

Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 61

As discussed in the comments on D&C 60, some of the Elders in the company were not zealous for missionary work (D&C 60:2-4) despite an earlier admonition (D&C 59:21-22). From the contents of v. 7-12, Phelps and Gilbert appear to have been the ones being addressed. Also note only Phelps saw the vision, not even Smith saw it, the others present only heard it. This is similar to the case when Paul was chastised, cf. Acts 9:7. This suggests Phelps was the primary target, and the reason was because he ignored the preceding admonitions, including those of D&C 58:40-43.

The next issue is then the "destroyer". There are a number of "destroyers" in the scriptures: the destroying angel of the Passover (Exod. 12:23, also cp. D&C 89:21, D&C 105:15); then there is the adversary and the sons of perdition (KJV renders the Gr:apoleia to "perdition" but is better translated "destruction", cp. Rev. 9:11); and then the King of Babylon, a potentially eschatological character, is also called a destroyer (Jer. 4:7, and possibly D&C 101:54, and Isaiah's King of Assyria/Babylon is frequently equated with a flooding scourge as well, cf. Isa. 8:6-8).

Attempting to interpret the text, vision, or incidents figuratively so as to forward the destroyer being an eschatological king of Babylon/Assyria is problematic as the text of the section is presented in a literal fashion, and not couched in the rhetoric of an OT Prophet. As for it being the adversary and his minions, this is also problematic as the Lord here indicates the events in question are a direct result of His personal anger and His will upon the wicked. The adversary is not used in such a manner in apocalyptic events, rather he is one of the targets (as occurs in John's Revelation).

In this case, the text favors the "destroyer" being a destroying angel, the minister of the Lord's wrath, as a number of covenantal maledictions cited fit that context (v. 8, 13-18). Supporting this, the Lord states He has decreed the destroyer to ride upon the waters (v. 5), and He was angry with them the previous day when the incident occurred (v. 19-20).

1 Behold, and hearken unto the voice of him who has all power, who is from everlasting to everlasting, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

v1 Typical opening with authority statement, cp. D&C 38:1-6,

D&C 39:1.

2 Behold, verily thus saith the Lord unto you, O ye elders of my church, who are assembled upon this spot, whose sins are now forgiven you, for I, the Lord, forgive sins, and am merciful unto those who confess their sins with humble hearts; 3 But verily I say unto you, that it is not needful for this whole company of mine elders to be moving swiftly upon the waters, whilst the inhabitants on either side are perishing in unbelief.

4 Nevertheless, I suffered it that ye might bear record; behold, there are many dangers upon the waters, and more especially hereafter; 5 For I, the Lord, have decreed in mine anger many destructions upon the waters; yea, and especially upon these waters. 6 Nevertheless, all flesh is in mine hand, and he that is faithful among you shall not perish by the waters.

7 Wherefore, it is expedient that my servant Sidney Gilbert and my servant William W. Phelps be in haste upon their errand and mission. 8 Nevertheless, I would not suffer that ye should part until you were chastened for all your sins, that you might be one, that you might not perish in wickedness; 9 But now, verily I say, it behooveth me that ye should part. Wherefore let my servants Sidney Gilbert and William W. Phelps take their former company, and let them take their journey in haste that they may fill their mission, and through faith they shall overcome; 10 And inasmuch as they are faithful they shall be preserved, and I, the Lord, will be with them. 11 And let the residue take that which is needful for clothing. 12 Let my servant Sidney Gilbert take that which is not needful with him, as you shall agree.

v2-12 The Lord chastens them for being more interested in traveling than in preaching (v. 2-3). But, the Lord has allowed it so He might use them as witnesses against the dangers to come (v. 4-6). Gilbert and Phelps are specifically identified twice as the targets of the Lord's admonition (v. 7, 9).

v4a-b The manifestation of the "destroyer" was given to the Elders at that time so they may be witnesses of the Lord's decrees.

v4c-6 A parenthesis on the destructions decreed upon the waters. This theme is expounded upon in v. 13-19. The Lord has decreed that there will be dangers upon the waters, and it will keep getting worse. However, the faithful will not perish.

13 And now, behold, for your good I gave unto you a commandment concerning these things; and I, the Lord, will reason with you as with men in days of old. 14 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. 15 Wherefore, the days will come that no flesh shall be safe upon the waters. 16 And it shall be said in days to come that none is able to go up to the land of Zion upon the waters, but he that is upright in heart. 17 And, as I, the Lord, in the beginning cursed the land, even so in the last days have I blessed it, in its time, for the use of my saints, that they may partake the fatness thereof. 18 And now I give unto you a commandment that what I say unto

one I say unto all, that you shall forewarn your brethren concerning these waters, that they come not in journeying upon them, lest their faith fail and they are caught in snares; 19 I, the Lord, have decreed, and the destroyer rideth upon the face thereof, and I revoke not the decree.

v13-19 These verses take up the theme of the destructions decreed upon the waters and explains it. The text can be arranged as follows:

- A - (v. 13) I gave unto you a commandment
- B - (v. 14) In the beginning blessed, now curse the waters
- C - (v. 15) No flesh safe upon the waters
- C - (v. 16) None upon the waters, but upright in heart
- B - (v. 17) In the beginning cursed, but now bless the land
- A - (v. 18) I give unto you a commandment

v14 "in the beginning [I] blessed the waters", i.e., at the Creation the waters were pronounced good, cp. Gen. 1:20.

