lucifer would have tried, and in fact did try, to stake a fair claim on such authority, for he possessed a lofty and exalted position among the Father's spirit children. The Doctrine and Covenants refers to him as "an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God" (D&C 76:25). Another ingredient was requisite for godhood as the principle of divine investiture of authority infers. One had to be endowed and invested with the power and authority to speak and act as God the Father, as Jesus shows us. To speak and act in the place of God the Father was not an honor that could be taken unto oneself, as the arrogance of Satan shows us.

The principle of divine investiture of authority is demonstrated in latter-day revelation. Doctrine and Covenants 29 opens with a summons by the Savior: "Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, the Great I AM, whose arm of mercy hath atoned for your sins. . . . Lift up your hearts and be glad, for I am in your midst, and am your advocate with the

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20. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 516.

Father; and it is his good will to give you the kingdom" (D&C 29:1, 5). Yet several verses later, without any mention of a change in person or tone, section 29 concludes as though God the Father had been speaking all along: "But, behold, I say unto you that I, the Lord God, gave unto Adam and unto his seed, that they should not die as to the temporal death, until I, the Lord God, should send forth angels to declare unto them repentance and redemption, through faith on the name of *mine Only Begotten Son*. . . . But behold, I say unto you, that little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through *mine Only Begotten* (D&C 29:42, 46; emphasis added). Throughout section 29, the Savior is speaking sometimes as Himself and sometimes as though He were the Father. It is by the operation of this principle that the premortal Jesus, acting as the Great Jehovah, spoke as though He were God the Father, and in so doing manifested His own greatness, glory, and godhood, as well as His oneness with Elohim.

An important extension of the doctrine of divine investiture of authority is the corollary doctrine that *all* revelation to humankind on this earth since the fall of Adam and Eve has been given by Jesus Christ acting in His position of Jehovah. Thus, whenever the Lord appeared in ancient times or gave visions and revelations to His prophets or even testified in the third-person narrative fashion that Christ, the Son of God, would come in the meridian of time, it was the premortal Jesus speaking. In a very instructive summary statement, President Joseph Fielding Smith taught the following:

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. *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.*<sup>21</sup>

### THE CHOSEN REDEEMER

One cannot talk about the premortal stature of Jesus without examining His redemptive powers and actions. In addition to His position as God, Jesus was chosen and anointed in premortality to be our Redeemer and Savior. Peter, the chief Apostle, taught this lesson in a very poignant way to the Saints of his day:

Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, . . .

But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.  
(1 Peter 1:18–20)

The premortal Savior was the chief proponent of the Father's plan of salvation for His children. A hallmark of the Savior's personality in premortality as well as mortality was humility: He humbly offered to be our Redeemer, to put into effect the Father's plan, to sacrifice His own comfort and lofty position to do His Father's will and yet to give the honor and glory to the Father. However, in subjugating His own will to the will of the Father, in freely giving His agency over to the Father, the premortal Jesus acquired even greater power. This is a powerful lesson for all of the Father's children. Whenever we freely give back to God the one and only thing that is really

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21. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:27; emphasis added.

our own to give—our agency—we lose nothing but gain back even greater power than we had before. And the premortal Jesus is our exemplar (see Moses 1:1–4).

Part of the expansive apocalyptic revelation recorded by John the Revelator includes a vision of the celestial throne and kingdom of God, and "in the right hand of him that sat on the throne [was] a book . . . sealed with seven seals" (Revelation 5:1). The book represents the revealed will of God (his plan of salvation) for this earth, and the seals represent the seven thousand years of the earth's temporal existence (see D&C 77:6–7). John wept much because there was no one found worthy of opening the book, or, in other words, no one capable of knowing the mind and will of God in its fulness, no one powerful enough to execute God's plan—no one, that is, until John was shown the Savior.

And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain. (Revelation 5:5–6)

It seems that John is telling us, among other things, that Jesus is the only one who emerges from the whole host of the Father's children who is able to know the aims and desires of the Father in their entirety, and the only being worthy and powerful enough to put into effect the Father's plan, the only perfect being in premortality who voluntarily yielded His agency to the Father and selflessly offered to be the Redeemer.

### THE ATONEMENT IN PREMORTAL LIFE

All the holy prophets since the world began have testified of the redeeming ministry of that second member of the

Godhead who would come to earth as the Messiah (see Jacob 4:4; Mosiah 3:5–13; 13:33). However, the testimonies of some of these seers preserved in Restoration scripture are so explicit that an aspect of the Atonement is revealed which makes all other denominational statements of Christ's redemptive role pale in comparison. It is a truth which allows us to see more clearly the grandeur, majesty, and sweeping significance of Jesus' atoning power in a truly eternal context. We are referring of course to the doctrine which teaches that the Atonement already operated on our behalf in our first estate, allowing each and every one of our Heavenly Father's children to be born into mortality innocent—with a clean slate, as it were.

To Moses it was revealed that "Enoch saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is *slain from the foundation of the world*" (Moses 7:47; emphasis added). John the Revelator recorded a similar thing as part of his vision of the plan of salvation known as the Apocalypse: "And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb *slain from the foundation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8; emphasis added).

