

Jesus Christ as Elder Brother

Corbin Volluz

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints often refer to Jesus Christ as their elder brother. This expression of endearment appears in sermons, lessons, and publications. In current usage, the term elder brother reflects an understanding that Jesus was the firstborn of the Father's spirit children and, since we humans are all spirit children of the Father, Jesus is our elder spirit brother. But that meaning was slow in coming to be articulated by Church leaders. The title is used enough that some might think that elder brother is one of the many titles attributed to Christ in the scriptures, but nowhere do the scriptures use this expression in reference to Jesus.¹ Nor can the idea that Jesus is our elder brother be ascribed with certitude to the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, although nothing he taught would seem to contradict the idea. The use of the title elder brother seems to make its first appearance the year of the Prophet's death (1844) in the writings of other Church leaders and soon thereafter greatly increased in usage and popularity. It is possible that Joseph Smith himself spoke this phrase toward the end of his life, for some reminiscences support that position.²

This paper will examine the usage in LDS discourse of the idea that Jesus Christ is the elder spirit brother of humankind, from its first documented occurrences. Then we will review the logical and scriptural arguments that have been used to support the concept of Jesus as elder brother over the years, along with other possible interpretations of the truths upon which it is based.

Contemporaneously Recorded Statements (1844–1846)

Beginning in 1844 we find the first instances in which Church leaders use the phrase brother or elder brother to refer to Christ. These six instances were all recorded contemporaneously.

June 22, 1844, Orson Pratt. The first written account containing the concept of Jesus Christ being a brother (though not necessarily the elder

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Researchers who set out to write a paper with a certain thesis often find many surprises along the way. These twists and turns can challenge or strengthen the original thesis. This is the adventure of research. As Corbin Volluz studied the history of the phrase elder brother to describe Christ, he encountered a few such surprises. “The most surprising thing I learned was that there appears to be no affirmative teaching of the elder brother subject in either the standard works or in the preserved teachings of Joseph Smith.” Readers may draw their own conclusions about the implications of this absence; one of the interesting things about Volluz’s article is that the subject raises questions about the term’s appropriate use. For example, are other Christians confused when Latter-day Saints use the term elder brother? Is the phrase too familiar to be used so often as a title for deity? “Many members of the Church seem to feel a personal attachment to the phrase elder brother,” explains Volluz. “On the few occasions I have discussed the contents of the paper with acquaintances who are members of the Church, the first question I commonly get is, ‘Are you saying that Jesus is *not* our elder brother?’ To which I respond, ‘No, I’m not saying that. All I am doing is tracing the historical development of the doctrinal idea.’” Volluz’s work assesses how it has been historically approached: “Any difference I would hope this article might make would be for us all to be thoughtful in the choice of titles we apply to the Savior.”



spirit brother) of man occurs in 1844, the year of Joseph Smith's death, and comes from Orson Pratt. Orson printed supplementary material at the bottom of his *Prophetic Almanac for 1845*, including these statements:

What is man? The offspring of God. What is God? The father of man. Who is Jesus Christ? He is our Brother. . . . How many states of existence has man? He has three. What is the first? It is spiritual. What is the second? It is temporal. What is the third? It is immortal and eternal. How did he begin to exist in the first? He was begotten and born of God.³

Charles R. Harrell has noted, "Pratt's almanac went on sale 3 August 1844, though it was advertised in the *Prophet* as being at the printer's as early as 22 June 1844."⁴ This appears to be the earliest date that can be pinpointed with confidence on which an LDS publication refers to Jesus Christ as man's brother.

July 9, 1844, Willard Richards and John Taylor. In their *Letter of Instruction to the President of the British Mission*, Willard Richards and John Taylor, writing from Nauvoo, Illinois, stated that the Saints suffer persecution so that they "might obtain their inheritance in that kingdom of their heavenly Father, which Jesus, their elder brother, had gone to prepare for them."⁵

October 6, 1844, Brigham Young. At the October 1844 conference of the Church in Nauvoo, Brigham Young gave a discourse in which he was recorded as referring to Jesus Christ as the elder brother: "He [Brigham Young] next showed how the saints are delivered up in their progress from those who give them up to the high council, and from the high council to the prophet, and from the prophet to the son, the elder brother, and from the son to his father."⁶

January 1, 1845, William W. Phelps. Phelps published a letter in the *Times and Seasons* about how Lucifer fights against "Jesus Christ, our eldest brother."⁷

