



CHAPTER 12

The Preexistence

THE END OF THE THIRD CHAPTER IS THE MOST QUOTED part of the Book of Abraham. In these few verses, Abraham is told about the preexistence. More than half of all citations of the Book of Abraham in the general conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a third of all citations of the Book of Abraham in the Church's manuals are from the Book of Abraham's discussion of the preexistence. For Latter-day Saints, this is the most important part of the book.

PREEXISTENCE IN THE SCRIPTURES

Some Latter-day Saints think that the prefix *pre-* in *preexistence* means *before* and reason that one cannot have an existence before one exists and therefore prefer to use the term *premortal existence*. The reasoning

is correct but the understanding it is based on is incomplete. The prefix *pre-* can mean both *before* and *previous*. A preexistence is therefore a previous existence. Thus the term *preexistence* is not an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

A number of scriptures discuss the preexistence. In most of these, the emphasis is on the preexistence of Jesus as the Son of God. Thus, in John 8:57–58, Jesus identifies himself as existing before Abraham, which means that Jesus existed before his mortal birth. Moses 4:1–4 tells a story of a meeting in heaven at which both Jesus and Satan are present before God, and Jesus is chosen and Satan was not. But this account mentions no others as being there; it does not exclude that possibility, but it also does not mention it. It only argues that Jesus and Satan had a preexistence. Many other scriptures discuss the pre-mortal existence of Jesus (John 1:1–14; 3:13; 6:62; 8:58; 16:28; 17:5, 24; 1 John 1:1; 5:7; 3 Nephi 1:13; 26:5; Ether 3:16; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:20; Mosiah 7:27; D&C 76:13–14).

In some scriptures, certain prophets are seen as existing before they were born. In Jeremiah 1:5, God tells Jeremiah, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). Thus, Jeremiah was known of God before he was born or even conceived. Jeremiah, however, is a prophet. Alma 13:3 mentions some high priests “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,” but for Alma, the high priest was not just any elder of the church, but the head of the church (Alma 4:16–20; 8:11).

There are other scriptures that Latter-day Saints interpret as referring to the premortal existence, but these either are ambiguous and can be interpreted differently (Proverbs 8:22–31; John 9:2; Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2; D&C 49:17;

THE PREMORTAL EXISTENCE OF JESUS IN SCRIPTURE

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. —John 3:13

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father. —John 16:28

Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. —3 Nephi 1:13

Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after 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

And because he said unto them that Christ was the God, the Father of all things, and said that he should take upon him the image of man, and it should be the image after which man was created in the beginning; or in other words, he said that man was created after the image of God, and that God should come down among the children of men, and take upon him flesh and blood, and go forth upon the face of the earth. —Mosiah 7:27

See also John 1:1–14; 6:62; 8:58; 17:5, 24; 1 John 1:1; 5:7; 3 Nephi 26:5; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:19–20; D&C 76:13–14.

Moses 6:36), refer to the preexistence of angelic beings (Job 38:7; Jude 1:6; Revelation 12:7; D&C 29:36; 38:1), or say that God created the spirits of men but not when he did so (Numbers 16:22; 27:16; Ecclesiastes 12:7; Zechariah 12:1; Acts 17:28; Hebrews 12:9). Some are clear only through careful reading (John 9:2; Helaman 14:17).

What is exceptional about the discussion of the preexistence in the Book of Abraham is that it places not just Abraham in a preexistent state but others as well. Abraham is shown the spirits “that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones” (Abraham 3:22). God then tells him, “Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (Abraham 3:23). It was proposed that this world would be created to “make an earth whereon these [spirits] may dwell” (Abraham 3:24). This implies that the spirits who dwell on earth were present in that premortal meeting.

Only a few other scriptures explicitly say that humans had a pre-existent state. One is Doctrine and Covenants 93:29, which states, “Man was also in the beginning with God.” Moses 3:5 mentions in passing that “I, the Lord God, had created all the children of men; and not yet a man to till the ground; for in heaven created I them; and there was not yet flesh upon the earth.” Joseph F. Smith’s vision of the redemption of the dead builds upon these concepts (D&C 138:53, 56).

