

SECTION 61

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 61, received in August 1831, addresses a specific historical context where Joseph Smith and other elders experienced difficulties and dangers while canoeing on the Missouri River. The text serves a dual purpose: providing logistical instructions for their return journey to Kirtland and establishing a theological explanation for the dangers of water travel. The revelation asserts that in the 'last days,' the waters have been cursed 'by the mouth of my servant John' (referencing the Apostle John), and that a 'destroyer' rides upon them. Consequently, the text commands the leading elders to travel by land or canal rather than the river to avoid these spiritual and physical snares. It also intertwines missiological commands, instructing the elders to preach to congregations along the way to 'rid their garments' of the people's sins, thereby linking their own spiritual spotlessness to the performance of missionary duties. The text presents a God who manages the physical safety of the Saints through specific travel bans while emphasizing the necessity of active labor for spiritual justification.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Lord/Alpha and Omega), Joseph Smith, William W. Phelps (Witness of the 'destroyer'), Sidney Gilbert, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, John the Revelator (Attributed source of the curse)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE CURSING OF THE WATERS

Assertion: God, through the Apostle John, has placed a specific curse on waters in the last days, making them the domain of the 'destroyer.'

"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. (D&C 61:14)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, God remains the sovereign ruler over all creation, including the seas (Psalm 89:9). While the Bible describes judgment upon waters (e.g., the plagues of Egypt or Revelation trumpets), it never designates water as a permanently cursed medium unsafe for believers to traverse. Jesus sanctified water through His baptism and walked upon it, demonstrating dominion, not fear. D&C 61 introduces a novel doctrine that attributes a specific, dispensational curse to water, claiming authority from the Apostle John that is absent from the biblical record. This creates a superstitious worldview regarding natural elements that is foreign to the New Testament.

2. JUSTIFICATION THROUGH MISSIONARY LABOR

Assertion: Elders become 'spotless' before God by declaring the word to the wicked.

"And inasmuch as they do this they shall rid their garments, and they shall be spotless before me. (D&C 61:34)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly links the state of being 'spotless' to the action of preaching ('inasmuch as they do this'). In Evangelical soteriology, a believer is made spotless solely through the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith (2 Corinthians 5:21, Jude 1:24). The concept of 'ridding garments' of the blood of others is a distinct Mormon theological pressure (derived from Jacob 1:19 in the Book of Mormon) which places the responsibility for others' salvation—and the missionary's own purity—on the missionary's performance. This contradicts the finished work of Christ, implying that Jesus' blood is insufficient to make one spotless without the believer's labor.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: D&C 61 presents a fundamental divergence from Evangelical Christianity in two key areas: Cosmology and Soteriology. Cosmologically, it imbues a specific element of nature (water) with an inherent spiritual malevolence ('cursed'), contradicting the biblical mandate of dominion and the neutrality of creation. Soteriologically, it posits that a believer's 'spotlessness' is contingent upon their output in missionary labor

(v34). This creates a transaction where human effort purchases spiritual purity, a direct negation of the Evangelical doctrine of Sola Fide, where purity is a gift of grace received through faith in Christ's finished work.

Shared Values:

Belief in God's sovereignty; Importance of evangelism/preaching; Reality of spiritual warfare; Expectation of the Second Coming

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Attributes a specific curse on waters to John the Revelator which is not found in the Bible.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Conditions 'spotlessness' on the work of preaching and warning others.
3. [Minor] Theology Proper – Depicts God as reactive and emotionally volatile ('angry with you yesterday, but today mine anger is turned away').

Semantic Warnings:

"Spotless"

In Text: A state of purity achieved by discharging one's duty to warn the wicked (v34).

Evangelical: A state of purity imputed to the believer through the sacrificial blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19, Ephesians 5:27).

Example: *In D&C 61, an elder is spotless because he preached; in the Bible, a believer is spotless because Jesus died.*

"The Destroyer"

In Text: A visible entity or force riding upon the waters, capable of being seen in a vision.

Evangelical: Typically refers to an angel of judgment sent by God (Exodus 12:23) or Satan/Abaddon (Revelation 9:11), but not restricted to a specific terrain like water.

Example: *W.W. Phelps seeing the destroyer on the river implies a localized demonic presence.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Being 'spotless' before God and entering the Kingdom (v37).

How Attained: Through humility, obedience to travel commands, and specifically through the work of declaring the word (v34).

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is based on the cessation of God's anger (v20) and the completion of assigned tasks.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly adds a 'works' condition (preaching) to the status of being spotless. Evangelicalism asserts that justification is by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery must not travel on the waters (river) again, only canals (v23)
2. Preach the gospel to congregations of the wicked (v33)
3. Warn brethren not to journey on these waters (v18)
4. Sidney Gilbert and W.W. Phelps must travel in haste (v7)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Avoid water travel when possible due to spiritual danger
2. Confess sins to receive forgiveness and safety
3. Accept Joseph Smith's logistical decisions as divine commands

Ritual Requirements:

1. None explicitly detailed in this text, though 'ridding garments' implies a ritualistic view of guilt and cleansing.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 34, it says the elders become 'spotless' by declaring the word. How does that relate to 1 John 1:7, which says the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin?
2. The text mentions that John cursed the waters. Where do we find that in the writings of John in the New Testament?
3. Do you believe the waters are still cursed today, or was this specific to that group of elders? If it's still in effect, why do missionaries fly over oceans or travel by boat?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Destroyer on the Waters – The text highlights a fear of death and destruction in the natural world. The Gospel answers this fear not by avoiding the water, but by knowing the One who walks on water. [Matthew 14:27 - 'But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.']
2. The need for a safe path – The text seeks a physical route to safety (Zion). Jesus offers Himself as the spiritual Way to the Father, securing us regardless of physical geography. [John 14:6 - 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Superstitious Fear [Mild] – Believers may develop an undue fear of natural elements or specific locations, believing them to be under the dominion of Satan rather than God.
2. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The burden of 'ridding garments' places the eternal weight of one's own purity on the success of their ministry efforts. If they fail to warn a neighbor, they feel spiritually stained.
3. Uncertainty of Standing [Moderate] – God is depicted as angry one day and not the next (v20), creating an emotional rollercoaster where the believer is unsure of their current standing.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith speaking for God) and Visionary Experience (W.W. Phelps seeing the destroyer).

Verification Method: Obedience to the revelation is expected; confirmation comes through the 'Spirit' guiding individual actions (v27-28).

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the objective standard of the closed canon of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). D&C 61 relies on subjective experience (a vision of a destroyer) and new revelation that contradicts the functional liberty believers have in Christ regarding travel and nature.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: August 12, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The text serves as a convenient explanation for a frightening river experience, retroactively justifying the decision to switch to land travel.