Episode 30

Mormon Identities
PRE-MORTAL LIFE, PART 1

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INTRODUCTION: Welcome to Mormon Identity, a thirty-minute talk radio program that addresses Church topics important to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our host is Robert L. Millet, professor of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

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ROBERT MILLET (HOST): We welcome you once again to this edition of Mormon Identity. I’m Bob Millet from Brigham Young University. I’m joined today by my friend and colleague Brent Top, who is the chair of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. Welcome, Brent.

BRENT TOP: Thank you, Bob.

ROBERT MILLET: We want to talk today really in two segments. First and the second segments, both dealing with the subject of our first estate, the pre-mortal existence, our pre-mortal life. Brent, when we think about some things that appeal to people about Mormonism, it seems to me that, that this portion of our doctrine, namely the doctrine that talks about the eternal nature of man, is particularly appealing. Have, have, have you found that to be the case?

BRENT TOP: Well, I’ve had lots of experiences with that. I remember many years ago taking some of our neighbors and friends when we lived in the Washington D.C. area, northern Virginia. Took them at Christmas time to the Washington D.C. Temple Visitors’ Center and to see the Christmas lights around the temple. And while we were there, we were, we took them in to see Man’s Search for Happiness, that was very prominent at that time, and was being shown in all of the visitors’ centers. And as we were driving home, they were so impressed by that, and we got talking, and I said to them, “Well, what did you think about that idea that we lived before we ever came here?” And my, my friend who was very, very devout in his Christian tradition said, “Well, of course it makes perfect sense.
I’ve always believed that.” And I said, “But your church doesn’t teach that.” And he said, “Well, I don’t know what my church teaches, but I’ve always believed it.”

ROBERT MILLET: (laughing)

BRENT TOP: And I think that reflects that wonderful statement in the, the beautiful hymn by Eliza R. Snow, my father, that says, “There is a secret something that whispers, ‘You’re a stranger here.’”

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, this, this idea that people can identify with, that they did not suddenly spring into existence….

BRENT TOP: Right.

ROBERT MILLET: …at the time of birth, but that in a very real sense they’ve always lived. I, I’ve always been impressed when I think back on the, the marvelous General Conference address that Elder Boyd K. Packer delivered years ago when he described by analogy life as that football game. And remember that, that things get a little rough sometimes, and he, and his whole point was to, was to emphasize that there’s some things about life, including some of the rough times, that we just can’t make sense of unless we understand that we’re part of a three act play.

BRENT TOP: Exactly. And I, you know, I think that there’s something else there, that, that in that secret something that, that immortality, it’s—most of our Christian friends and many non-Christian friends believe in an immortality of after this life. Then it’s not that big of a stretch to think of immortality if we think of eternal, like the Prophet Joseph Smith did in one of his great sermons where he took the ring off of his finger and said, “Where is the beginning, and where is the end?” If we believe that there is an eternal future for us, it’s not that hard to believe, “Well, wait a second. There had to have been something before. Eternity can’t just be one way.”

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah. As I understand their teachings, traditional Christians, Brent, it would be that immortality comes only following death, through Jesus.

BRENT TOP: Right.
ROBERT MILLET: They believe in a, what we might call a one-directional immortality. But you’re right, it’s, it’s fascinating that most Christians believe Jesus had a pre-existence; that the Father existed before. It’s not too far removed to suggest that men and women, each of us, lived before we were born.