In other words, the Savior's sacrifice, though not made in actuality until He had taken a physical body in mortality, was regarded in our premortal existence as having already been accomplished. That is why, for example, in the opening scenes of mortal life on this earth, immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve, God could and would say to our primal patriarch, "Adam: Behold I have forgiven thee of thy transgression in the Garden of Eden" (Moses 6:53). That is, Adam's transgression had already been paid for by the time our first parents embarked on their sojourn in mortality. How could this have

been accomplished unless the Atonement was already in operation long before it took place in the flesh? This realization gives new meaning to the verse which follows the one quoted above: "Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt" (Moses 6:54).

The prophet Alma may have alluded to the operation of the Atonement in premortality when he taught the doctrine of the premortal foreordination of all those who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood in mortality.

And this is the manner after which they were ordained—being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such. (Alma 13:3)

The grand implication associated with the idea of the premortal operation of the Atonement, and an uncomfortable one to some, is that sins were committed and mistakes were made in premortality. We know one-third of the hosts of heaven rebelled against God and were cast out, a fact that should be sufficient evidence of the operation of moral agency as well as its consequences in our first estate. That such was indeed the case is made explicit in a statement by Elder Orson Pratt, who, when writing about the nature of sin in our premortal existence, said that "among the two-thirds [of God's spirit children] who remained, it is highly probable, that, there were many who were not valiant . . . , but whose sins were of such a nature that they could be forgiven through faith in the future sufferings of the Only Begotten of the Father, and through

their sincere repentance and reformation. We see no impropriety in Jesus offering Himself as an acceptable offering and sacrifice before the Father to atone for the sins of His brethren, committed, not only in the second, but also in the first estate.<sup>22</sup>

In premortality the atonement of Jesus Christ operated in our behalf so that each of us could begin our second estate with a fresh start, free from the blemishes, mars, mistakes, sins, and errors committed in premortality, free of the disabling and crippling spiritual baggage brought from a former life. As was revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith, "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God" (D&C 93:38).

Could it be that Satan and his followers were finally cast out of heaven because they ultimately refused to accept the efficacy of the Savior's atonement as it operated in premortality? Without acceptance of the Atonement in our premortal phase of existence, any chance to be rendered innocent in our infant mortal condition would be eliminated. Is it not reasonable to assume that just as our commitment to Christ's atonement in our second estate determines our future possibilities, so too one's commitment to the Atonement in our first estate determined future possibilities? As one writer said, "The scriptures and statements of the prophets indicate that there is, indeed, much similarity between the conditions of and expectations for mankind premortally and on earth. That gospel principles were taught and practiced in both places also implies that the atonement of Jesus Christ was in full effect in [the] premortal world."<sup>23</sup>

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22. Orson Pratt, *The Seer*, no. 4 (April 1853), 1.54.

23. Brent L. Top, *The Life Before* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 94.

## THE REDEEMER OF ALL CREATION

With this sweeping perspective of the activities, powers, and roles of the premortal Savior, Alma's discussion of the Atonement takes on added meaning: "For it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice" (Alma 34:10). We know that the Atonement was made by God Himself, just as King Benjamin testified it would be (see Mosiah 3:5-8). It was not an action of a mere human. And we know that the Atonement was and is truly eternal in its operation, covering our premortal existence as well as our mortal sojourn, and affecting God's children forever. But this is not all; the atonement of Christ is also infinite in scope and was such from the beginning.

Perhaps even greater and more stunning than Jesus' role as creator is His corollary role as redeemer of all that He has created. We do not know how many creations, how many worlds and universes, came into being before this earth was brought into existence through the power of God's Only Begotten Son. (Remember what Moses learned from God: "For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man" [Moses 1:35].) But we do know that His atonement operates for each and every creation and covers them all. (The word *cover* presents an apt image and derives from the Hebrew word for atonement, *kaphar*, as in Yom Kippur—Day of Atonement, which literally means "to cover over.") The Prophet Joseph Smith testified of the operation of the Savior's creative power before the formation of this earth when he said:

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard a voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

That by him, and through him, and of him, the



worlds *are and were* created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. (D&C 76:23–24; emphasis added)

Later in that same section of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Prophet testified of the Savior's vast redemptive power when he declared "that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; that through him *all* might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him" (D&C 76:41–42; emphasis added).

The doctrine of the all-encompassing nature of the Atonement was taught by the Prophet in majestic poetry when he gave a special rendering of Doctrine and Covenants 76:23–24. He composed it as a response to a poem penned by his friend William W. Phelps. A portion of the Prophet's inspired rendition reads:

And I heard a great voice bearing record from heav'n,  
He's the Savior and Only Begotten of God;  
By him, of him, and through him, the worlds were all  
made,  
Even all that career in the heavens so broad.  
Whose inhabitants, too, from the first to the last,  
Are sav'd by the very same Savior of ours;  
And, of course, are begotten God's daughters and sons  
By the very same truths and the very same powers.

