

TERRY B. BALL

THE UNIQUE AND
SUPREME ATTRIBUTES OF
JESUS THE CHRIST



During Alma’s ministry among the people of Ammonihah, he taught them of the priesthood to which he was ordained, which both authorized and mandated him to teach God’s commandments. He testified that the “Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son, to teach” the commandments of God to the people (Alma 13:1). He then explained, “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” (v. 3).

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Alma's understanding that those ordained to the high priesthood were so ordained on account of their "exceeding faith . . . in the first place," raises some provocative questions. For example, "in the first place," which we understand to be the premortal life, God "stood in the midst" of the "noble and great ones" that were "chosen" before they were born (Abraham 3:22–23). Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained that "in the premortal life *we all* dwelt in his [God's] presence, saw his face, and heard his voice."¹ Under such circumstances, in what, then, did those foreordained to the high priesthood exercise faith that qualified them for this distinction? If we understand, as Alma taught, that "faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things" but rather a "hope for things which are not seen" (Alma 32:21), then the faith exercised by those foreordained to the high priesthood in the premortal life must have been something other than faith in the existence of God, for there they dwelt with God and saw Him. They would have had a perfect knowledge of His existence. What was it then that they hoped for but had not yet seen?

Certainly one unseen truth in which they must have exercised faith was that Jesus, He who was "chosen from the beginning" by the Father (Moses 4:2), really could and would be able to work the great, infinite Atonement that was such a vital part of God's plan. They must have believed that He truly could and would do the will of the Father, that He truly could and would be our Savior, and that He truly could and would live a sinless life and suffer and die for us.

This conclusion leads to another important question: why? Why in that premortal setting did they—and for

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that matter, why did all of us before we were born to this earth—have faith in Jesus, faith that He could and would be our Redeemer? I believe one answer is that we recognized then, as we recognize now in mortality, attributes in Jesus that identify Him as one both uniquely and supremely prepared and qualified to be our Savior. We must have believed what Cecil F. Alexander declared in her hymn, “There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heav’n and let us in.”²

JESUS’S PREMORTAL AND MORTAL ATTRIBUTES

The Firstborn and Only Begotten. As Latter-day Saints, we hold as true Jesus’s pronouncement “I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the Firstborn” (D&C 93:21; compare Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15), meaning the Firstborn of all God the Father’s premortal spirit children.³ We further understand that because He was chosen to be our Savior, in mortality He also became the “only begotten” in the flesh (see John 1:14, 18; John 3:16; 1 John 4:9).⁴ Furthermore, we know that when He was born in mortality Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Micah (see Micah 5:2), for He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David (see Luke 2:4–6). Thus, Jesus is both unique and supreme among God’s children being the Firstborn in the spirit and the Only Begotten in the flesh, born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy.

The glory and image of the Father. The first chapter of Hebrews informs us that Jesus was “the brightness of his [God the Father’s] glory, and the express image of his

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person” (Hebrews 1:2–3; compare John 1:14). Speaking of Their appearance, Joseph Smith taught that the Father and the Son “exactly resembled each other in features and likeness.”⁵ Perhaps this is why, in mortality, Jesus could declare to Philip, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). While He may have maintained His physical resemblance to the Father as He ministered in the flesh, Christ apparently did not openly go about displaying the “brightness” of the Father’s glory to which He had attained in His premortal life, for Isaiah prophesied that in mortality “he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2).⁶ Speaking of the remarkable contrast between the premortal and mortal Jesus’s status and glory, Elder Francis M. Gibbons testified, “The supernal status of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and the preeminent place which he occupies in the eternal scheme of things cause us to stand in awe at what has been called the condescension of Christ, meaning his willingness to step down from his exalted place and to go forth, as the scripture says, ‘suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; . . . that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities, . . . that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance’ (Alma 7:11–13).”⁷ Once again, Jesus presents both a unique and supreme attribute in that not only does He resemble the Father in appearance but also in brightness and glory—a glory which He set aside to minister in the

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flesh. No other child of God has condescended more, for no one could have given up more to become mortal.

In the beginning with God. The Gospel of John adds considerably to our understanding of Jesus’s premortal attributes, accomplishments, and stature. As John opens his Gospel, he declares that Jesus, whom he calls the “Word,” was “in the beginning” (John 1:1; compare D&C 93:6–8). We understand this to mean that He was not a latecomer to God’s work and plans. He was not, as some early Christian sects would try to explain, simply a man who lived such a good life in mortality that God chose to put His Spirit in Him.⁸ Rather, Jesus was as Moses explains “chosen from the beginning” (Moses 4:2). John further testifies that not only was Jesus present from the beginning but also that He was “with God” (John 1:1). I believe this is more a statement of commitment than of simple presence. In other words, He was not just simply present with the Father but He was “with” Him in thought, purpose, and will—so much so that in mortality He could testify, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). No other person born to this earth has so totally conformed to the Father’s will that he or she could so rightfully make such a claim in mortality.