BRENT TOP: And, you know, it’s, we say it’s so distinctive to us as Latter-day Saints, but there are remnants of that doctrine, or bits and pieces, or vestiges of what the Lord has revealed throughout the history of the world, found throughout the scriptures. There are remnants of this view of immortality not at only in scripture, but in philosophy, in literature. People believe that, and, and then when they see in the Bible a little bit here and a little bit there, they don’t have a full context to put it in and they don’t know why, or what to do with that, that notion that they’ve always believed. For example, the British romantic author, William Wordsworth: great example of this, of that secret something. I think most Latter-day Saints are familiar with these, this little stanza from his epic poem, Ode Intimations [of] Immortality, where Wordsworth wrote:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
[And] not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

ROBERT MILLET: You know, that was, that was beautifully quoted, you’ll recall, in, in fact, Man’s Search for Happiness, that wonderful film the Church produced. Yeah, our Latter-day Saints scholar Terryl Givens has written an entire volume on this entitled When Souls Had Wings, trying to show us, the reader, just how common, in fact, the idea is across cultures, across, across religious groups, across literature, the idea that we’ve always lived. The idea that we’ve, that we’ve, we didn’t just suddenly come here. And so, you’re right. But when I think of, of Biblical passages that seem so naturally to fit this idea, Biblical passages that refer, allude to pre-existence, or a pre-mortal existence, they seem so right. But, but you’re right; when someone doesn’t have the doctrine as the foundation, then those passages are as, are as strange and, and unusual as anything. “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” the question is asked by Jehovah.
BRENT TOP: Or Jeremiah: “Before I formed thee in the womb, before I formed thee in the belly I ordained thee.”

ROBERT MILLET: I need thee. Mhmm. That idea of, “I knew you before,” God says. We’re discussing our first estate, the concept; I really think the distinctive Latter-day Saint concept of the pre-mortal existence of men and women. Brent, we talked about the fact that the Bible points out certain passages that allude to pre-mortal existence. We’ve talked about how this is something that really appeals to people. I, and you made a comment last time. I, I think back of my days as a missionary, how often I heard people say, when referring to this doctrine, “Yes, I, I think I’ve always believed that.” Well, they have, you know? (laughing) There’s the irony of the whole thing. They’ve, they’ve always believed it, it was always there in their minds and hearts. Just to, just a clarification. I’ve noticed in recent years, I’m sure you have, we seem to refer to pre-existence less these days and a little more to pre-mortal existence or pre-earth existence. Why don’t you comment on that?

BRENT TOP: Well, I think that just the word itself, pre-existence, is kind of a oxymoron. Existing before you existed?

ROBERT MILLET: (laughing)

BRENT TOP: And so I think it just took a clarification, I don’t think it’s any, any doctrinal shift or anything like that, it’s just a clarification that, that we existed as, as spirit sons and daughters of God before we came to earth. But that wasn’t pre-existence, that was a pre-mortal existence.

ROBERT MILLET: All right, good. Let’s talk about how this doctrine came to be revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. It seems to me that, that one of the first places the Prophet would have encountered this idea would have been in the, in the translation of the Book of Mormon, with the translation of Alma 13. What does Alma 13 teach us, Brent, that—let’s first talk about what it teaches us, but then let, I want to come back to, to what extent we think this registered with the Prophet.

BRENT TOP: Well, Alma 13 is clearly in the context of priesthood; that Alma is talking about the Great Priests, the High Priests that had been called and prepared from before the foundation of the world. And I think that’s the very, very interesting phrase that, that Alma uses. That
even before they ever came here, the Lord was preparing them like they had to, to Jeremiah, where he knew them and prepared them and, and ordained them, and sanctified them before they came. But it’s in that next phrase there, where Alma talks about that they were called and prepared and foreordained to these great missions in mortality on account of their exceeding great faith and good works. Then the next phrase, and it, I think the punctuation may cause us to look at it a little differently, but Joseph may not have even caught it where it says, “In the first place.” Now, was he talking about first estate, or was he just talking about the sequence of spiritual concepts? I think you could read it either way, but, but I think that’s a very clear jumping out of the Book of Mormon that there was something from before the foundation of the world that affected more than just the Only Begotten Son.

ROBERT MILLET: Well said. I think as a kind of backhanded affirmation of the truth of the Book of Mormon, the truthfulness of the, of the teachings, Elder Orson Pratt, as I recall, said that as far as he knew, to put in our language, Alma 13 did not register with the Prophet Joseph Smith. That is, he didn’t seem to have learned or picked up on the pre-mortal notion of man by reading, translating, as it were, Alma 13.