June 1, 1845, probably William W. Phelps. In an article in the *Times and Seasons*, an anonymous writer (most likely William W. Phelps⁸) who signed himself as "Joseph's Speckled Bird" wrote that "even the elder brother could do nothing but what he had seen his Father do in eternities before." This is the first known use of the elder brother title in which the writer did not feel it necessary to make it explicit that the reference was to Jesus Christ. Within a year of the title's first documented usage, then, the author of this *Times and Seasons* article apparently felt comfortable that his audience would understand that the elder brother title applied to Jesus Christ without further explication.⁹

September 5, 1846, John Taylor. John Taylor wrote this passage in poetic verse to a Miss Abby Jane Hart of New York City:

Tread in the
Footsteps of thine elder brother, Jesus—
The “Prince of Peace,” for whom a body was
Prepared.¹⁰

Statements and Reminiscences Recorded Noncontemporaneously

In addition to the accounts discussed above, several accounts that refer to Jesus as elder brother were not recorded contemporaneously with the event, or were based exclusively on memory. As a result, one is not able to be as confident in the accuracy of these statements as with those that were recorded at the time, or shortly after, the utterance was made.

Personal Reminiscences, Zebedee Coltrin, 1870. Zebedee Coltrin attended the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, Ohio. Years later, on February 5, 1870, in Spanish Fork, Utah, Coltrin recollected: “At another time after fasting and prayer, Joseph told us that we should see the glory of God, and I saw a personage passing through the room as plainly as I see you now. Joseph asked us if we knew who it was, and answered himself, “That is Jesus, our elder brother, the Son of God.”¹¹

Coltrin related this same event on October 3, 1883:

At one of these meetings after the organization of the school, (the school being organized on the 23rd of January, 1833), when we were all together, Joseph having given instructions, and while engaged in silent prayer, kneeling, with our hands uplifted each one praying in silence, no one whispered above his breath, a personage walked through the room from east to west, and Joseph asked if we saw him. I saw him and suppose the others did and Joseph answered that is Jesus, the Son of God, our elder brother.¹²

If these recollections are accurate, they would constitute the earliest known application of the elder brother title to Jesus Christ, attributing this specific usage to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1833. But it must be noted that Coltrin’s first account was recorded thirty-seven years after the fact, and by that time the phrase elder brother had become commonplace in Mormon usage.¹³

The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt. In his autobiography, written many years after Joseph Smith’s death, Parley P. Pratt recorded that in 1839 Joseph Smith “taught me many great and glorious principles concerning God and the heavenly order of eternity.” Parley continues, “I felt that God was my heavenly Father indeed; that Jesus was my brother, and that the wife of my bosom was an immortal, eternal companion.”¹⁴ Pratt is careful throughout his record to distinguish between what Joseph Smith actually taught, and his own personal feelings and interpretations of what Joseph Smith taught. It is clear that Parley does not attribute the statement “Jesus

[is] my brother” to the Prophet, but Parley is comfortable using the phrase in discussing what he learned from Joseph.¹⁵

Journal of George Laub. As a member of the Church living in Nauvoo, George Laub recorded that Joseph Smith gave this discourse on April 6, 1843:

The[y] saw till time should be no more and the[y] spake concerning the Redemption of this world and . . . Jesus Christ being the greater light or of more Inteligence for he loved rituousness and hated in[i]quity. He being the elder Brother Presented himself for to come and redeem this world as it was his right by inheritance.¹⁶

Laub’s account suggests that Joseph Smith was teaching openly the concept that Jesus is our elder brother a year before his death in 1844. In his study of George Laub’s Nauvoo journal, Eugene England notes that, unfortunately, “Laub did not transcribe his original notes of this discourse in his journal until nearly a year after the death of Joseph Smith.”¹⁷ George Laub began his journal on January 1, 1845, while still in Nauvoo and transcribed his notes of sermons delivered by Church leaders years earlier.¹⁸

Use of the Phrase in the Pioneer West

After its initial appearance in print in 1844, the title elder brother came to be associated closely in LDS discourse with Jesus Christ and was with increasing frequency applied in the years 1851–53.¹⁹ The title elder brother is applied to Jesus Christ by Church leaders no less than thirteen times during these years (see chart), thus firmly establishing the concept in the rhetoric of Church discourse and in the minds of Latter-day Saints. Brigham Young took the lead in the number of recorded uses of the term.

Thereafter, the phrase continued to figure frequently in the sermons of the leaders of the Church, being recorded in the *Journal of Discourses* twenty times from 1854 to 1860.²⁰

Early Scriptural and Logical Explanations for the Title Elder Brother

Specific supporting revelation or scriptural reference was not given in the early years on the use of the title elder brother, and the expression did not appear to require revelation or scripture by those who first propounded it. Perhaps the concept grew organically out of the newly revealed doctrine that all humans are literally the spirit children of God the Father, having been born to him in the premortal existence.²¹ When coupled with the doctrine that Jesus is the firstborn of the Father, the conclusion may have irresistibly followed that Jesus is our elder brother.

