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**Abstract** The mortal Savior was not man, not human (Alma 34:10). Infinite and eternal, he received his physical life not from a son of Adam but from the Father of Adam, God. He took upon himself the image of man, but in truth he was the model, not the copy. Though mortal, he was still God, able to suffer and to redeem as only a god could. He was Son, because he received physical life from his Father, and Father, because he used his divine powers to give eternal life to others. Though not man, he experienced mortality, which allowed him to understand and love mortals.

## **The Mortal Ministry of the Savior as Understood by the Book of Mormon Prophets**

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**Abstract:** The mortal Savior was not man, not human (Alma 34:10). Infinite and eternal, he received his physical life not from a son of Adam but from the Father of Adam, God. He took upon himself the image of man, but in truth he was the model, not the copy. Though mortal, he was still God, able to suffer and to redeem as only a god could. He was Son, because he received physical life from his Father, and Father, because he used his divine powers to give eternal life to others. Though not man, he experienced mortality, which allowed him to understand and love mortals.

While in mortality the Savior was not man, not human. According to Alma 34:10, "It is expedient that 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." The question naturally arises: what kind of mortal being was he? The Book of Mormon answers that question by presenting aspects of his life and ministry not found in the other Standard Works. It stresses his uniqueness. This paper will focus on that uniqueness, showing why he was neither human nor man, and the importance of his distinction from other mortals.

No Book of Mormon prophet ever knew the mortal Lord. All the information they received concerning that aspect of his eternal ministry came through revelation. But what they did know is noteworthy. As one examines the revelations which deal with the mortal ministry, that material which God deemed necessary to give, two points become clear: first, there were certain elements the Nephites needed to know in order to have faith in Christ; and second, those elements concerned the nature of his person, character, and ministry. There is no extraneous material.

These revelations carry the burning witness that the mortal Christ was the ever-living omnipotent Lord. King Benjamin expressed his understanding by saying:

The time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay. (Mosiah 3:5-6)

The prophet's words focus on the eternal nature of the mortal Christ. His mortal nature and ministry must be understood in terms of his eternal nature and ministry. His mortality was, however, neither adjunct nor ancillary to his eternal nature, but absolutely essential. Indeed, the focus of all the faith that came before and all the confirmation that came after centered on what he was and did in mortality. Conversely, at no point did his mortality either restrain or eclipse his eternity. He never ceased being God, the Eternal God, at any moment. Further, the whole thrust of his mortal ministry focused on eternity and on eternal lives. His actions and teachings were not calculated to bring women or men into the terrestrial or telestial glory but into everlasting life.

The testimony which Amulek bore against the antagonistic Zeezrom bears this out. Their dialogue goes as follows:

And Zeezrom said unto him: Thou sayest there is a true and living God [meaning Elohim]? And Amulek said: Yea, there is a true and living God. Now Zeezrom said: Is there more than one God [or Elohim]? And he answered, No. Now Zeezrom said unto him again, How knowest thou these things? And he said: An angel hath made them known unto me. And Zeezrom said again: Who is he that shall come? Is it the Son of God? And He said unto him, Yea. . . . Now Zeezrom saith again unto him, Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last; And he shall come into the world to redeem his people; and he shall take upon him the transgressions of those who believe on his name; and these are they that shall have

eternal life, and salvation cometh to none else. (Alma 11:26–33, 38–40)

The Savior came into mortality as the Eternal Father bequeathing eternal life to those who believed on him. The greatest work he did, that which brought meaning to all he accomplished as a premortal God and power as a postmortal God, was grounded in his mortal ministry.

The Book of Mormon witnesses that this eternal yet mortal God was something special, something unique. He was different from all his mortal kin in that he was never man, and he was never human. The term *man* designates one who descends from Adam “the first man of all men” (Moses 1:34). The term *human*, as an adjective, describes that which relates to or is characteristic of man. Taken together, the terms seem to define that which is not yet God. As the Psalmist said, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels [Heb. *Elohim*, “god”] and hast crowned him with glory and honour” (Psalms 8:4–5). Certainly man is not a second-class citizen of the cosmos, but neither is he God. The Savior, however, is God. As Alma testified:

It is expedient that 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. . . . And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal. (Alma 34:10, 14)

Alma shares his conviction that the Savior was something which humans are not, infinite and eternal. The Lord received this dimension of his being as the divine Son of Elohim. Thus, he was not man (as distinct from male) because he did not receive his physical life, as all others do, through Adam. An angel instructed Nephi that the Savior was not conceived as a son of man. In vision Nephi beheld the Savior’s mortal mother, Mary. As he did so an angel said to him: “Behold the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh. . . . And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto me:

Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father [meaning Elohim in this case]" (1 Nephi 11:18, 20–21). The point is that although Jesus was born after "the manner of the flesh," the way all babies are born, his father was not a son of Adam, but the Father of Adam, God.