On this point of doctrine, the Prophet Joseph Smith was steadfastly consistent and unwavering. The inhabitants of the millions of earths like the one on which we reside are all saved and redeemed by the same atonement of Jesus Christ that occurred in actuality on this world. On one occasion, while speaking about the Apostle John's future vision of the beings and creatures who had ultimately inherited the celestial

glory as recorded in the book of Revelation, chapter 4, the Prophet Joseph Smith further said: "I suppose John saw beings there of a thousand forms, that had been saved from ten thousand times ten thousand earths like this. . . . The grand secret was to show John what there was in heaven. John learned that God glorified Himself by saving all that His hands had made, whether beasts, fowls, fishes or men; and He will glorify Himself with them."<sup>24</sup>

In summary, we may take the words of Elder McConkie as our guide and doctrinal foundation: "When the prophets speak of an *infinite* atonement, they mean just that. Its effects cover all men, the earth itself and all forms of life thereon, and reach out into the endless expanse of eternity. . . . The atonement of Christ, being literally and truly infinite, applies to an infinite number of earths."<sup>25</sup>

### THE CONDESCENSION OF GOD

Given this brief glimpse at the premortal godly stature of the Being known in mortality as Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps we can begin to appreciate more fully the concept spoken of in the Book of Mormon as the condescension of God. The ancient prophet Nephi was tutored in detail regarding this wondrous doctrine. As the heavens were opened, an angel came down and stood before him, "And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?" (1 Nephi 11:16). Nephi responded that he knew that God loves His children, but he did not know the meaning of all things. He was then shown many symbols and scenes pertaining to the plan of salvation, especially the mortal birth of the Son of God. And the angel said to Nephi again, "Look and behold the condescension of

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24. Smith, *Teachings*, 291.

25. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 64-65.

God!" (1 Nephi 11:26). Nephi then saw, in vision, scenes from the earthly ministry of the Savior, He who not only was "the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father" (1 Nephi 11:21) but also was God Himself.

Thus, the condescension of God occurred on two levels. First, God the Father condescended to voluntarily associate Himself with our fallen world by siring a son to live as a mortal. Second, it was a condescension of almost incomprehensible magnitude for God the Son, the great Jehovah, the Eternal God, the Creator of all things from the beginning, to forsake His throne of radiant glory and enter human history in the small town of Bethlehem as a helpless baby who had to learn to crawl and walk, who cut his first tooth, who stubbed his toes and bruised his shins, and who suffered the effects of cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and pain of every sort and kind. Elder McConkie put it this way:

The One whose might and omnipotence we can scarcely glimpse and cannot begin to comprehend, this Holy Being to whom we, by comparison, are as the dust of the earth, this Almighty Personage, in his love, mercy, and grace, condescended to step down from his Almighty throne, to step down to a lesser and benighted state, as it were, and become the Father of a Son "after the manner of the flesh." . . . The Creator of all things from the beginning [did also] step down from his high state of exaltation [to] be, for a moment, like one of the creatures of his creating.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Because of the veil of forgetfulness as well as the relentless and all-encompassing influence and intrusions of a fallen

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26. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 467.

world, mortals can scarcely comprehend the true stature of the premortal Jesus. Though some would try to accuse the Latter-day Saints of a deficient belief in Jesus, the revelations of the Restoration teach otherwise. Indeed, ours is a high Christology, rooted firmly in the reality of the great High Priest of our profession. Prophets have testified to us in plainness that Jesus was God in our premortal existence, He is God now, and He will be God forevermore. Latter-day revelation declares that "from eternity to eternity he is the same" (D&C 76:4). Aside from discussions of His actual atoning sacrifice in mortality, some of the most powerful statements in the standard works speak to the nature of the Jesus we worship and describe His towering greatness and glory in premortality.

By virtue of his position as Jehovah, and predicated upon the doctrine of divine investiture of authority, every name and every power that were the Father's (save one, procreation) also belonged to Jesus in the premortal realms. Even before He entered mortality as the Messiah of our redemption, all the names that Isaiah grandly pronounced would be His were already His: "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). He was omnipotent, omniscient, and, by His Holy Spirit, omnipresent. He is eternal. He is the Star arisen out of Jacob, and He is the Sceptre come out of Israel (see Numbers 24:17). He is the Well Beloved and Chosen One of the Father (see Helaman 5:47; Moses 4:2; 7:39). He is the Anointed One (see Acts 10:38; D&C 109:53) and He is the Bridegroom (see Matthew 25:1-13; D&C 133:10,19). He was the hope of Israel in ancient times, and He is the hope of Israel today!

Finally, we know that all the ancient prophets gave Jesus witness (see Acts 10:43; Jacob 7:11), and all true modern prophets testify of Him in the latter days. President Gordon B. Hinckley boldly proclaimed to an ailing world, "Jesus is the

Christ, the great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the promised Messiah of the New Testament, our King, our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer who gave His life for each of us.<sup>27</sup> After all is said and done, both King Benjamin (see Mosiah 3:5-8) and Abinadi (see Mosiah 15:1) were right: God Himself came down among us!

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27. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Excerpts from Recent Addresses of Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, July 1999, 72.