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The Fatherhood of Christ and the Atonement¹

Paul Y. Hoskisson

While having lunch one day in the BYU cafeteria with a former student, our conversation turned to Mosiah 15:1-8, one of the more puzzling sections of Abinadi's speech before King Noah and his court of priests. It occurred to me on that occasion, as it never had before, that Abinadi was not giving a discourse on the Godhead, but rather he was discussing the Atonement. Specifically, as part of his defense before Noah's court and at the same time as part of his responsibility to deliver his prophetic message to Noah's people, Abinadi was explaining the role that Christ would play and the reason that he could perform the Atonement. In the course of this discourse, Abinadi also explained why Christ would be called the "Father"² and the "Son," and what the relationship is between his fatherhood, his sonship, and the Atonement.

Abinadi's explanation of the Atonement was prompted when one of his interrogators, near the beginning of his trial, posed the question, "What meaneth the words which are written" by Isaiah when he said, among other things, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings?" (12:20-21).³ In order to answer the question, Abinadi reminded Noah and his priests that all the prophets had declared that "God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth" (13:34). Then, after quoting Isaiah 53 which explains through the Suffering Servant motif what will befall God during his sojourn on the earth, Abinadi bore his own personal witness that "God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people" (15:1).

What follows next, in verses 2-8, is a succinct and sublime exposition of why Christ, the God who will “come down among the children of men,” was capable of atoning for “their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice” (15:9). Because Abinadi uses expressions that can easily be misunderstood, for clarity’s sake it will be helpful to fill out the following table, based on 15:2-8.

Christ’s dual titles:		
Christ’s parentage:		
Christ’s dual nature:		
Christ’s dual capacity:		

This God, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, will be called the Father and the Son (15:2). He will be called the Son “because he dwelleth in flesh” (15:2) and because he “subjected [that] flesh to the will of the Father” (15:2). When Abinadi mentions the Father and the Son in verse two he is quick to forestall any misunderstanding that he is talking about different members of the Godhead by immediately stating that the personage of whom he is speaking, namely, the Messiah, is “the Father and the Son” (15:2). Thus the first row of the table can be filled in as follows.

Christ’s dual titles:	Father	Son
Christ’s parentage:		
Christ’s dual nature:		
Christ’s dual capacity:		

Abinadi explained that the Savior is called “the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God” (15:3), that is, the title “Father” was given to Christ because he was begotten of God the Father.⁴ He is called “the Son, because of the flesh” (15:3), that is, the title “Son” was given to him because he was conceived by Mary. And thus the Messiah, or the Savior, became “the Father and Son” (15:3). Luke phrased it only somewhat differently in his gospel, “And the angel answered and said unto [Mary], The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).⁵

Abinadi wanted there to be no confusion that, when he used the titles “Father” and “Son,” he was talking, almost exclusively, about only one member of the Godhead. And just to make sure there was no confusion, he again stated that the single person he was talking about and who carries the titles “Father” and “Son” “was one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth” (15:4). Thus, the table can be expanded in the following manner:

Christ’s dual titles:	Father	Son
Christ’s parentage:	Begotten by God	Conceived by Mary
Christ’s dual nature:		
Christ’s dual capacity:		

The Messiah was called the “Son of God,” because he “dwelleth in flesh” (15:2). This aspect of Christ’s nature allowed him to be a part of mortality in every way that we are a part of it, suffering “temptation,” though he did not yield “to

the temptation” (15:5). He even “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6)⁶. In order for Christ to accomplish the Atonement he had to “subject the flesh to the will of the Father,” that is, he had to overcome the mortal nature he inherited from Mary by submitting that mortal nature to the will of his divine nature which he inherited from God the Father. Using a tidy little couplet, Abinadi paralleled the “flesh” with the “Son,” and the “spirit” with the “Father,” i.e., “The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh” (15:3). This allows the chart to be filled in as follows.

