

# Christ and Krishna:

## The Visions of Arjuna and the Brother of Jared

Joseph M. Spencer

The *Bhagavadgītā*, generally if nonetheless inaccurately regarded as the chief volume of Hindu scripture, culminates in a revelatory vision. Arjuna, hero of the Kurukshetra war, is given to see the true nature of his companion and fellow hero, Krishna, who, he has just learned, is actually the “birthless one,” “the Lord of all beings,” albeit manifest in human form (*BhG* 4.6).<sup>1</sup> As the vision comes to its close, Krishna explains the unique nature of what Arjuna has seen: “By my grace toward you, Arjuna, this supreme form has been manifested through my own power . . . which has never before been seen by other than you” (*BhG* 11.47). Those words have a familiar ring for the reader of the Book of Mormon. In the baffling little Book of Ether, included almost as an afterthought in the Nephite volume of scripture, the brother of Jared has a remarkable vision of the premortal Christ, in the course of which he is told: “And never hath I shewed myself unto man, whom I have created, for never hath man believed in me as thou hast” (Ether 3:15).<sup>2</sup> I would like, in this paper, to ask what might be learned by taking this apparent point of contact seriously.

### Epic Contexts and Revolutionary Visions

Only recently, unfortunately, have Western scholars begun to take seriously the epic context of the *Bhagavadgītā*.<sup>3</sup> The *Gītā* is not, after all, a stand-alone text, but an excerpt from the lengthy epic of the *Mahābhārata*. That context is interpretively important in at least two ways. First, it is only within that larger frame that one can fully see how central to the *Gītā* the turn to *bhakti* (devotion) is—about which I will have more to say later.<sup>4</sup> Second, it is only in the context of the larger story about the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna that the real significance of the latter’s self-revelation can be recognized.<sup>5</sup> Stripped of its epic context, the *Gītā* is as likely as not to be read as a beautiful encapsulation of earlier Hindu texts (the *Upanishads* in particular) that is unfortunately interrupted by the distracting account of Arjuna’s vision with its vulgar emphasis on devotion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Except where noted, I use Winthrop Sargeant’s translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*. See Christopher Key Chapple, ed., *The Bhagavad Gītā*, trans. Winthrop Sargeant (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from Royal Skousen’s critical text. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> On the Western reception of the *Bhagavadgītā* generally, see Catherine A. Robinson, *Interpretations of the “Bhagavad-Gītā” and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See Madhav M. Deshpande, “The Epic Context of the *Bhagavadgītā*,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991), 334–48.

<sup>5</sup> See Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> This is, interestingly, how the *Gītā* seems to have been read by its earliest American devotees (incidentally contemporary with the appearance in America of the Book of Mormon): Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David

Similarly epic in nature, according to Hugh Nibley, is the Book of Ether, in which the story of the brother of Jared appears. On Nibley's fascinating reading, the Jaredite narrative presented in the Book of Mormon is an epic that has been "divested of its epic form."<sup>7</sup> As Nibley explains: "All we have now is Moroni's brief summary, made from a translation and interlarded with his own notes and comments. That means that all that is left to us is the gist of the epic material."<sup>8</sup> This approach to Ether allows Nibley to make sense of the curious presentation of the brother of Jared as "a large and a mighty man" and "a man highly favored of the Lord" (Ether 1:34). The epic hero, Nibley notes, "has almost superhuman, but never supernatural, strength, and yet from time to time he receives supernatural aid."<sup>9</sup> The brother of Jared is as much a hero whose constant companion is a god as is Arjuna.

The epic context is just as important to the interpretation of the Book of Ether as it is of the *Bhagavadgītā*. It is only when Krishna's revelations to Arjuna in the *Gītā* are compared to his other revelations in the *Mahābhārata* that the uniqueness of his emphasis on devotion becomes clear. Similarly, it is only when the words of the Lord to the brother of Jared in Ether 3 are compared with remainder of the Book of Ether that one can recognize the startlingly unique nature of the brother of Jared's experience.<sup>10</sup> Further, the shock of Krishna's true identity and nature can only be felt when one considers his relatively unremarkable nature before that point in the story recounted in the *Mahābhārata*. Similarly, the shock the brother of Jared experiences when seeing the finger and then the body of the Lord—as of flesh and bone!—derives its force from the self-presentation of the Lord before that point in the story of the Jaredites.