The Great Jehovah. John further declares that not only was Jesus with God in the beginning but that “the Word was God” (John 1:1; compare D&C 38:1–5). Latter-day Saints understand this to mean that somehow even before He came to earth Jesus had attained unto the stature of a God—divinely invested by God the Father with the authority to be Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. As Jesus Himself testified in a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus

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Christ, the Great *I Am*, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made; the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes; I am the same which spake, and the world was made, and all things came by me. I am the same which have taken the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom; and verily, I say, even as many as have believed in my name, for I am Christ” (D&C 38:1–4). Jesus wants us to understand that He is the God who spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who parted the Red Sea and brought down the walls of Jericho; and the God who became flesh and dwelt among us (see John 1:14). Thus, He could testify through Isaiah, “I, even I, am [Jehovah]; and beside me there is no saviour” (Isaiah 43:11).⁹

The Creator. John continues his description of Jesus’s attributes by explaining that He also had a role in the Creation. John testified, “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). Moses further clarifies Jesus’s role in the Creation, teaching us that Jesus created the worlds under the direction of the Father: “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 1:32–33). How appropriate that He who was in the beginning; who was with God in every way; who was Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament; and who was the creator of the earth, should also be chosen to be its Savior.

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THE LIFE AND LIGHT OF MEN

Continuing to describe Jesus’s attributes and “credentials,” John says of Him, “In him was life; and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). By life, I believe John means something far more than mortal life; rather, that Jesus is the means whereby we have access to eternal life. By light, I believe John means light as defined in Doctrine and Covenants 93: Jesus is the source of truth, knowledge, and intelligence (see D&C 93:24–37). John further explained that the “true Light” of Jesus “lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9). What a remarkable and essential attribute for the Savior to have—the ability to give light, truth, intelligence, and ultimately eternal life to all of us.¹⁰ John then describes the blessings that can be ours if we accept the light and truth Jesus offers. John promises, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12). This promise tells us that if we are willing to accept Jesus and the light and life He offers, then we become like Him—children of God just as Jesus is and heirs to all that the Father has. As the revelation on the priesthood assures us, “He that receiveth me receiveth my Father; and he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him” (D&C 84:37–38). It is my faith that only Jesus could offer this to us. It is only through believing on and receiving Jesus, His gospel, and His Atonement that we can become heirs to all the Father has. As Nephi declared, “And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given

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under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 31:21).

CONCLUSION

While this discussion of Jesus’s attributes is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, I hope it is adequate to support the truth that Jesus, He who was known in mortality as Jesus of Nazareth, was both uniquely and supremely qualified to be our Savior. He truly was the Firstborn and Only Begotten of the Father. He was with the Father from the beginning. He was even like the Father—one with Him in love, purpose, power, and will—so much so that He was divinely invested with the authority to be Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, who created the world and offered it light, truth, intelligence, and eternal life. He condescended to come to earth as a mortal man of ordinary appearance and to become like His brethren in all things (see Hebrews 2:17). As Alma declared, He suffered pains, afflictions, and temptations of every kind, and ultimately death so He could loose the bands of death (see Alma 7:11–12). I believe in the premortal council when He was chosen to be our Savior each of us born to this earth agreed with the choice. We had faith in Him. We believed that He was good, that He was wise, and that He loved us. As Cecil Alexander declared and as we recognized in that heavenly council, “There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heav’n and let us in.”

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NOTES

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 45; emphasis added. See also Sterling W. Sill, in *Conference Report*, October 1956, 66.
2. “There Is a Green Hill Far Away,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 194.
3. While Romans 8:29 identifies Jesus as the firstborn “among many brethren,” and Colossians 1:15 is understood by some to also mean the firstborn from the grave in the resurrection, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin helps us understand that Jesus was indeed “the Firstborn Son of our Heavenly Father in the spirit” (“Christians in Belief and Action,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 70).
4. See also Topical Guide, “Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,” 251.
5. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:536.
6. Isaiah uses the past tense or “prophetic perfect” in this prophecy, “speaking of things to come as though they had already come” (Mosiah 16:6). For other descriptions of Jesus’s glorified premortal and postmortal appearance see the Topical Guide under the headings “Jesus Christ, Appearances, Antemortal” and “Jesus Christ, Appearance, Postmortal.”
7. Francis M. Gibbons, “The Savior and Joseph Smith—Alike yet Unlike,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 33.

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8. This was a belief held by some Gnostic Christians. For a discussion of the issue, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6–7, 191.
9. Here I have chosen to interpret the tetragrammaton, the name of the God of the Old Testament, as Jehovah, rather than following the KJV practice of translating the term as “the Lord.”
10. For more discussion on this topic see Dallin H. Oaks, “The Light and Life of the World,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 63.