Of all the scriptures talking about the preexistent state, the Book of Abraham is unique in including the whole human race as part of the premortal gathering. The Book of Abraham says that not just Jesus or some prophet had a premortal life, but that every person on earth did as well.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The Book of Abraham tells not only of the human family’s premortal existence, but in the short scope of three verses it outlines a clear plan and purpose for this mortal existence.

AN EARTH WOULD BE CREATED

We will go down, for there is space there,
and we will take of these materials,
and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

THOSE IN THE PREEXISTENCE COULD DWELL ON THAT EARTH AS A TEST OF OBEDIENCE

And we will prove them herewith,
to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their
God shall command them;

THOSE WHO DID WOULD RECEIVE A GLORIOUS REWARD

And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon;
and they who keep not their first estate shall not have
glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first
estate;
and they who keep their second estate shall have glory
added upon their heads for ever and ever. (Abraham 3:24–26)

Latter-day Saints use other scriptures to flesh out more details to this bare outline of what they term the plan of salvation, but the Book of Abraham provides the outline.

PREEXISTENCE IN LATTER-DAY SAINT THOUGHT

The idea of the preexistence and the attendant plan of salvation, originating in the Book of Abraham, has been significant and pervasive in Latter-day Saint culture. It appears in popular children songs:

“I am a child of God, and he has sent me here.”¹

“I lived in heaven a long time ago, it is true. Lived there and loved there with people I know. So did you. Then Heav’nly Father presented a beautiful plan, all about earth and eternal salvation for man.”²

“He sent me here to earth, by faith to live his plan.”³

“Faith is knowing I lived with God before my mortal birth.”⁴

“My life is a gift; my life has a plan. My life has a purpose; in heav’n it began. My choice was to come to this lovely home on earth and seek for God’s light to direct me from birth. I will follow God’s plan for me.”⁵

“The Lord gave me a temple to live within on earth. Once in Heaven I was spirit, but I left my home at birth.”⁶

It also appears in hymns: “For a wise and glorious purpose, thou has sent me here on earth, and withheld the recollection of my former friends and birth. Yet oft times a secret something whispers, ‘You’re

1. Naomi Ward Randall, “I Am a Child of God,” in *Children’s Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 2.

2. Janeen Jacobs Brady, “I Lived in Heaven,” in *Children’s Songbook*, 4.

3. Reid N. Nibley, “I Know My Father Lives,” in *Children’s Songbook*, 5.

4. Beatrice Goff Jackson, “Faith,” in *Children’s Songbook*, 96.

5. Vanja Y. Watkins, “I Will Follow God’s Plan,” in *Children’s Songbook*, 164.

6. Donnell Hunter, “The Lord Gave Me a Temple,” in *Children’s Songbook*, 153.

a stranger here.’ And I felt that I had wandered from a more exalted sphere.”⁷

Besides music used in worship services, the idea of the preexistence has been utilized in all sorts of Latter-day Saint popular culture, from novels, to plays, to musicals, to kitsch. The ideas are ubiquitous among Latter-day Saints.

So the Book of Abraham has had a significant and profound influence on Latter-day Saint culture and thought. Rejection of the Book of Abraham thus involves a significant disruption to Latter-day Saint thinking about life and its purpose. For Latter-day Saints, the Book of Abraham is not an optional scripture that one can take or leave on a whim. Elimination of the Book of Abraham would entail much more than shortening Latter-day Saint scriptures about one percent; it would rob them of a sense of purpose.

For Abraham, the teachings about the preexistence are an introduction to the story of creation.

FURTHER READING

Givens, Terryl. *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. This book provides a historical overview of the idea of the preexistence from the ancient Near East to modern times. Since the author is not an ancient historian, the discussion of the idea of the preexistence in the ancient world is one of the weaker parts of the book.

7. Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.