References to Elder Brother, 1851–53

Dec. 1, 1851	Lorenzo Snow p. 119*	“We are here that we may be educated in a school of suffering and of fiery trials, which school was necessary for Jesus, our Elder Brother.”
Apr. 7, 1852	Brigham Young 6:319	“[Refrain] from speaking lightly of our great Father in heaven, of our elder brother Jesus Christ.”
Apr. 9, 1852	Brigham Young 1:51	“Jesus, our elder brother, was begotten in the flesh.”
Jun. 13, 1852	Brigham Young 1:92	“[We have] an opportunity of proving ourselves before God, before Jesus Christ our elder brother.”
Jul. 11, 1852	Brigham Young 1:40	“Can you imagine to yourselves anything that pertains to this earth that does not belong to its Redeemer? He is my master, my elder brother.”
Aug. 8, 1852	Brigham Young 3:93	“Jesus is the elder brother, and all the brethren shall come in for a share with him.”
Aug. 29, 1852	Orson Pratt 1:56	“[We] have come here and taken tabernacles, after the pattern of our elder brother; and in our humiliation, . . . just like our elder brother, our judgment is taken away.”
Feb. 27, 1853	Brigham Young 1:117	“Suppose that our Father in heaven, our elder brother, the risen Redeemer, the Saviour of the world, or any of the Gods of eternity should act upon this principle.”
Apr. 6, 1853	Brigham Young 2:33	“[We are laying] the foundation of a Temple to the Most High God, so that when His Son, our Elder Brother, shall again appear, he may have a place where he can lay his head.”
Apr. 6, 1853	Heber C. Kimball 2:34	“For thou art our Father, and Jesus Christ is our Elder Brother.”
Jun. 12, 1853	John Taylor 1:149	“[Jesus] can bear with them as a father an elder brother.”
Aug. 14, 1853	Brigham Young 1:271	“...the friendship of God, and our Elder Brother Jesus Christ...”
Oct. 6, 1853	Orson Hyde 1:125	“The servants of God may then be permitted to see their Father, and elder brother.”

*Clyde J. Williams, ed., *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 119. All other references are from the *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86).

As has been argued by Charles R. Harrell, the doctrine that human-kind existed as premortal spirit children of God was just beginning to take form in the consciousness of Church leaders at the time that Joseph Smith was martyred. Many of the distinctive doctrines of the Church, including the belief that Jesus Christ is our elder brother, began to be elucidated by Church leaders at this same time. Accordingly, though it is “difficult to determine precisely how prevalent particular beliefs were and when they began to take root or change form, it is clear that the basic idea of preexistence began to emerge shortly after the organization of the Church but was not fully expounded in Church publications until after Joseph Smith’s death.”²²

Similarly, the concept that Jesus is our elder brother appears to have grown out of the understanding that mankind is literally the spirit offspring of God the Father, and both doctrines more fully entered into Church discourse at approximately the same time, shortly after the death of the Prophet Joseph. When Orson Pratt first referred to Jesus as “our brother” in 1844, he set forth the basic logic behind the title: “What is Man? The offspring of God. What is God? The father of man. Who is Jesus Christ? He is our Brother.”²³ Here we see the rudimentary logical progression for referring to Jesus as man’s brother. In essence, the argument posits that since we are all the children of a common Father, and since Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus must be our brother.²⁴

Subsequent references to Jesus as elder brother did not delve into the logical underpinnings of the title until this statement by Brigham Young in 1862:

We have been hearing that Jesus Christ is our elder Brother. Yes, he is one of us, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, and became a partaker with us of all that is earthly. He also inherited a greater portion of the divine nature than we can possess in this life. He was the Son of our heavenly Father, as we are the sons of our earthly fathers. God is the Father of our spirits, which are clothed upon by fleshly bodies, begotten for us by our earthly fathers. Jesus is our elder Brother spirit clothed upon with an earthly body begotten by the Father of our spirits.²⁵

The concept that Christ is the elder brother because of his status as the firstborn of all the spirit children of God the Father does not appear to have been actually articulated and recorded until 1871 by Orson Pratt:

Now, who is Jesus? He is only our brother, but happens to be the firstborn. What, the firstborn in the flesh? O no, there were millions and millions born in the flesh before he was. Then how is he the firstborn? Because he is the eldest—the first one born of the whole family of spirits and therefore he is our elder brother.²⁶