The parallel between the visions of Arjuna and the brother of Jared in terms of their epic contexts might be put quite generally. In each case, it is only because the vision takes place in a larger epic context, in which the hero has a divine figure as his constant companion, that what is revealed in the vision can have the kind of forceful impact it does. The sustained length and wealth of detail characteristic of the epic, combined with the almost casual familiarity with deity typical of the characters portrayed, establishes a generally stable order that is always ready to be overturned by a self-revelation of the divine. The epic is uniquely suited, it seems, to present the experience of a vision as the start of a revolution in religion. Even if the Book of Ether is an epic

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Thoreau. See Barbara Stoller Miller, "Why Did Henry David Thoreau Take the *Bhagavad-Gita* to Walden Pond?" in *The Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Barbara Stoller Miller (New York: Bantam, 1986), 147–154.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 405.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 408. He further explains: "Our editor, Moroni, admits the damage. . . . He says that the men of his day were conspicuously lacking in the peculiar literary gifts of those who wrote the original book of Ether: 'Behold, thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared,' he says, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them' (Ether 12:24). . . . Moroni in editing Ether is keenly aware of his inability to do justice to the writing before him." *Ibid.*, 406. Brant Gardner has highlighted the potential importance of the fact that Moroni would have been working with an already-extant translation of the Jaredite story (that produced, according to Mosiah 28:11–19, by King Mosiah, son of Benjamin). See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 6:152–54, 159–63, 170, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, 300. For a criticism of Nibley's characterization of the Book of Ether as characteristic of an "epic milieu," see David B. Honey, "Ecological Nomadism versus Epic Heroism in Ether: Nibley's Works on the Jaredites," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2.1 (1990): 143–63, especially 155–63.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 235–40.

“divested of its epic form,” there are traces enough of the original to feel the transformative force of the brother of Jared’s vision.

## Devotion and Faith

What is revealed in each case through the vision of the divine is, as I just put it, the possibility of radically revolutionizing the basic nature of religion. This has come to be widely recognized when it comes to the *Bhagavadgītā*. The purpose of Arjuna’s vision is to introduce *bhakti* or devotion as the privileged means of achieving the Hindu ideal of acting without attachment. The way this unfolds over the course of the *Gītā* deserves a bit of exposition.

In the first half of the *Gītā*, Krishna exposit to Arjuna, through a philosophical dialogue, the two traditional paths that lead to detachment: the paths of action and knowledge. This dialogue is, however, interrupted at key points by offhand hints on Krishna’s part that he is not exactly human. This happens first in the fourth teaching, when Krishna mentions that he had delivered his doctrine to people who had died before he was born. When Arjuna expresses confusion, Krishna explains for the first time that he is “birthless” and his nature “imperishable,” since he is “the Lord of all beings” (*BhG* 4.6). Krishna returns to the theme in the seventh teaching, describing in more detail the distinction between his “material” or “inferior nature” and his “higher nature” (*BhG* 7.4–5).<sup>11</sup> Then, in the ninth teaching, Krishna explains how his two natures allow him to act (to intervene in human affairs) without attachment (see *BhG* 9.5–9).<sup>12</sup> All these interruptions eventually lead Arjuna to ask for the vision he then receives: “You have spoken about the highest secret known as the supreme Self. . . . Thus, as you have described yourself, O supreme Lord, I desire to see your divine form, O supreme spirit. If you think it possible for me to see this, O Lord of yogins, then show me your imperishable Self” (*BhG* 11.1, 3–4).