Christ’s dual titles:	Father	Son
Christ’s parentage:	Begotten by God	Conceived by Mary
Christ’s dual nature:	Spirit ⁷	Flesh
Christ’s dual capacity:		

Though Abinadi does not explicitly draw the following conclusion concerning Christ’s dual abilities, the conclusion nevertheless can be extrapolated from his short treatise. Because Christ was begotten by God and conceived by Mary, he also inherited the abilities he would need to perform the Atonement. Through his mother, Mary, he inherited all the abilities of mortality, including the possibility of dying. Through his Father, Elohim, he inherited many traits of divinity, including the possibility of not dying. The first ability is one that he shares with all mankind (see especially Alma 7:10-13);⁸ the second ability is unique to himself. Thus, his ability to die and his ability not to be subject to death, make him unique among all those born on the earth. Truly, he

is the only person born into this life who could choose whether or not he would die. As Christ himself expressed it, “No man taketh [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:18).⁹ Thus the chart may be completed:¹⁰

Christ’s dual titles:	Father	Son
Christ’s parentage:	Begotten by God	Conceive by Mary
Christ’s dual nature:	Spirit	Flesh
Christ’s dual capacity:	He did not have to die.	He could die.

This God, who is called the Father and Son, “shall come down among the children of men” (15:1) and dwell on the earth. He will suffer “temptation” but will not yield “to the temptation” (15:5). He will allow himself, as the “Suffering Servant” passage prophesied, “to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people. And after all this, after working many mighty miracles among the children of men, he shall be led, yea, even as Isaiah said, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain” (15:5-7).

In this final act of self-sacrifice, in allowing himself to “be led, crucified, and slain,” when at any moment he could have walked away from it, he made the ultimate submission. He subjected the “flesh” (which he inherited from Mary) “even unto death.” In so doing, “the will of the Son” (the mortal desire to live) became “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (in the will of the Savior’s divine spirit, 15:7, which he inherited from his Father). Thus he completed the temporal requirements of the Atonement. That is, as the final act of the

earthly Atonement, Christ, who did not have to die, freely and voluntarily offered up his life on the cross¹¹ so that we might also, after our inevitable temporal death, be raised to everlasting life with him. “The death of Christ,” as Amulek concisely put it, “shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised from this temporal death” (Alma 11:42).

In summary, Abinadi’s unique and beautiful explanation of the Atonement may be outlined as follows:

- 1) God himself will come down and live on the earth. He will be tempted but will yield to no temptation, and in the process he will be mocked, oppressed, scourged, etc., and eventually crucified.
- 2) Christ inherited from his mother, Mary, the same mortal nature that all the children of Adam possess, including the ability to die.
- 3) Christ inherited from his Father, Elohim, a divine nature that no other children of Adam possess, including the capability of not dying.
- 4) On the cross Christ freely chose to submit his mortal self to his immortal self; that is, of his own free will he subjected himself to death and accomplished the Atonement. Just as Adam made death possible for all of Heavenly Father’s children by freely submitting to the conditions that brought about mortal life, so Christ, by freely submitting to mortal death, brought about the conditions that made everlasting life possible for all of God’s children.

Certainly, many of the prophets knew the doctrine that Abinadi taught.¹² But no other scripture combines these elements together the way Abinadi did. There can be no doubt that Abinadi knew the Savior, that he knew about the Savior,

and that he understood the unique role and nature of the Savior many years before Christ would condescend to be born among the children of Adam.

I cannot leave the subject of Abinadi without making one more observation. It seems to me that Abinadi must have been aware of some partial but commanding parallels between himself and the Savior. Like Christ, Abinadi experienced much of the same rejection and persecution expressed in the “Suffering Servant” motif of Isaiah 53 (see also Mosiah 14). For example, nowhere in Abinadi’s speech does he mention the fact that Christ succeeded in converting anyone during his time on the earth. In fact, several of the statements from Isaiah quoted in Mosiah 14 could be interpreted to mean that Christ would have little or no success in converting people during his mortal ministry. For example, “He is despised and rejected of men; . . . we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (verse 3); “we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God” (verse 4); and “all we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way” (verse 6). Abinadi must have wondered if he also would be killed without achieving even modest success. Indeed, as far as his finite knowledge was concerned, he could easily have thought that he had not succeeded in converting a single person.

Like the Savior, Abinadi was executed by people unworthy to sit in judgment on him. And yet, it seems likely that he was aware that he would be executed when he returned the second time to preach to Noah and his people. During the course of his trial Abinadi stated, in order that “ye may know of [the] surety [of the words I have spoken concerning this people], I have suffered myself that I have fallen into your hands. Yea, and I will suffer even until death, and I will not recall my words, and they shall stand as a testimony against

you. And if ye slay me ye will shed innocent blood” (17:9-10). It would appear that Abinadi, in a manner not unlike his Savior, also freely chose to expose himself to temporal death, thereby sealing “the truth of his words” (17:20). Abinadi was, as almost all prophets have been, a type and shadow of the path the Savior would tread.