In 1872, Orson Pratt sought to give this concept a scriptural rationale, though he did not cite his scriptural references and it is uncertain what scripture he might have meant, since there is no scripture that directly speaks of Jesus being the elder brother:

What then is the meaning of that Scripture which speaks of Jesus being the elder brother? It certainly could not have reference to him being the eldest so far as his natural birth on this earth was concerned, for he certainly was not the eldest, for generation after generation had preceded him during the four thousand years which had passed away, from the time of creation until he was born; but yet he is called the “elder brother.” In another Scripture it is said of him that he was “the first-born of every creature.” This would imply, then, that Jesus, so far as the great family of man is concerned, was the first born of the whole of them. How and when was he born? He was born in the eternal world, not his flesh and bones, but that intelligent spirit which dwelt within his tabernacle was born before this world was made, and he seems to have been the first spirit that was born, and for this reason he became the elder brother; and we are told in many Scriptures in the New Testament, that we are his brethren, and that he is not ashamed to call us his brethren. I look upon him as having the same origin as we had, only he was the eldest; and if he was born in the eternal world thousands of years ago, why not all the rest of his brethren, so far as their spirits are concerned?²⁷

It is apparently Orson Pratt, then, who should be credited with the first attempt to support by scripture the use of the title elder brother as applied to Jesus. It was Orson Pratt who first recorded the concept that Jesus is “our Brother” shortly before the death of Joseph Smith, and Orson Pratt who first articulated that Jesus is all of humankind’s elder brother in the spirit, basing his argument on Jesus’ scriptural title of firstborn.

Important Twentieth Century Commentary on the Phrase

In the early twentieth century, the First Presidency made two statements that used the phrase elder brother. This is important to consider, as these were the first instances the phrase was used in official Church pronouncements.

The Origin of Man, First Presidency Statement (1909). In 1909, the First Presidency issued an official statement entitled “The Origin of Man,” which addressed the subject of biological evolution. In the middle of a discussion on the literal truth that man was created in the image of God, the following declaration appears:

The Father of Jesus is our Father also. Jesus Himself taught this truth, when He instructed His disciples how to pray: “Our Father which art in heaven,” etc. Jesus, however, is the first-born among all the sons of

God—the first begotten in the spirit, and the only begotten in the flesh. He is our elder brother, and we, like Him, are in the image of God. All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity.²⁸

Without further elaboration, “The Origin of Man” indicates the logical progression that Jesus is our elder brother because God is our Father, Jesus is the “firstborn among all the sons of God,” Jesus is the “first begotten in the spirit,” and Jesus is the “only begotten in the flesh.”²⁹

“The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve,” June 30, 1916. This exposition describes the roles of the Father and the Son and gives four distinct meanings for the term “Father” as used to define or describe deity: Father as literal parent, Father as creator, Jesus Christ the Father of those who abide in his gospel, and Jesus Christ the Father by divine investiture of authority. The last section reads:

A fourth reason for applying the title “Father” to Jesus Christ is found in the fact that in all His dealings with the human family Jesus the Son has represented and yet represents Elohim His Father in power and authority. . . .

. . . Among the spirit children of Elohim the firstborn was and is Jehovah or Jesus Christ to whom all others are juniors. . . . From this scripture [Col. 1:15–19] we learn that Jesus Christ was “the firstborn of every creature” and it is evident that the seniority here expressed must be with respect to antemortal existence, for Christ was not the senior of all mortals in the flesh. He is further designated as “the firstborn from the dead” this having reference to Him as the first to be resurrected from the dead, or as elsewhere written “the first fruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20, see also verse 23); and “the first begotten of the dead” (Revelation 1:5; compare Acts 26:23). The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews affirms the status of Jesus Christ as the firstborn of the spirit children of His Father, and extols the preeminence of the Christ when tabernacled in flesh: “And again, when he bringeth in the first begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him” (Hebrews 1:6; read the preceding verses). That the spirits who were juniors to Christ were predestined to be born in the image of their Elder Brother is thus attested by Paul: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:28, 29). John the Revelator was commanded to write to the head of the Laodicean church, as the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: “These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God” (Revelation 3:14). In the course of a revelation given through Joseph Smith in May, 1833, the Lord Jesus Christ said as before cited: “And now, verily I say unto you,

I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the firstborn” (Doc. & Cov. 93:21). A later verse makes plain the fact that human beings generally were similarly existent in spirit state prior to their embodiment in the flesh: “Ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth” (verse 23).