The Book of Mormon reveals other ways in which he was distinct. Abinadi taught that "God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him *the form* of a man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth" (Mosiah 13:34). Note that Abinadi did not say that he would be a man but rather he would have the form of a man. He insisted 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)

Humankind was created in the image of God, not the other way around. Thus, the Savior appears to look like man, but in reality, it is man who looks like him. He set the pattern; man is but the copy. Thus, he is distinct, being the perfect model from which the image of humankind is derived. Speaking of his mortal form, the Book of Mormon teaches another point. Though his physical body was perfect, it was not so far beyond that of many of the sons of Adam as to make the Lord stand out. According to Mosiah 14:2, "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him there is no beauty that we should desire him." There was no radiance, no angelic glory, no overpowering attractiveness, no unusual handsomeness nor manliness which made him really different. Mankind is created in the image of God, and the likeness is a good one.

But the Savior, aside from his image or form, was still God. This allowed him to fulfill his responsibilities and duties. According to Benjamin, "he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death" (Mosiah 3:7). Note that not only would his hunger, thirst, or fatigue kill a human, but so would the temptations he had to endure. Yet, in spite of all these more than human deeds, those unto whom he would come would

“consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and [would] scourge him, and [would] crucify him” (Mosiah 3:9).

Lehi understood why. His call to the ministry included a vision in which he saw “One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Nephi 1:9–10). Afterward, Lehi testified “plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19), but when he tried to teach the Jews of these things they “did mock him because of the things which he testified” (1 Nephi 1:19). Mockery was just the beginning. Soon “they were angry with him; yea, even as with the prophets of old, whom they had cast out, and stoned, and slain; and they also sought his life, that they might take it away” (1 Nephi 1:20).

What was it that made the Jews so upset with Lehi’s message? Among other things, he testified that the coming Messiah would be a Redeemer. As Nephi clearly taught:

Six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world. And he [Lehi] also spake concerning the prophets, how great a number had testified of these things, concerning this Messiah, of whom he had spoken, or this Redeemer of the world. Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:4–5)

What the Jews wanted was a Deliverer, one who would conquer the world and then put the Jewish leaders in control. They did not want a Redeemer. To need one meant that they were wicked and fallen, and stood in need of repentance. They refused to accept such an idea. However, the consistent witness of the Book of Mormon prophets from Lehi to Mormon combine to show that the coming Messiah would not be a deliverer from political bondage but a redeemer from spiritual chains. The Jews might wish otherwise but the only mortal Messiah they would get was a Redeemer.

The Book of Mormon notes that the Israelites had problems with the Redeemer God from the beginning. Nephi, speaking of Israel at the time of the Exodus, states that,

Notwithstanding they being led, the Lord their God, their Redeemer, going before them, leading them by day and giving light unto them by night, and doing all things for them which were expedient for man to receive, they hardened their hearts and blinded their minds, and reviled against Moses and against the true and living God. (1 Nephi 17:30)

One of the reasons Nephi quoted the prophets and especially Isaiah was to prove that the God who would come to the Jews would be a Redeemer. He states clearly that "I read many things unto them [my brethren] which were written in the books of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah" (1 Nephi 19:23).

Forty-one times the Book of Mormon prophets refer to the Savior as the Redeemer, and never as the Deliverer. The central point of their witness is that the Messiah who would become the mortal Son of God would come in the capacity of the Redeemer. One of the clearest testimonies on this subject is that of Helaman to his sons Nephi and Lehi. To them he said,

There is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world. And remember also the words which Amulek spake unto Zeezrom, in the city of Ammonihah; for he said unto him that the Lord surely should come to redeem his people, but that he should not come to redeem them in their sins, but to redeem them from their sins. And he hath power given unto him from the Father to redeem them from their sins because of repentance; therefore he hath sent his angels to declare the tidings of the conditions of repentance, which bringeth unto the power of the Redeemer, unto the salvation of their souls. And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation. (Helaman 5:9-12)

Helaman's teaching gives insights into the reason the Jews rejected Lehi's witness of the coming Messiah. He insisted that the Messiah would not save them in their sins but only from



their sins and, further, he would not save them from foreign powers and potentates.

Nephi clearly understood the nature of the ministry of the coming Messiah. An angel asked him, "Knowest thou the condescension of God?" Nephi answered, "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:16-17). The angel then revealed to Nephi not only the condescension of God but also the love on which it was grounded. The term *condescension* means to descend from a higher to a lower state, to waive the privileges of one's rank or dignity.