This powerful testimony of Abinadi, given as it was to an apostate and wicked people, contains information about the Savior expressed in a way like no other passage in scripture. Truly, how beautiful upon the mountains were the feet of Abinadi.

Notes

1. This is a reduced version of a presentation I gave to the faculty of Religious Education in September 1996. I had circulated written versions of the presentation as early as May 1996 among colleagues for their comments.

2. Traditionally, as Elder McConkie in *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 130, has stated, there are three reasons that Christ the Son also bears the title Father: 1) He is the “Creator . . . of the heavens and of the earth,” 2) “He is the Father of all those who are born again,” and 3) He is the Father because of “divine investiture.” See also the important and more thorough statement dated 30 June 1916 by the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles recorded in James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 5:25-34. Sometimes I have heard a fourth reason (similar to Elder McConkie’s second reason). that Christ is the Father because he is the Father of the Atonement, just as George Washington is the Father of the United States. The reason Abinadi applied the title Father to Christ in this passage is different than these four. making this a fifth reason. This paper will make the fifth reason clear.

3. This and all subsequent scriptural references refer to Mosiah in the Book of Mormon, unless specifically noted otherwise.

4. For other references to Christ as the Only Begotten Son of God see Jacob 4:5 and 11; John 1:14 and 18.

5. See also D&C 93:4, where Christ states that he is “the Father because he gave me of his fulness, and the Son because I was in the world and made flesh my tabernacle, and dwelt among the sons of men.”

6. See also *Lectures on Faith*, 5:2. Christ “is called the Son because of the flesh, and descended in suffering below that which man can suffer; or, in other words, suffered greater sufferings, and was exposed to more powerful contradictions than any man can be.”

7. “Spirit” here does not refer to the spirit person that we were in the premortal life. It refers rather to a characteristic or an aspect of Christ’s divine nature which he inherited as the Only Begotten. Another way of stating this would be “spiritual nature” versus “mortal nature.” This distinction is obvious for “spiritually” versus “naturally” in Moses 3:5. Compare Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 756-761; and Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 14th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 432.

8. That is why Amulek could say “there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice” (Alma 34:10). Christ, if he were only a mortal like all other mortals, could not have performed a sacrifice to atone for mankind. It was because of his immortal nature that his sacrifice was infinite and eternal.

9. A colleague in Religious Education at Brigham Young University, reminded me of this passage. Note also Christ’s words on the cross, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost” (Luke 23:46).

10. For a similar listing see Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 192.

11. The Atonement, if it is to be effected by a valid sacrifice, must be freely given (as all sacrifices must be freely given to be valid). If the Savior’s life could be taken from him by force, then his death would be involuntary and not a sacrifice. Thus he said, “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life. that I might take it again” (John 10:17). It was not enough that he had the ability to simply walk away from captivity and death. It was not enough that he allowed himself to be placed in the hands of the executioners. He also had to choose, he had to will, temporal death. For this reason, crucifixion, though we are repulsed by the vile aspects of this form of execution, was probably the only type of execution that gave the Savior the choice of whether to die or not to die. To the casual observer, it would have appeared that Christ had been

executed by crucifixion. However, to those like Abinadi who understood the nature of Christ's sacrifice, his death on the cross was an act of his own will and not of the executioners. This recognition is hinted at in Mark 15:39 for the Roman centurion attending the crucifixion, when he stated, "Truly this man was the Son of God." There may be other forms of execution that would fulfil the requirements just outlined, but I am unaware of any.

12. See King Benjamin's delivery of the words of an angel of God on the Atonement in Mosiah 3. Verses 8 and 9 especially reveal a knowledge of the doctrine Abinadi taught. See also Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 11, Alma's speech in Alma 7, Amulek's understanding in Alma 34:9-10 and Alma's explanation of the atonement to his son in Alma 42, especially verse 15. It should be noted that Abinadi may not have had access to any of these discourses, with the exception of 1 Nephi 11. But he could have drawn upon the same source of inspiration for this doctrine that was available to Alma and Amulek.