There is no impropriety, therefore, in speaking of Jesus Christ as the Elder Brother of the rest of human kind. That He is by spiritual birth Brother to the rest of us is indicated in Hebrews: “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17). Let it not be forgotten, however, that He is essentially greater than any and all others, by reason (1) of His seniority as the oldest or firstborn; (2) of His unique status in the flesh as the offspring of a mortal mother and of an immortal, or resurrected and glorified, Father; (3) of His selection and foreordination as the one and only Redeemer and Savior of the race; and (4) of His transcendent sinlessness.

Jesus Christ is not the Father of the spirits who have taken or yet shall take bodies upon this earth, for He is one of them. He is The Son, as they are sons or daughters of Elohim. So far as the stages of eternal progression and attainment have been made known through divine revelation, we are to understand that only resurrected and glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring. Only such exalted souls have reached maturity in the appointed course of eternal life; and the spirits born to them in the eternal worlds will pass in due sequence through the several stages or estates by which the glorified parents have attained exaltation.³⁰

While the document uses the term elder brother to demonstrate Christ’s relationship to humankind (“There is no impropriety, therefore, in speaking of Jesus Christ as the Elder Brother of the rest of human kind”), it also clearly reminds the Saints of their proper place in relation to Christ: “Let it not be forgotten, however, that He is essentially greater than any and all others.”³¹

Beyond the 1916 Exposition

The 1909 and 1916 statements became the basis for numerous usages of the elder brother terminology by Church leaders throughout the twentieth century. Two such instances include one from Joseph Fielding Smith, “We accept Jesus Christ as God—the Only Begotten Son of the Father in the flesh, and the first begotten in the Spirit. Therefore he is our eldest brother,”³² and another from Bruce R. McConkie: “Christ is literally our Elder Brother. Since all men are the personal spirit children of the Father, and since Christ was the Firstborn spirit offspring, it follows that he is the Elder Brother of all men.”³³ More recent examples are found in the writ-

ings of Robert L. Millet, Stephen E. Robinson, and Jerry C. Giles.³⁴ Considering the cautious language found in the 1916 Doctrinal Exposition, it is curious that the concept of Jesus as elder brother retained its position in the pantheon of widely emphasized Mormon teachings.

Other Interpretations of Brother, Father, and Firstborn

The two scriptural predicates, that (1) Jesus is the firstborn of the Father, and (2) all human beings are the literal spirit children of God the Father, may at first blush suggest that Jesus is the elder spirit brother of all God's children. There are other interpretations that may be drawn from these two scriptural predicates.

A passage from the Book of Mormon illustrates an alternate meaning when using familial titles: "Wherefore, after my father [Lehi] had made an end of speaking concerning the prophecies of Joseph, he called the children of Laman, his sons, and his daughters, and said unto them: Behold, my sons and my daughters, who are the sons and the daughters of my first-born, I would that ye should give ear unto my words" (2 Ne. 4:3). In this passage, we see that Laman is the firstborn of Lehi, and that Laman's children are referred to as the sons and daughters of Lehi. From this, one would not be justified in concluding that Laman is the elder brother of his own sons and daughters.

Similarly, the fact that Jesus is the firstborn of the Father, and the fact that men and women are the literal sons and daughters of the Father, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Jesus is the elder brother of humankind. Brigham Young may have held a similar view in this regard, as it is apparent that he did not care to distinguish between exalted beings found along the eternal continuum; all are of the same family, and it is not necessary to distinguish between the differing status of each member of the Godhead.³⁵

Popular biographer and Latter-day Saint John Henry Evans, though he ascribed the title of elder brother to the Savior, appears to have considered the title to be susceptible to a broader spectrum of interpretation: In his 1933 biography of Joseph Smith, Evans explains, "God is our Father by spiritual generation. He 'begot' our spirit. The idea involves a divine Mother, as well as a divine Father—and Joseph Smith taught that." Thus Jesus "becomes literally, and not figuratively, our elder Brother." According to Evans, it does not follow, however, "that Christ and man were begotten by the same identical Being in heaven, any more than Adam and Eve, who are our common parents, begot our fleshly bodies."³⁶ B. H. Roberts also points out that the titles firstborn and elder brother do not apply when

considering the co-eternal nature of intelligences—the spirit or intelligence from which man was created is just as eternal in duration as is the intelligence of Christ:

The reference to Jesus as the “first-born”—and hence the justification for our calling him our “Elder Brother”—cannot refer to any relationship that he established in his earth life, since as to the flesh he is not our “Elder Brother,” any more than he is the “first-born” in the flesh. There were many born as to the flesh before he was, and older brothers to us in the flesh than he. The relationship of “Elder Brother” cannot have reference to that estate where all were self-existent, uncreated and unbegotten, eternal intelligences, for that estate admits of no such relation as “elder” or “younger.” For as to the succession in time—the fact on which “younger” or “elder” depends—the intelligences are equal, that is, equal as to their eternity. Therefore, since the relationship of “Elder Brother” was not established by any possible fact in that estate where all were self-existing intelligences, it must have been established in the spirit life where Jesus, with reference to the hosts of intelligences designed to our earth, was the “first-born spirit,” and by that fact became our “Elder Brother,” the “first-born of every creature,” “the beginning of the creations of God,” as pertaining to our order of existence.³⁷

The statement that Jesus is the firstborn, when found in the scriptures, usually has reference to his being the first to be resurrected from the dead, not to his being the firstborn in the premortal existence. Colossians 1:18 speaks of the Savior as “the firstborn from the dead,” which clearly has reference to Jesus being the first to be resurrected, and firmly established that, in the language of Paul, to be resurrected was synonymous with a type of birth. Three verses prior to this usage (Col. 1:15), Paul refers to Jesus as the “firstborn of every creature” in a context that could denote a birth prior to the creation, but just as Christ is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8), he could also be the “firstborn from the dead” from before the creation.

In Doctrine and Covenants 93:20–22, we read:

For if you keep my commandments you shall receive of his fulness, and be glorified in me as I am in the Father; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace. And now, verily I say unto you, I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the Firstborn; And all those who are begotten through me are partakers of the glory of the same, and are the church of the Firstborn.

In this passage, Christ refers to those who are partakers of the same glory that Christ himself received from his father as “those who are *begotten* through me.” Christ has already received the fulness of the glory of the Father; hence, in receiving the fulness of glory, Christ was “begotten” by

the Father. Christ's reference to himself as the firstborn can mean that Christ was the first to receive the fulness of glory from the Father.

Section 93, an 1833 revelation to Joseph Smith, allows implicitly the idea of brotherhood with Jesus: since human spirits are eternal, these spirits were with God in the beginning just as Jesus was. Though not expressly stated, the elder brother concept may have been germinating in the Kirtland-era revelations. Even if the phrase had not yet emerged, the idea is not far beneath the surface. It seems that there was a sudden confluence of statements by Church leaders in 1844 using the elder brother terminology, with or without the leaders having heard the doctrine stated expressly by Joseph Smith.

As these examples show, the meaning of Jesus' status as firstborn is not entirely transparent to us. Moreover, it remains unknown how he excelled so far beyond the Father's other spirit children in power, knowledge, and premortal glory.

Two Modern Declarations

"The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles" (2000). On January 1, 2000, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles issued a unanimously signed declaration concerning their testimony of the Savior.³⁸ Nowhere in this document do they state that Jesus is the elder spirit brother of mankind. Is this omission significant, or is this to be explained because of editorial reasons, such as not wanting to state a doctrinally intricate concept in a declaration meant for public consumption? It is understandable that there would be times when the use of the title is not preferable. Although we do not know the exact reasons behind this, the omission of such a traditionally accepted concept relating to Jesus Christ is noteworthy.

"Special Witnesses of Christ" (2000). A special video presentation was released to the world in the year 2000 of the testimonies of members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³⁹ The presentation is structured around the premortal, mortal, and postmortal ministries of the Savior. This video runs almost a full hour in length, and yet there is no mention made of Jesus as the elder brother. It is easy to imagine that some viewers, not having a sufficient background in Latter-day Saint belief, might find the elder brother expression a stumbling block to understanding Christ's status.

Conclusion

The concept that Jesus is the elder brother of the human family is not expressly set forth in the standard works. Neither can it be traced with

absolute confidence to any utterance of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The phrase appears to have surfaced first in the writings of Orson Pratt shortly prior to Joseph Smith's death and was soon thereafter used frequently by other Church leaders. This sudden confluence of expressions of the elder brother concept in 1844 may have derived from Joseph Smith, in spite of the absence of any contemporaneous documentation of his teaching this concept. Or it may have been the result of the dawning realization occurring during that time period that all humans are literally the spirit children of our Father in Heaven, together with the appealing corollary that Jesus is our elder brother. Once this concept emerged, it became firmly entwined in LDS theology through frequent repetition in sermons and personal expressions by Church leaders and members throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.

The 1909 First Presidency statement "The Origin of Man" used the elder brother term and introduced two new phrases to describe the Savior: (1) "that he is the Firstborn in the spirit," and (2) "that he is the Only Begotten in the flesh." These two phrases, the highlighted portions of which seem to appear for the first time with the 1909 statement, have since gained common currency in the LDS vernacular. The logical progression found in the 1909 Origin of Man statement is consistent with the earlier reasoning of Orson Pratt.