BRENT TOP: You know, and I, and it makes perfect sense if you think of the religious traditions of the day. And you think of the traditions from which Joseph Smith is coming, and the Biblical traditions that had been centuries in the making. You think of the, the great, the great early Christian Father Origin, and how he had advocated a pre-mortal existence and—

ROBERT MILLET: His teachings were banned years later.

BRENT TOP: And he’s, he’s basically persona non-grata, because he teaches that. So, it has been taken out of the Biblical Christian tradition for centuries, and it, to me it’s like, when you see those Biblical passages, and then you know that Origin has had his, more than his hands slapped. But if you were to take it like a, a, a ten-thousand piece jigsaw puzzle and you have a few little pieces here and there, but you don’t have the cover of the, the puzzle box to look at the picture, you would have a hard time knowing what it is that you were looking at with just a small little segment. So I think it begins to register with Joseph as more and more and more of the pieces of the puzzle start fitting together.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, well said. I, Joseph would have brought the same mindset, presumably, that any other person living at that time, a traditional Christian mindset, to his translation of the Book of Mormon. All right, well then, Brent, what do you see as one of the earliest times when the Prophet Joseph Smith might have begun to grasp and thus begun to teach the pre-mortal existence?
BRENT TOP: Well, I think that there’re two or three passages in the scriptures, in modern revelation, where we begin to see this pre-mortal existence and its importance fully emerging out, and that would be in the Joseph Smith Translation process, as the Prophet is translating what we call today the book of Moses, which would have been Genesis.

ROBERT MILLET: So, the, the early chapters of Genesis.

BRENT TOP: And as he’s talking about the patriarchs. And so I think we begin to see some things there about a war in heaven, and we begin to see the Prophet going to the Lord with, with questions about this immortality and this eternal nature of man that then the Lord reveals additional. But I think as early as 1830, was as Joseph is translating the book of Genesis, which becomes the book of Moses, we see, clearly, pre-mortality coming out.

ROBERT MILLET: Let me examine that, as it’s now found in the Pearl of Great Price. And Brent, we’ve talked about this idea. Not, not only in Joseph Smith’s day, but clearly well before Joseph Smith, you mentioned in our last segment Origin, the early church Father. Why was Origin’s, why were Origin’s ideas not well accepted?

BRENT TOP: Well, I think a lot of it goes with the whole Creedal development and, and certainly with Greek influences and, and trying to reconcile immortality and all of those kinds of things with the, with Christ, nature, and the nature of man. And so, I think there were a lot of issues going on there of which his, his teachings about pre-mortal existence were, were just kind of an exclamation point that he was maybe a little on the fringes of the, the thinking at that time.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, as I recall, his, after his death, by at least a couple of hundred years, he, his writings are, are eventually just banned, And they refer to the inannahous of Origin, things that were just cursed because of his, his writings being so harshly condemned.

BRENT TOP: Well, and I think you see that in many other doctrines, as well. Is that you then go back and see some of those teachings of those early Christian Fathers, and we say, “Well, they certainly couldn’t have meant this.” And, and so it takes, like I said, the example of a jigsaw puzzle box that has the picture of the completed puzzle on the front of it. It, in reality, you, you have to have the overall picture to be able to make sense of the individual pieces. And Origin didn’t have the overall picture, and what is, remains in the Bible and a little bit from Jeremiah, and a little bit from Job, and Jesus talking, and John
about that. And unless you have the overall picture that comes with the Restoration of the fullness of the Gospel, you can understand why people would say, “Well, I’m not sure that’s what that says.” Or, “I don’t, I don’t understand that.”