After the remarkable vision, Krishna explains the role that devotion has played in it:

Not through study of the Vedas, not through austerity, not through gifts, and not through sacrifice can I be seen in this form as you have beheld me. By undistracted devotion alone can I be known, and be truly seen in this form, and be entered into, Arjuna. He who . . . is devoted to me, . . . comes to me, Arjuna. (*BhG* 11.53–55.)

Here, as Krishna states, it is uniquely because of Arjuna’s devotion that he has been granted the vision and has come to know the true nature of the divine.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Krishna stresses the remarkable power of devotion to transform the reprobate: “If even the evil doer worships me with undivided devotion, he is to be thought of as righteous, for he has indeed rightly resolved. Quickly he becomes virtuous and goes to everlasting peace” (*BhG* 9.30–31).<sup>14</sup> If Arjuna is the

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<sup>11</sup> “The spiritual beings” would be the literal translation of *jīva-būtām*, though Sargeant renders it simply as “self.” See Chapple, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 323.

<sup>12</sup> See the helpful discussion in Angelika Malinar, *The “Bhagavadgītā”: Doctrines and Contexts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 148–49.

<sup>13</sup> For a most helpful exposition of the nature of *bhakti*, see J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata: Text and Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 24–29.

<sup>14</sup> Ithamar Theodore argues that, contrary to certain widespread interpretations, this turn to devotion is not a turn to populism or vulgar religion, but rather a raising of the stakes of the traditional paths of action and knowledge. See

first to see Krishna's form, it is because he is the first fully to exemplify devotion, and it is in this sense that Arjuna's vision marks a religious revolution.

Moreover, the *exemplary* nature of Arjuna's experience must not be missed. The point of the *Gītā*'s recounting Arjuna's vision is unmistakably didactic. The point, that is, is to ensure that hearers or readers of the *Gītā* will see in Arjuna a model of *bhakti*, of what all who wish to achieve the ideal of detachment must pursue. Religious revolution is really possible only if the force of the event is communicated to those who did not witness it. It is thus significant that, in the whole of the *Gītā*, it is only in the telling of Arjuna's vision that the dialogue is interrupted by the narrator. The sudden reminder that this event is being recounted—and by one who, incidentally, has the same gift of “divine sight” granted to Arjuna—forces the hearer or reader to recognize the kerygmatic nature of recounting the story.<sup>15</sup>

How is all this relevant to the vision of the brother of Jared? Although commentators generally overlook the point, Moroni explicitly presents the brother of Jared's vision as introducing or illustrating—as Grant Hardy puts it—“a particular path to religious knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> The significance of this illustration to the larger project of the Book of Mormon is crucial, even if it is universally missed. It calls for detailed comment.

According to a reading I have worked out in my book, *An Other Testament*, Mormon is presented in his book as having constructed his history of the Lehiters in such a way as to reveal the importance that should be granted to their rootedness in the covenant given to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis.<sup>17</sup> Beginning with Nephi's apocalyptic version of his father's dream of the tree of life and culminating in the visiting Christ's complicated midrashim on texts from Micah and Isaiah, the Book of Mormon is from start to finish meant “to shew unto the remnant of the house of Israel how great things the Lord hath done for their fathers, and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.”<sup>18</sup> From the very start of the Book of Mormon, the prayers of its prophetic figures are that “if it should so be that . . . the Nephites should fall into transgression and by any means be destroyed, and the Lamanites should not be destroyed, that the Lord God would preserve a record of . . . the Nephites, . . . that it might be brought forth some future day unto the Lamanites, that perhaps they might be brought unto salvation” (Enos 1:13).<sup>19</sup>

The Book of Mormon thus presents itself as a kind of letter written by an ancient covenant people and addressed to a modern covenant people, from the Nephites to the Lamanites. And the

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Ithamar Theodore, *Exploring the “Bhagavad-Gītā”*: Philosophy, Structure and Meaning (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010), 85–86.

<sup>15</sup> See Malinar, *The “Bhagavadgītā”*, 166–67.