Through his vision Nephi understood that the condescension of God manifested itself in two ways. First, the immortal God Elohim condescended to bring forth his Son through a mortal woman "after the manner of the flesh" (1 Nephi 11:18). As Alma testified concerning the conception of the Lord: "he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God" (Alma 7:10).

Secondly, the God Jesus condescended to be baptized by the mortal man, John. As the angel said, "Behold the condescension of God! And I [Nephi] looked and beheld the Redeemer of the world, of whom my father had spoken; and I also beheld the prophet who should prepare the way before him. And the Lamb of God went forth and was baptized of him" (1 Nephi 11:26-27). Through this condescension, the Savior showed the way for all men no matter how high- or lowborn. Nephi understood this and testified,

I would that ye should remember that I have spoken unto you concerning that prophet which the Lord showed unto me, that should baptize the Lamb of God, which should take away the sins of the world. And now, if the Lamb of God, he being holy, should have need to be baptized by water, to fulfil all righteousness, O then, how much more need have we, being unholy, to be baptized, yea, even by water! And now, I would ask of you, my beloved brethren, wherein the Lamb of God did fulfil all righteousness in being baptized by water? Know ye not that he was holy? But notwithstanding he being holy, he showeth

unto the children of men that, according to the flesh he humbleth himself before the Father, and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments. Wherefore, after he was baptized with water the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove. And again, it showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter, he having set the example before them. And he said unto the children of men: Follow thou me. (2 Nephi 31:4–10)

Through this act of submission the Savior did two things: humbled his flesh to the will of the Father, and fulfilled his promise that he would show unto the children of men the way to eternal life.

The love of this God manifested itself three ways during his mortal ministry. The first was in his service to others. Alma bore record, saying,

The Son of God shall come in his glory; and his glory shall be the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace, equity, and truth, full of patience, mercy, and long-suffering, quick to hear the cries of his people and to answer their prayers. And behold, he cometh to redeem those who will be baptized unto repentance, through faith on his name. (Alma 9:26–27)

These verses clearly detail the attributes which the mortal Messiah would manifest during his ministry. Note how the scripture stressed the redeeming nature of his work. Nephi testified of the Lord's love as he saw

the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him. . . . And I beheld that he went forth ministering unto the people, in power and great glory; and the multitudes were gathered together to hear him. . . . And I beheld multitudes of people who were sick and who were afflicted with all manner of diseases, and with devils and unclean spirits; and the angel spake and showed all these things unto me. And they were healed by the power of the Lamb of God;

and the devils and the unclean spirits were cast out. (1 Nephi 11:24, 28, 31)

Through his love, the Lord manifested his power not only over the natural world, but also over the demonic.

The second way that the Savior manifested his love was suppressing his divine power so that he felt the full weight of mortality. As Alma stated,

He shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, 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. (Alma 7:11–12)

Alma reveals two aspects of the Lord's mortal ministry which should not be overlooked. First, the Savior suffered affliction and pain, and was not absolved from temptations of any kind, so that he might fully understand his people. There is a popular myth which teaches that good people know little if anything about the power of temptation. This is patently false. It is the wicked who know little of its allure, its seducing force, and its punishing power because they never resist. How do they know what it is like to have to be strong for an hour, a day, or a year. The Savior never gave in. He stands alone as the one who never fell captive to the enticements of sin for an entire lifetime. He knows more about the power of temptation than any. For this reason, he can "succor his people according to their infirmities."

Second, his miracles and service cost him something. He had to take upon himself the pains and afflictions of those whom he healed or forgave. His healings and forgivings took power out of him. It was for this reason that he had to escape from the multitudes from time to time to find renewal in his Father or in desperately needed rest. His love often pushed him to the point of exhaustion.

Finally, there was the third way that love manifested itself. It was not only strong enough to endure the distress involved in healing bodies and souls, but also strong enough to overcome

the excruciating pain of death and hell. As Nephi saw, the multitudes "cast him out from among them," (1 Nephi 11:28) and the Lamb of God was judged of the world (cf. 1 Nephi 11:32). "And I, Nephi, saw that he was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Nephi 11:32). Indeed, those who believed that he was only a man scourged and crucified him (Mosiah 3:9). Nephi revealed the basis of the Savior's willingness to endure both the pain and the humiliation:

And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men. And the God of our fathers, who were led out of Egypt, out of bondage, and also were preserved in the wilderness by him, yea, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself, according to the words of the angel, as a man, into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up, according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified, according to the words of Neum. (1 Nephi 19:9-10)

It was in enduring these horrible deeds that the mortal God made manifest his long-suffering and loving kindness.