It was not until 1916 that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles offered an in-depth examination of the scriptural underpinnings of the term. The 1916 Doctrinal Exposition concluded that "there is no impropriety, therefore, in referring to Jesus Christ as the elder brother of all human kind," and reminded the Saints of their proper relationship to Christ: "Let it not be forgotten, however, that He is essentially greater than any and all others."

To those not familiar with the plan of salvation, hearing Jesus Christ called an elder brother might be misunderstood as a diminution of Christ's high status. Latter-day Saints may wish to be guided in their public pronouncements on this subject by the examples of scripture, Joseph Smith, and modern-day prophets and apostles of the Lord. Robert J. Matthews once made this insightful comment that acts as a fitting summation to the subject at hand: "In the Book of Mormon, Christ is God. He is not simply a mortal, a great teacher, a Friend of Mankind. He is God. I have been surprised that the Book of Mormon never defines Jesus as the firstborn spirit, man's Elder Brother. In the Book of Mormon, he isn't so much man's brother, he is man's God."⁴⁰

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1. Rodney Turner refers to "Elder Brother" as a "nonscriptural title" for Jesus Christ. Rodney Turner, "The Doctrine of the Firstborn and Only Begotten," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1989), 94.

2. See reminiscences of Zebedee Coltrin and George Laub, in this article.

3. Orson Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: Prophet's Office, n.d.), 7–8.

4. Charles R. Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844," *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (1988): 88. I am indebted to Harrell's article for bringing to my attention this important early statement from Orson Pratt. It is significant that this publication was in New York, far removed from Nauvoo, Illinois, where Joseph Smith was at the time. Orson Pratt does not attribute this teaching to Joseph Smith.

5. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 7:172 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

6. *History of the Church*, 7:286–87. Unfortunately, at the point of this reference, the recorder of the sermon switched from recording Brigham Young's own words to simply writing a synopsis of what was said. Immediately following this passage, the recorder resumed transcribing Brigham Young's own words. It is possible that at this juncture the recorder got behind in his minutes, and then had to catch up as Brigham Young continued to speak. It is unclear whether the phrase elder brother in this setting was Brigham Young's own choice of words, though one would presume if Brigham Young had disagreed with this characterization of his sermon, he would have corrected it at some point, which he apparently did not do.

7. W. W. Phelps, "The Answer," *Times and Seasons* 5 (January 1, 1845): 758.

8. Joseph's Speckled Bird, "Communications: The Paracletes Continued," *Times and Seasons* 6 (June 1, 1845): 917. The article is signed using a *nom de plume*, "Joseph's Speckled Bird." The idea of the "speckled bird" comes from Jeremiah 12:8 and refers to something that stands out from its surroundings due to its unusual nature. The phrase was used infrequently in Church history to refer to oneself; see for example Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1916), 24, and Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:236.

Most likely "Joseph's Speckled Bird" was William W. Phelps. In a January 1, 1845, letter to William Smith, published in the *Times and Seasons*, Phelps likened

himself to Jeremiah's speckled bird. William W. Phelps, "The Answer," *Times and Seasons* 5 (January 1, 1844): 757.

9. It would be hard to miss, however, the scriptural reference to John 5:19, where it is Jesus who says he can do nothing but what he hath seen the Father do.

10. "Lines: Written in the Album of Miss Abby Jane Hart, of New York City," in *Gospel Kingdom: Selections from the Writings and Discourses of John Taylor*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1943), 388.

11. Zebedee Coltrin, Address, Spanish Fork High Priest Quorum, February 5, 1870, as quoted in *LDS Collector's Library*, CD-ROM, Deseret Book, 1997.

12. Zebedee Coltrin, Minutes, Salt Lake City School of the Prophets, October 3, 1883, as quoted in *LDS Collector's Library*.

13. Coltrin's memory is called somewhat into question by the fact that in a subsequent statement given before the Salt Lake City School of the Prophets, he could not recollect the performance of the ordinance of washing of feet at the Kirtland School of the Prophets, even though it is generally accepted from the accounts of other witnesses that such an ordinance was, in fact, performed there. "He did not remember the washing of feet at the opening of the school [of the prophets], but could not say it was not so." (President George Q. Cannon said in the *History of Joseph Smith* they were washed on the 23rd of January, 1833.) Zebedee Coltrin, Remarks, Salt Lake City School of Prophets, October 11, 1883, as quoted in *LDS Collector's Library*.

14. Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 259–60.

15. It is worthy of note that Parley P. Pratt's 1837 seminal work, *A Voice of Warning*, nowhere mentions the concept that Jesus is the brother of mankind. Nor does his 1855 work, *Science of Theology, A Key to the Scriptures*.