<sup>16</sup> Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 241. In my view, Hardy's emphasis on “knowledge” is too narrow, as my own reading will show.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> I draw these words from the title page of the Book of Mormon.

<sup>19</sup> The Lord's response to this particular prayer in Enos 1:18 makes clear that this was the desire quite generally of the prophets of the first generations of Nephites: “Thy fathers have also required of me this thing. And it shall be done unto them according to their faith, for their faith was like unto thine.” This particular vision of things continued—however marginally and however disconnected from its original covenantal bearings—throughout Nephite history, as can be seen from sermons like those of Alma the Younger in Alma 9 and Samuel the Lamanite in Helaman 15.

letter carrier, the person assigned to ensure that the book arrives at its destination, is the Gentiles—specifically, it seems, those of European descent situated in the Americas and profoundly shaped by the terrifically complicated history of Christianity in Europe.<sup>20</sup> This last detail, the role to be played by the Gentiles in the historical unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant, is one Mormon seems to have been content just to make known through his abridgement and arrangement of the Nephite record. His son, Moroni, however, seems to have been a good deal more concerned about this particular detail—worried, at his most anxious moments, that the Gentiles were as likely as not to *prevent* the delivery of the letter to its rightful addressees.<sup>21</sup> This anxiety seems to have motivated Moroni’s interest in the story of the Jaredites, as well as to have determined his (heavy-handed) editorial style in abridging and annotating that story. What seems to have interested—if not obsessed—him is the fact that the Jaredites, in Grant Hardy’s words, “were not even of the House of Israel and thus had no part in the covenants and promises that were so central to the Nephites’ conception of themselves and their role in God’s plan for human history.”<sup>22</sup> That is, what seems to have interested Moroni in the Jaredites was the fact that *they were Gentiles*.

The story of the brother of Jared has to be seen through this covenantal lens. Moroni presents the brother of Jared as, one might say, *the* Gentile, the *exemplary* Gentile. This becomes particularly clear when Moroni explains the absence in the published record of most of what the brother of Jared saw in his vision. Moroni did indeed “write them” in the plates, but he was “commanded” to “seal them up” (Ether 4:5). He then explains:

The Lord saith unto me: They shall not go forth *unto the Gentiles* until the day that they shall repent of their iniquity and become clean before the Lord. And in that day that they shall exercise faith in me, saith the Lord, *even as the brother of Jared did*, that they may become sanctified in me, then will I manifest unto them *the things which the brother of Jared saw*, even to the unfolding unto them all my revelations, saith Jesus Christ. (Ether 4:6–7, emphases added.)

Here the link between the Gentiles more generally—those who would potentially keep the Book of Mormon from its intended audience by ignoring its covenantal foundation—and the brother of Jared is made perfectly clear. If the Gentiles would develop the sort of relationship to God appropriate to them, they must follow the example of *the* Gentile, the brother of Jared. His model of approaching God, his way of “exercis[ing] faith,” is apparently *the properly Gentile approach to God, the properly Gentile exercise of faith*.

This, it seems, is why Moroni decided to give his attention to the brother of Jared. Like the *Bhagavadgītā*’s narrator, he carefully interrupts his narrative of an unprecedented vision to ensure that his audience would recognize how the story is meant to model a particular approach to the divine. But in the place of Arjuna’s *devotion*, the Book of Ether presents its readers with

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<sup>20</sup> See especially 1 Nephi 13.

<sup>21</sup> See on this point Grant Hardy’s crucial discussion in Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 217–47. On the theological stakes of Moroni’s eventual overcoming of this anxiety, see Adam S. Miller, “A Hermeneutics of Weakness,” in *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 99–105.

<sup>22</sup> Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 229.

the brother of Jared's *faith*. This is highlighted in the passage of Ether that most clearly mirrors the account of Arjuna's vision, which I cited at the outset of this paper: "And never hath I shewed myself unto man, whom I have created, for never hath man believed in me as thou hast" (Ether 3:15). It is the stark unicity of the brother of Jared's faith or belief that makes his approach to God exemplary.

