

SECTION 71 (MODERN SECTION 61)

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 1835 Edition | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Given on August 12, 1831, this revelation (now known as Section 61 in modern editions) addresses a specific historical incident at McIlwaine's Bend on the Missouri River, where Joseph Smith and his companions experienced a dangerous canoe accident. The text transforms this physical mishap into a theological decree, asserting that while God blessed the waters in the beginning, He has now cursed them 'by the mouth of my servant John' for the last days. The revelation warns that 'the destroyer rideth upon the face' of the waters and that no flesh is safe thereon. Consequently, the elders are commanded to change their mode of travel from water to land (except for the canal). Beyond travel logistics, the text imposes a heavy missiological burden: elders must preach to the wicked to 'rid their garments' and become 'spotless' before God. It concludes with specific instructions for various elders to pair off and preach, particularly in Cincinnati, warning of imminent destruction.

KEY FIGURES

Alpha and Omega (Jesus Christ), Joseph Smith, Jr., Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Gilbert, William W. Phelps, John (the Apostle/Revelator), Reynolds Cahoon, Samuel H. Smith

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE CURSING OF THE WATERS

Assertion: God has specifically cursed bodies of water in the last days, making them the domain of the 'destroyer,' and they are unsafe for travel except for the 'upright in heart' or those with specific power.

"Behold I the Lord in the beginning, blessed the waters, but in the last days by the mouth of my servant John, I cursed the waters... the destroyer rideth upon the face thereof"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, God remains the sovereign Creator over all elements (Psalm 24:1-2). While the Book of Revelation (referenced here as 'John') describes judgments affecting waters (turning to blood, wormwood), biblical theology does not support the idea that water travel itself is spiritually prohibited or that the element of water is 'cursed' in a way that requires believers to avoid it. This doctrine appears to be a reactionary theological explanation for a specific travel accident, elevating a logistical mishap to a cosmic decree. It contradicts the biblical mandate where Jesus commands wind and waves, showing mastery rather than avoidance.

2. SANCTIFICATION VIA PROCLAMATION

Assertion: Missionaries become 'spotless' before God by discharging their duty to preach to the wicked, thereby 'ridding their garments' of the people's sins.

"declare the word among the congregations of the wicked... inasmuch as they do this they shall rid their garments, and they shall be spotless before me"

Evangelical Comparison: This text utilizes the 'blood on garments' motif (borrowed from Ezekiel 33 and the Book of Mormon's Jacob 1:19). In Mormon theology, this implies that a failure to warn others results in sharing the guilt of their sins. Conversely, warning them clears the missionary's record. Evangelical soteriology rejects this: a believer is made 'spotless' (justified) by faith in Christ's finished work (Jude 1:24, Ephesians 5:25-27). While evangelism is a command, it is not a cleansing ritual that removes sin or guilt from the evangelist.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The primary theological gap lies in the nature of the physical world and the means of sanctification. First, the text attributes a moral/spiritual 'curse' to a physical element (water) based on a travel inconvenience, fostering a superstitious worldview distinct from the biblical view of a fallen but God-sustained creation. Second, and more critically, it suggests that a believer's spiritual 'spotlessness' is contingent upon their performance in warning others. This creates a 'merit' dynamic where the missionary's

standing before God is partially earned through their labor, directly contradicting Sola Fide and the sufficiency of Christ's atonement.

Shared Values:

God is sovereign (Alpha and Omega).; Sin requires confession.; The Second Coming is approaching ('cometh in an hour you think not').; Call to evangelism.

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide / Sola Gratia – Suggests that preaching is required to remove guilt ('rid garments') and achieve spotlessness.
2. [Minor] Theology Proper (Sovereignty) – Depicts God as cursing elements for travel, creating a dualistic fear of nature rather than trust in God's omnipresence.

Semantic Warnings:

"Spotless"

In Text: A state achieved by faithfully discharging the duty to warn the wicked, thereby removing their blood from one's garments.

Evangelical: A state granted to the believer through the sacrificial death of Christ (1 Peter 1:19), received by faith.

Example: *In D&C 71:6, they are spotless 'inasmuch as they do this [declare the word].' In Hebrews 9:14, the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience.*

"The Destroyer"

In Text: An entity or force specifically riding upon the waters in the last days.

Evangelical: Often refers to an angel of judgment (Exodus 12) or Satan (Abaddon/Apollyon in Rev 9), but never restricted to water travel.

Example: *The text implies the Destroyer is geographically bound to rivers/lakes.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Being 'spotless' before God and entering the 'kingdom.'

How Attained: Through faith, humility, and obedience to commandments (specifically preaching to warn others).

Basis of Assurance: Performance of duty ('inasmuch as they do this... they shall be spotless').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly contrasts with Sola Fide by making 'spotlessness' conditional on the work of evangelism.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Sidney Gilbert and W.W. Phelps must travel in haste.
2. Forewarn brethren not to travel on the waters.
3. Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Oliver Cowdery must not travel on waters (except the canal).
4. Preach in Cincinnati against the wicked.
5. Reynolds Cahoon and Samuel H. Smith must not separate.

Implicit Obligations:

1. Believers must interpret accidents or natural obstacles as divine signaling or cursing.
2. Missionaries must preach to avoid carrying the spiritual guilt of those they failed to warn.

Ritual Requirements:

1. Confession of sins with humble hearts to receive forgiveness.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. When you read about the command to 'rid your garments' by preaching, does that make you feel that your standing before God depends on how well you warn others?
2. How do you interpret the 'cursing of the waters'? Do you feel this still applies today, or was it specific to that group?
3. If being 'spotless' comes from declaring the word, how does that relate to the Bible's teaching that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7)?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Destroyer – The text acknowledges a real force of destruction and death. The Gospel offers Christ not just as a guide *around* the danger, but as the Conqueror *of* the danger. [Colossians 2:15 (Christ disarming powers/authorities)]
2. Safe Passage to Zion – The text seeks a safe physical route to a physical Zion. The Gospel presents Jesus Himself as the Way to the true heavenly Zion. [John 14:6, Hebrews 12:22]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Works-Righteousness / Guilt [Severe] – The believer carries the heavy burden of other people's salvation. If they fail to warn their neighbor, they believe they share in that neighbor's guilt/sin, meaning their own 'spotlessness' is constantly at risk based on their boldness in preaching.
2. Superstitious Fear [Mild] – Creates a worldview where physical elements (water) are spiritually dangerous, leading to unnecessary fear and a need to navigate life through complex rules rather than simple trust in God.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith speaking as the Lord).

Verification Method: Internal spiritual confirmation and obedience to the prophet's logistical commands.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicals test prophecy against Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:21, Acts 17:11). The claim that water is cursed contradicts the biblical view of creation's goodness (1 Timothy 4:4).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: August 12, 1831 (Published in 1835 D&C).

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: This section was heavily edited from the original manuscript to the 1835 edition to clarify the 'water' restrictions, likely to manage the community's perception of the accident.