16. Eugene England, "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 172.

17. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 405 n. 50. Though this particular comment is made regarding a sermon recorded by Laub for May 12, 1844, the comment is equally true for the words Laub attributed to Joseph Smith as quoted above and given the date of April 6, 1843.

18. England, "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," 151. England casts some doubt on the accuracy of Laub's account of this sermon. England observes that Willard Richards took minutes of various remarks delivered on April 6, 1843, but these remarks do not have the same subject matter as what Laub recorded. Additionally, Laub recorded his first arrival in Nauvoo as being on May 1, 1843, nearly a month after he was supposed to have recorded Joseph's sermon. Laub himself admits that the notes in his journal were from "various scraps of 1843 & 4" and from "memery by George Laub." England, "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," 171 n. 23. Additionally, as noted by England, Laub reports other sermons that he attributes to Joseph Smith (for April 13 and April 20, 1843) which do not appear in the *History of the Church*. Also, England observes other instances where Laub attributes sermons to the wrong man. England, "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," 173 n. 24, 176 n. 26, 177 n. 28.

19. A dearth of such references in the years 1847–1850 may be due to the disruption of the Saints in moving from Nauvoo to the Great Salt Lake Valley.

20. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:193, January 27, 1856; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:355, June 15, 1856; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:370, June 22, 1856; Franklin D. Richards, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:163, January 11, 1857; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:220, February 8, 1857; Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:226, February 8, 1857; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:281, March 15, 1857; Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:362, April 19, 1857; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:296, October 6, 1857; Lorenzo D. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:222, October 25, 1857; Lorenzo D. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:223, December 25, 1857; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:332, June 19, 1859; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:203, July 31, 1859; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:275, October 6, 1859; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:284, October 9, 1859; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:43, April 8, 1860; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:137, July 29, 1860; and Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:195, October 7, 1860.

21. Indeed, the elder brother doctrine may have been germinating just below the surface of the revelations received through the Prophet Joseph Smith as early as 1833.

22. Harrell, "Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence," 91.

23. Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845*, 7–8.

24. The logical argument used in this paper is based upon inferences drawn from scripture. This particular reasoning process is being termed a logical argument or logical progression so as to distinguish it from a more direct attempt to support the elder brother doctrine by means of scripture.

25. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:2, September 28, 1862. See also Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:42, January 8, 1865 and 13:235, February 20, 1870.

26. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:241, August 20, 1871.

27. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:245–46, December 15, 1872. A similar argument was made by Orson Pratt in 1876 in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:290, November 12, 1876.

28. "The Origin of Man," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 4:203.

29. Like the 1909 First Presidency statement, James E. Talmage uses the elder brother phrase in conjunction with a commentary on the Lord's Prayer, which establishes that Jesus is the son of the Father:

"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." In this we acknowledge the relation we bear to our Heavenly Father, and while reverencing His great and holy Name, we avail ourselves of the inestimable privilege of approaching Him, less with the thought of His infinite glory as the Creator of all that is, the Supreme Being above all creation, than with the loving realization that He is Father, and that we are His children. This is the earliest Biblical scripture giving instruction, permission, or warrant, for addressing God directly as 'Our Father.' Therein is expressed the reconciliation which the human family, estranged through sin, may attain by the means provided through the well beloved Son. This instruction is equally definite in demonstrating the brotherhood between Christ and humanity. As he prayed so pray

we to the same Father, we as brethren and Christ as our Elder Brother. (James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915], 238–39)

30. The First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles, “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve,” in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:31–34.

31. The First Presidency, “The Father and the Son,” 5:34.

32. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 2:127.

33. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1966), 214.

34. See Jerry C. Giles, “Jesus Christ: Firstborn in the Spirit,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:728; Robert L. Millet, “Jesus Christ: Overview—Premortal Jesus,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:724; Millet, “Jesus Christ, Fatherhood and Sonship of,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:739; and Stephen E. Robinson, “Jesus Christ, Names and Titles of—Father,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:741.

35. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:217, February 8, 1857.

36. John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith: An American Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1933), 282. Reprinted by Deseret Book in 1989.

37. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), 250.

38. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” *Ensign* 30 (April 2000): 2–3.

39. “Special Witnesses of Christ,” satellite broadcast, April 1, 2000; DVD available from Distribution Center, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; printed in *Ensign* 31 (April 2001): 2–21.

40. Robert J. Matthews, “Some Thoughts on the Atonement” (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989), 17. This is a transcript from a faculty lecture delivered by Robert J. Matthews on February 17, 1989.