Unfortunately, interpretation of this passage in the literature has been largely distracted by the pseudo-problem of apparent contradiction between the Lord's claim in Ether 3 that he had never "shewed [him]self unto man" and passages elsewhere in uniquely Mormon scripture that refer to antediluvian appearances of the Lord to mortal human beings.<sup>23</sup> Obsessed with reconciling passages from distinct scriptural texts in the name of doctrinal consistency, interpreters have largely overlooked the point of the Lord's words, namely, that his appearance was unique in that it responded to a unique sort of faith.<sup>24</sup>

The exceptions to this unfortunate interpretive trend, however, are most instructive. Thus Daniel Ludlow suggests that the Lord "is essentially saying in Ether 3:15 that he has never *had* to show himself unto man before," an interpretation that is strengthened by the subsequent notes in the text that "the brother of Jared 'could not be kept from within the veil' (Ether 3:20), and that the Lord 'could not withhold anything from him, for he knew that the Lord could show him all things' (Ether 3:26)."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Holland paraphrases the Lord's words to the brother of Jared as follows: "Never have I showed myself unto man *in this manner, without my volition, driven solely by the faith of the beholder.*" He explains further:

As a rule, prophets are *invited* into the presence of the Lord, are bidden to enter his presence by him and only with his sanction. The brother of Jared, on the other hand, seems to have thrust himself through the veil, not as an unwelcome guest but perhaps technically as an uninvited one. . . . The only way that faith could be so remarkable was its ability to take the prophet, uninvited, where others had been able to go only with God's bidding.<sup>26</sup>

This interpretation, it seems to me, has to be right.<sup>27</sup> It has the added benefit of revealing the stark contrast between the brother of Jared, the father of the non-covenant people to which

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<sup>23</sup> Moses 7:4 and D&C 107:54 are the passages most often cited.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, the discussions in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957–1966), 2:123–25; Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 47–51; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 599–600; Kent P. Jackson, "'Never Have I Showed Myself Unto Man': A Suggestion for Understanding Ether 3:15a," *BYU Studies* 30.3 (Summer 1990): 71–75; Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 4:277–78; Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990*, 4 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 4:272; Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:205–207.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 318, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 23, emphases in original.

<sup>27</sup> The remarkable hold the pseudo-problem of doctrinal consistency has on interpreters of the Book of Mormon can be witnessed in the fact that at least two of those cited above themselves cite Ludlow's interpretation of the passage,

Moroni would draw the attention of his Gentile readers, and Abraham, the father of the covenant people on which the rest of the Book of Mormon focuses. Where Abraham is definitively the called one, the one who—unlike Adam before him—responded to God’s call with “Here am I!” (see especially Genesis 22:1, 7, 11), the brother of Jared is the uncalled or unbidden *but nonetheless faithful* one. A model for the similarly uncalled Gentiles, the brother of Jared displays a sort of *non-Abrahamic* faith that, if imitated by Gentiles generally, can result in “the unfolding [of] all [of God’s] revelations.”

The prospects, it might be noted, are pretty bleak for the Gentiles if they do not follow the revolutionary religious pattern established by the brother of Jared. While a remnant remains of covenant Israel at the end of Nephite history—the remnant to which the Book of Mormon itself is to be delivered to inform them of their covenantal status—nothing of the non-covenantal Jaredites remains at the end of their sad history. For Gentiles, it seems, Moroni sees two options: faith like the brother of Jared, or annihilation without remainder. Moroni states this point clearly at the outset of his abridgement of the Jaredite story: “This cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God, that ye may repent and not continue in your iniquities until the fullness be come, that ye may not bring down the fullness of the wrath of God upon you, as the inhabitants of the land hath hitherto done” (Ether 2:11).