All this, the Book of Mormon prophets knew, was toward a divine end. As the Lord himself testified,

And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil—And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works. And it shall come to pass, that whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world. (3 Nephi 27:14-16)

Because it was sinless, the life the Lord offered as a ransom for humankind was acceptable; it was in giving that life that he became the standard against which all others are judged.

There is another aspect of his willingness to give of himself that is equally important, but often overlooked. It was this very aspect which demanded that he face the cross. The main focus of Abinadi's testimony bears directly on this, but in sharing his beliefs the prophet has left us with one of the most difficult passages in the whole Book of Mormon. Even so, once the passage is untangled, two essential facets of the mortal Lord are revealed. Before analyzing Abinadi's witness, a few terms must be defined: *Father* designates a male who gives life; *Son* is a male who receives life. A man can hold both positions at the same time. Thus, many men are simultaneously fathers and sons. The same is true of the Lord.

Abinadi bore record of this dual aspect of the Savior in Mosiah 15:1-7. The prophet states: "I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people." Abinadi begins his witness by making it clear that it is God in the full sense of the word who will come in the role of Redeemer. The prophet then explains that this God, that is Christ, shall dwell in the flesh. "And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God," or, in other words, the son of Elohim, because it was from Elohim that he received his physical endowments of life. Abinadi stresses that He is literally the physical offspring, the son, of Elohim. The prophet then states: "and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son." Here is where there can be some confusion.

Abinadi notes that the Savior subjected his flesh to the will of the Father. The prophet is quick to point out that the Father he has in mind is not Elohim, but Christ, that *Christ* is the Father *and* the Son. As a mortal he received life from Elohim, making him the Son, but he also gave eternal life to others, making him the Father. Abinadi, seeming to sense that his assertion needed some expansion, explained how it was that the Savior was both the Father and the Son: "The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh." Because he had God (Elohim) for his father, the power to give eternal life became inherent within the mortal Lord. Because the kind of life he gave was eternal, he became the Eternal Father. But the same act which made him the Father also made him the Son, for he had received physical life from Elohim, "thus be-

coming the Father and Son—And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth.”

The Savior did not always hold the positions of physical Son and Eternal Father, but when he was sired by the power of Elohim, that power dwelt in him, making him the Son (the life-receiver) and at the same time the Eternal Father (the life-giver). In this way the terms *Father* and *Son* define the two natures of the mortal Christ. So Abinadi says, “And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people” (Mosiah 15:5). Abinadi stressed that the mortal Savior always placed his sonship, that is, his physical wants and needs, under the strict control of his fatherhood, that is, his spirit. As the prophet states, “the flesh [the Lord’s sonship] becoming subject to the Spirit [the Lord’s fatherhood], or the Son to the Father, being one God” (Mosiah 15:5). He then notes how closely the Lord checked his physical nature by being willing to suffer temptations and mockings and scourgings but never yielding to the cries of the flesh.

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, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father. (Mosiah 15:7)

At all times he was God and could have used his power against his enemies, but he would not. The will of the Father always dominated the will of the Son, even unto death.

It should not be construed, however, that the Savior’s sonship stood in opposition to his fatherhood. He himself testified that “I come unto my own, to fulfil all things which I have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of the Father and the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh” (3 Nephi 1:14). The flesh and the spirit were indeed one. There was a moment when the flesh—the Son—shrank from the horror and pain of atonement, and in earnestness prayed that he might not have to partake of the bitter cup. Nevertheless, the flesh remained checked, the will of sonship yielding to the will of fatherhood.

The flesh carried the spirit well and did its bidding. The flesh submitted to a forty-day fast and only afterwards was hungry. It submitted to the humility of baptism, to the pounding of a totally selfless three-year ministry, and finally, to the beating, scourging, and crucifixion inflicted by unholy men. And in all this there was never a whimper or a cry: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb so he opened not his mouth" (Mosiah 14:7). The flesh—the mortal part of his soul—never sorrowed for itself, nor knew self-pity.

It was through his sonship, that is, through the flesh, that the Lord felt the weight, frustration, and temptations of life. Thus, his sonship was essential to his mission because it allowed him to feel what we feel, and know what we know. As the Father he willfully suppressed his divinity so that as the Son he could experience life fully, both the pleasant and the unpleasant. Thus, though he was never man nor human in the same sense as others were, he gained complete empathy and sympathy for his brethren and sisters. Alma said, "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" (Alma 7:12).

The Book of Mormon witnesses that we worship a God who can be touched with both our strivings and failures, for he was indeed tried, tempted, and in this way filled with mercy and compassion. Though he was neither man nor human but ever God, he knew mortality and loved mortals, perfectly understanding them because of his experience.