ROBERT MILLET: Right. We’d begun last segment, also, to talk about how the doctrine began to be revealed to Joseph Smith, that, though it’s found in the Book of Mormon, in Alma 13, concept of ordination and preparation of men to receive the Holy Priesthood, that it really wasn’t until the Prophet began to work with the Bible and his inspired translation, those early chapters of Genesis which now constitute the book of Moses in our Pearl of Great Price. We’d mentioned Moses four. Brent, let me, let me read these first four verses of chapter four, and then let’s talk about these and what they teach us about the doctrine of pre-mortal existence. And I, the Lord [God], spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded, meaning commanded to depart, thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning. And he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. But behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done and the glory be thine forever. Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto Him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. What do you see here, Brent, that stands out to you in these four verses?

BRENT TOP: Well, there’s one thing that jumps out immediately to me that again substantiates the point that we’ve been making before about how remnants of this doctrine were found in ancient times, but people didn’t know completely what to do with it. Because of those plain and precious parts being taken, or without the fullness of the Gospel, they couldn’t comprehend it. And what I’m seeing here is these are very, very similar words to Isaiah Chapter 14, verses 12-15. Isaiah teaches this exact same concept and tells about this Great One being thrown down from heaven, but without an understanding of the doctrine of pre-mortality, then it’s easy for the Biblical scholars to say, “Oh, he’s only talking about the Assyrians.”

ROBERT MILLET: Yes.

BRENT TOP: And so, that’s—
ROBERT MILLET: Or the Babylonians.

BRENT TOP: Exactly. So that’s the first thing that jumps out at me is, “Wait a second. Now I understand what Isaiah’s saying there.”

ROBERT MILLET: Sure. How art thou fallen from Heaven, oh Lucifer, thou Son of the Morning. We read that with a totally different mindset.

BRENT TOP: Right. And so I think as Joseph is having this revealed to him line upon line, all of a sudden these other Biblical passages jump out to us and we say, “Oh, yeah, that’s what it means.” And again, I think it emphasizes “In the beginning.” That phrase is found in the scriptures in, in many different contexts. Sometimes it just means “at the creation of the earth.” But other contexts it’s clear that it’s before the foundation of the word. And clearly he, he’s seeing something that is transpiring before the earth has ever even been created.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, I noted in verse one, it becomes clear Satan’s agenda is Satan. Look how, listen to how, I’ll try to place emphasis here, listen to how selfish sounding this is: Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. You get a feel for that, Brent? This is, this is very self-promotional. This is Satan’s—give the glory to me, give me thine honor. And, of course, Jesus, how, how typical is this: Father, thy will be done. Now, we derive from that, and Elder Talmage and Elder McConkie have been especially helpful in helping us understand, it wasn’t as if God was saying, “What shall we do?” The question was, “Whom shall we send?”

BRENT TOP: The Gospel is clearly being taught. Even before the earth is formed, it’s not like we’re sitting around, “What do we do?”

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah. We know we have to be saved and exalted one day, how should we do it? It’s thy will be done. Pre-mortal existence of man. This is a two-part program. Two segments. We’re in part one now, discussing that great doctrine and how it was given line upon line to Joseph Smith and the early Latter-day Saints. We talked about, for example, the Prophet’s inspired translation of Genesis. Brent, I’d like to turn us, if I could, to Section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. We’ve now moved to May 6, 1833. And the Lord continues to, to pour out these great truths, and here we have in one of the great revelations of our dispensation some marvelous insights. If you would, in Section 93, Brent, would you read 21 through 23, and then 29.
BRENT TOP: Okay. And now, verily I say unto you, I was in the beginning, there’s that phrase again, 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. And here comes a really important statement: Ye were also in the beginning with the Father;

ROBERT MILLET: Wow, it’s worth its weight in gold, just that one verse.

BRENT TOP: Right there. That phrase, he’s saying not only was Christ there, but ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth;

ROBERT MILLET: Twenty-nine now.

BRENT TOP: Man was also in the beginning with God. As if an exclamation point is needed. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.