## Krishna and Christ

Arjuna’s devotion and the brother of Jared’s faith are parallel in important ways, but they are ultimately distinct in nature. Still more distinct are the respective contents of their visions. But even the distinctness of their visions is rooted in an important similarity: the role played in each by divine incarnation. This final point of comparison deserves attention as well. Of course, there is already a large literature comparing the incarnational doctrines of the New Testament and the *Bhagavadgītā*, and I am anything but expert enough to contribute to *that* discussion.<sup>28</sup> The matter of Christ’s incarnation in the brother of Jared’s vision, however, is unique.

It is relatively early in the *Gītā*—specifically at the moment when Arjuna first begins to realize that Krishna is no mere mortal—that Krishna explains his reasons for taking on human form: “Whenever a decrease of social order exists, Arjuna, and there is a rising up of social disorder, then I manifest myself. For the protection of the good and the destruction of evil doers, for the sake of establishing social order, I am born in every age” (*BhG* 4.7–8).<sup>29</sup> Such are Krishna’s motivations in manifesting himself, but what is the *nature* of his incarnation? Incarnation “is possible,” Angelika Malinar helpfully explains,

because [Krishna] makes the power of creation (*prakṛti*, 4.6) act according to his will and produce an outward form for him . . . . The already detached self deliberately turns to the

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but apparently without recognizing how it dismantles the entire problem. See Jackson, “‘Never Have I Showed Myself Unto Man,’” 73; and McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4:277.

<sup>28</sup> For a particularly insightful and recent treatment, which also contains a sizeable bibliography, see Steven Tsoukalas, “Krishna and Christ: The Body-Divine Relation in the Human Form,” in *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the “Bhagavad-Gītā”*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Dudley, MA: Eerdmans, 2006), 145–163.

<sup>29</sup> I have modified Sargeant’s translation slightly here, replacing “righteousness” with “social order” and “unrighteousness” with “social disorder” to reflect the wider scope of the Sanskrit *dharma* and *adharma*. See the discussion in Malinar, *The “Bhagavadgītā”*, 99.

realm of *prakṛti*, activates it and yet manages to stay in control. When in this position, a god, like a successful *yogin*, is still connected to *prakṛti*, but already “liberated” from any egoistic appropriation of its manifestations.<sup>30</sup>

In other words (though still Malinar’s), in his self-manifestation, Krishna’s “apparitional body (*māyā*) . . . is not connected to his eternal self, which remains forever unborn and detached.”<sup>31</sup>

This is important for understanding Arjuna’s vision because it is Krishna’s *eternal self* that is revealed, precisely in that the veil of his apparitional body—the veil of *māyā*—is pulled aside. Having become originally acquainted with Krishna in his human form, the miracle of his vision is that he is given to see Krishna’s transcendent reality. What Arjuna is given to see is such, in fact, that he has to be—like Moses in Mormonism’s Book of Moses (see Moses 1:11)—in some way transformed to have the vision. Krishna explains to Arjuna: “But you are not able to see me with your own eyes. I give to you a divine eye” (*BhG* 11.8). Even with this divine assistance, however, Arjuna soon enough begs—like Abraham in *The Apocalypse of Abraham*, of which Hugh Nibley used to make a great deal<sup>32</sup>—to be released from the vision: “Having seen that which has never been seen before, I am delighted, and yet my mind trembles with fear. Show me that form, O God, in which you originally appeared. Have mercy” (*BhG* 11.45).

The brother of Jared’s experience is almost exactly the reverse of this. Throughout the opening narrative of the Book of Ether, it is the Lord *in his transcendence* who is the brother of Jared’s companion. Early in the brother of Jared’s travels, “the Lord came down and talked with [him],” but “he was in a cloud, and the brother of Jared saw him not” (Ether 2:4). From that point, the Lord “did go before them” in their travels, “talk[ing] with them as he stood in a cloud” (Ether 2:5). Later, when the brother of Jared earns a rebuke from the Lord, the latter “came again unto the brother of Jared and stood in a cloud and talked with him” (Ether 2:14). Although the brother of Jared seems to be in constant contact with the Lord throughout this narrative, it is always with the Lord as a disembodied figure from the beyond, an invisible being.

