

CHAPTER V

Did Nephi Talk to the Holy Ghost in Person?

In 1 Nephi 11:1-11 Nephi relates a marvelous experience in which he was caught up "in the Spirit of the Lord" to an exceedingly high mountain and shown many things that his heart desired. Nephi describes the Spirit as being "in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another." Now a question arises concerning the identity of the Spirit. Two schools of thought prevail among students of the Book of Mormon, and each gives a plausible answer to the problem. One of them holds that the Spirit beheld by Nephi was none other than the preexistent Christ. Those who adhere to this point of view direct our attention to a precedent which they think should have great weight in convincing one of the correctness of their position. This precedent was the open appearance of our pre-existent Lord to the brother of Jared. (Ether 3:13-16) The other school of thought believes that the Spirit of the Lord who talked with Nephi was the Holy Ghost in person.

The resolving of the problem raised here is of great importance, theologically speaking, for if it can be shown that the Spirit who talked to Nephi was the Holy Ghost in person, we may regard 1 Nephi 11:1-11 as the one classical passage in all scripture which identifies the Holy Ghost as a male personage with whom man may speak face to face. But if one attempts to resolve such a problem, it should be done with an open mind and with a determination to face the evidence squarely as the Book of Mormon gives it. All that the writer can claim as he attempts to resolve the problem is that he has no axe to grind and that he has spent a long time in weighing the evidence.

First, let us examine the circumstances which brought about Nephi's encounter with the Spirit. From 1 Nephi 10: 17 we learn that Nephi was so highly impressed with the visions of his father Lehi that he was desirous also to "see, and hear, and know of these things, by *the power of the Holy Ghost.*" (Italics mine.) Notice that Nephi wanted to know by the power of the Holy Ghost. He continues with a discussion about the Holy Ghost (1 Nephi 10:17-21) and ends by saying, "And the Holy Ghost giveth authority that I should speak these things, and deny them not." (1 Nephi 10:22)

Second, as one reads Nephi's account of his encounter with the Spirit of the Lord in the very next chapter (1 Nephi 11:1-11), the distinct impression is given that Lehi's son had never met that personage before. Notice the phrases "the Spirit said," "the Spirit cried," "I said unto the Spirit," in verses 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, etc. Notice especially verse 11, where Nephi says, "For I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh." Is it very likely that Nephi would have spoken this way if the personage had been the pre-existent Christ, who had appeared to him at an earlier time? (1 Nephi 2:16) Nephi was already acquainted with the Savior. There was no call for him to say of our Lord what he did about the Spirit in 1 Nephi 11:11.

Third, notice that Nephi never speaks of the pre-existent Christ as the Spirit of the Lord in those passages where it is very clear that he is talking about our Lord's appearance to him. (1 Nephi 2:16; 2 Nephi 11:2-3)

Fourth, in the continuation of Nephi's vision in Chapter 11 of First Nephi, two other references are made to the Spirit. The first reference in verse 19 concerns Mary, the mother of our Lord, and her being carried away "in the Spirit"; the second, in verse 29, concerns the twelve

apostles who were "carried away in the Spirit from before my face." The references to the Spirit in both instances seem obviously to point to the Holy Ghost, not to the preexistent Christ. (Cf. 11:19 with Matt. 1:18)

Fifth, it may be pointed out that the phrase "Spirit of the Lord" occurs forty times in the Book of Mormon, and in not a single passage where it occurs can there be shown a clear-cut example favoring the interpretation that it represents the pre-existent Christ instead of the Holy Ghost. On the other hand there are many occurrences of the phrase that can refer only to the Holy Ghost. Let us look at a few. It is obvious on examination that in no instance where the phrase was written down *after* the appearance of the resurrected Christ on this continent does it refer to His preexistent person. There are three illustrations of this kind: "the Spirit of the Lord did not abide in us (Morm. 2:26)"; "the Spirit of the Lord hath already ceased to strive with their fathers (Morm. 5:16)"; "I fear lest the Spirit of the Lord hath ceased striving with them (Moro. 9:4)." These references, we repeat, can only be dealing with the Holy Ghost. Let us look at another use of the phrase as Nephi describes the course of his vision. In 1 Nephi 13:12-15 he speaks of the coming of a Gentile (Columbus) to this land, together with other Gentiles who were to come at later times. Verse 15 has the reading: "And I beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles...." It seems quite evident to us that the "Spirit of the Lord" as used in this verse is synonymous with the phrase "Spirit of God" as found in verses 12 and 13. Whatever else these phrases may mean, it is certain that the personage of the pre-existent Christ cannot be meant, because the vision of Nephi in this context encompassed the latter days, which were to be long after Christ's resurrection. If it be contended that the phrases do not refer to the Holy Ghost (doubtful in the light of 1 Nephi 10:11), we shall have to say that they refer to the power that emanates from Deity as a whole. A few other illustrations where the phrase

"Spirit of the Lord" clearly represents the functions of the Holy Ghost are given herewith: "The Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy (Mosiah 4: 3)"; "the Spirit of the Lord did no more preserve them; yea, it had withdrawn from them because the Spirit of the Lord cloth not dwell in unholy temples" (Helaman 4:24; cf. Rom. 8:9,11; 1 Cor. 3:16).

Finally, it is worthy of notice that in Ether, chapter 3, where the momentous meeting of the brother of Jared with our pre-existent Lord is related at length, no mention of Him is made as the "Spirit of the Lord."

We may conclude that inasmuch as there is no single instance in the Book of Mormon where the phrase "Spirit of the Lord" can be clearly and unequivocally equated with the pre-existent Christ, it is far more reasonable in view of the evidence here presented to believe that the phrase refers to the Holy Ghost. And such was the position taken by the late James E. Talmage of the Quorum of the Twelve.¹

¹ *Articles of Faith*, Thirtieth Ed., p. 42.