ROBERT MILLET: We’ll come back in our next segment, in Part Two, and we’ll talk in more detail about intelligence—the nature of intelligence and what we don’t know and what we do know. But we’ll put that on the shelf for now. Brent, what do you, what do you gain from Section 93 that’s worth knowing?

BRENT TOP: Well I think it, again it’s important to go back and look and see how this is coming. Think of the year that the Book of Mormon’s being translated. Even before the Church is organized, and there’s this little glimpse about “before the foundation of the world” in Alma 13. Then, months after the Church is organized, with the translation process he’s getting about the War in Heaven. Now, the Church is still in its infancy, and the Lord is saying to him very clearly, “Mine only begotten was with me before the world was, and so were you. And all of these were there.”

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, and you know, and it’s like you were saying. It’s stunningly fascinating. This is eighteen—this is only three years after the organization of the Church!

BRENT TOP: And you think of all the temporal concerns and the other things. Section 93 is extraordinarily profound. And then it, I, again it jumps out at me that there is something eternal, something immortal that has always existed. “Neither can be made,” the Lord said. And so very, very profound as it, as the Lord is little, by little, by little revealing this great doctrine.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, we, we go from Section 93. I suppose chronologically the next place we would look would be the book of Abraham. Remember that in the summer of 1835, the
Brethren of the Church, the leaders, purchased the mummies and the papyrus for the prophet Joseph Smith. And Joseph begins, actually in 35, working on that translation. It’s not published really ‘til 1842, but, but he began to reveal things about and from the book of Abraham very early. What about Abraham? What do we learn from the book of Abraham that’s worth knowing about pre-mortal existence?

BRENT TOP: Oh, that’s the great, the great revelation where we see Abraham’s vision of the spirits in the pre-mortal existence. It is this great vision where he not only sees the War in Heaven to some degree, but the selection of Christ as the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. He sees the noble and great spirits. Abraham Chapter 3 is probably the most familiar passage to Latter-day Saints with regards to pre-mortal existence. That, I think, is one of the foundational revelations that we have in this dispensation with regards to pre-mortal existence.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, I was just glancing while you were talking—should have been paying closer attention—but I was glancing at the scriptures while you were talking, at Abraham, and, and, and just verses 18 and 19 of Chapter 3, talks about the spirits and it talks about the, that is the intelligent nature of them, the intelligence of them, has no beginning. The fact that, that the Lord is more intelligent than they all, that is Jehovah, as B. H. Robert said, more intelligent than the mass of the spirits.

ROBERT MILLET: And, you know, I think it’s important that we say at that point, is that because Section 93 has preceded this, this revelation, this, this vision, if you will, of Abraham, the word “intelligence” has taken on a totally new meaning to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Intelligence was not I.Q., it was not mental smartness. Section 93 has revealed to Joseph clearly that this is the glory of God, this is light and truth. And so when, when we see that passage in Abraham, that it is, that they were more, that Christ was more intelligent, it wasn’t just cognitive ability.

ROBERT MILLET: Well, as we draw this to a close, Brent, this segment, reminding our listeners to, to check out Part Two of our discussion. We’ll go on and discuss a number of other matters: the nature of intelligence, the nature of the Council in Heaven, the nature of the War in Heaven, the kinds of organization that went on, the nature of foreordination. We have a number of things to discuss. We’ll do all of that in the second segment. Maybe we could draw this to a close, though, by, by making known what the Prophet himself said in that, that great king-followed sermon concerning man. We say that God himself is a self-existing being. Who told you so? It’s correct enough, but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles. The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is coequal, probably meaning, coeternal, with God himself. You know, it’s a, it’s a marvelous thing to know, Brent, that, that where we lived and what we were like before
we came plays an important role in who we will become. One of my colleagues once said, “You cannot rise or expect to rise higher than your beginnings.” Well, knowing we came from glory is a good indication of what lies ahead.

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NARRATOR: You’ve been listening to Mormon Identity. Thanks for tuning in. We hope you join us next time.

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