The shock of the brother of Jared’s vision comes, therefore, when he sees the Lord *enfleshed*: “And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord. And it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood, and the brother of Jared fell down before the Lord—for he was struck with fear” (Ether 3:6). When the vision comes to its culmination and the veil is entirely removed for the brother of Jared, the Lord reveals to him his “body”: “Behold, this body which ye now behold is the body of my spirit. . . . And even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh” (Ether 3:16). Where

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<sup>30</sup> Malinar, *The “Bhagavadgītā”*, 95–96. See also the discussion at *ibid.*, 148: “This distinction is the basis of the theological doctrine of the god’s simultaneous presence in and distance from the world. This distinction demonstrates the specific character of Kṛṣṇa’s power, which is referred to as the yoga that is “majestic,” mighty, indicative of his being both the sovereign of all beings and the master of *prakṛti*. While the existence of the world depends on him, his ‘self’ and thus he himself do not depend on the world.”

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 128. Krishna is himself careful to distinguish this form of incarnation from other forms on offer in the Hindu tradition. See *BhG* 7.24–25, as well as the helpful commentary in Malinar, *The “Bhagavadgītā”*, 134.

<sup>32</sup> See *The Apocalypse of Abraham* 16.1–4, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985), 1:696. For references in Nibley’s writings, see Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 279, 522–23.

Arjuna is given to see beyond the veil of the enfleshed into the transcendent unimaginable, the brother of Jared is given to see beyond the veil of the transcendent unimaginable and so to come face to face with the incarnate. Moreover, where Arjuna requires divine sight and still can barely stand the vision, there is no talk of this sort in the Book of Ether. Indeed, what sets the climactic moment of the brother of Jared's vision in motion is the mortal's almost irreverent (because almost insultingly banal) command, "Shew thyself unto me" (Ether 3:10).<sup>33</sup>

This reversal of Arjuna's experience in the brother of Jared's vision is perhaps most instructive of all. Although there are striking parallels—as well as differences—between the incarnation of Krishna in the *Gītā* and the incarnation of Christ in the New Testament (particularly in the Gospel of John), Mormonism, through the Book of Mormon, greatly complicates things. The Incarnation is something more like the *full realization of Christ's nature* for Mormonism than his *willing condescension from* that nature. Orthodox Christianity is thus more akin to the Hinduism of the *Bhagavadgītā* than is Mormonism because the latter uniquely dispenses with the ultimate unimaginability of the divine in itself. Not only does the Book of Mormon present the story of a prophet who pierces the veil of mystery to see that God dwells eternally in flesh—with "toes, fingers, and all that stuff"<sup>34</sup>—but it also presents that story as a model to be followed by every Gentile who would rejoice in the promises of God.

I might conclude, then, with a few words from Adam Miller—words I reread this last February 2:

Heaven, for Mormons, is what *seals* our union with the mundane rather than terminates it. Leave it to Mormonism to see the nihilistic claim that there is nothing but the aching specificity of this repetition and raise it to the power of infinity. Leave it to Mormonism to claim that even in heaven we'll have to button and unbutton our shirts, show all our work, suffer paper cuts, and—of course, forever and ever again—breathe. . . . Nothing could be more merciful.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> It is significant that the brother of Jared differs in important ways from the figures of Moses and Abraham, whose visionary experiences are described as more like Arjuna's. It is worth asking whether the apparent banality of the brother of Jared's experience also says something about the distinction Moroni seems to be drawing, through his abridgement of the Jaredite record, between those of and those not of the covenant. On this point, see the preliminary comments in Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:202.

<sup>34</sup> See James Faulconer, "Toes, Fingers, and All That Stuff: Resurrection," retrieved February 14, 2013, from <http://www.patheos.com/Mormon/Toes-Fingers-and-All-that-Stuff-Resurrection-James-Faulconer-04-05-2012.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Adam S. Miller, "Groundhog Day," in *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 123–24.