"in the last days, by...John, I cursed the waters", cp. Rev. 8:8-11. Note this context presents a literal physical interpretation on the Rev. passage, while a figurative spiritual one is also possible per Rev. 9:1.

v15-16 Probably referring to natural disasters, cp. D&C 88:90.

v15 "the days will come", obviously implying a time future to the revelation.

v16 A restate of v. 6.

v17 This verse reverses the subject and order of v. 14. Now the land is being addressed and it was cursed "in the beginning" (i.e., when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, cp. Gen. 3:18-24), but in the eschatological setting the land is blessed for the Lord's people, cp. D&C 59:16-19.

v18 "you shall forewarn your brethren", i.e., "I suffered it that you might bear record" (v. 4).

v19 A restate of v. 5, and lets them know the decree is ongoing. It has not been revoked, so the only way they may be safe is to be faithful, cp. v. 6.

20 I, the Lord, was angry with you yesterday, but today mine anger is turned away. 21 Wherefore, let those concerning whom I have spoken, that should take their journey in

haste--again I say unto you, let them take their journey in haste. 22 And it mattereth not unto me, after a little, if it so be that they fill their mission, whether they go by water or by land; let this be as it is made known unto them according to their judgments hereafter.

v20-22 Conclusion to the admonition portion of this section and lets them know He is no longer angry at them.

23 And now, concerning my servants, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, Jun., and Oliver Cowdery, let them come not again upon the waters, save it be upon the canal, while journeying unto their homes; or in other words they shall not come upon the waters to journey, save upon the canal. 24 Behold, I, the Lord, have appointed a way for the journeying of my saints; and behold, this is the way--that after they leave the canal they shall journey by land, inasmuch as they are commanded to journey and go up unto the land of Zion; 25 And they shall do like unto the children of Israel, pitching their tents by the way. 26 And, behold, this commandment you shall give unto all your brethren. 27 Nevertheless, unto whom is given power to command the waters, unto him it is given by the Spirit to know all his ways; 28 Wherefore, let him do as the Spirit of the living God commandeth him, whether upon the land or upon the waters, as it remaineth with me to do hereafter. 29 And unto you is given the course for the saints, or the way for the saints of the camp of the Lord, to journey.

v23-37 Two parallel sets of commands. Verses 23-29 deal with the physical issue of traveling in their ministries, and v. 30-37 deals with the more spiritual issues of their ministry.

v23-29 The general case is laid down in v. 23-26, they are not to be traveling on the waters. However, v. 27-29 states there may be specific cases where it is expedient to travel upon the waters and in these cases they will be informed by the Spirit.

30 And again, verily I say unto you, my servants, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, Jun., and Oliver Cowdery, shall not open their mouths in the congregations of the wicked until they arrive at Cincinnati; 31 And in that place they shall lift up their voices unto God against that people, yea, unto him whose anger is kindled against their wickedness, a people who are well-nigh ripened for destruction. 32 And from thence let them journey for the congregations of their brethren, for their labors even now are wanted more abundantly among them than among the congregations of the wicked. 33 And now, concerning the residue, let them journey and declare the word among the congregations of the wicked, inasmuch as it is given; 34 And inasmuch as they do this they shall rid their garments, and they shall be spotless before me. 35 And let them journey together, or two by two, as seemeth them good, only let my servant Reynolds Cahoon, and my servant Samuel H. Smith, with whom I am well pleased, be not separated until they return to their homes, and this for a wise purpose in me.

v30-35 Smith and Cowdery are called to go directly to Cincinnati apparently to judge them (v. 30-32), and the rest of

them are to travel among the "congregations of the wicked", i.e., the world, cf. D&C 62:5.

v34 Compare Ezek. 33.

36 And now, verily I say unto you, and what I say unto one I say unto all, be of good cheer, little children; for I am in your midst, and I have not forsaken you; 37 And inasmuch as you have humbled yourselves before me, the blessings of the kingdom are yours. 38 Gird up your loins and be watchful and be sober, looking forth for the coming of the Son of Man, for he cometh in an hour you think not. 39 Pray always that you enter not into temptation, that you may abide the day of his coming, whether in life or in death. Even so. Amen.

v36-39 Conclusion. The Lord was obviously angry with them, but here He consoles them and tells them He has not forsaken them.

v38 "gird up your loins", i.e., "get to work", cp. D&C 38:9.

v39 "whether in life or in death", the Second Advent impacts both the mortal world as well as the post-mortal spirit world. With the Second Advent comes the second phase of the First Resurrection. Those in the spirit world who are awaiting the First Resurrection will be released from the spirit world, but those who will participate in the Second Resurrection will be sent to misery and woe until the end of the Millennium. For related references, cp. Isa. 34:4-5, D&C 88:99-101.

Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 61

The first excerpt is Smith's brief comment, the second is a more verbose historical commentary which indicates there was contention among the travelers. The third is a lengthy biased account of that discord written by [Ezra Booth](#), who had apostatized at the time of writing and was eager to dissuade people from the Church.

While Booth's account is quite prejudiced, it does reveal plainly there was little or no desire among those present to preach the gospel. They were clearly eager to ignore the commands to do so, Booth excusing himself by faulting others.

Interestingly enough, Booth entirely avoids the matter of Phelps' vision and the fact that it was witnessed, at least in part, by others present as well, possibly including himself. His intent is to publicly undermine Smith, Rigdon and Cowdery, so he omits details hostile to his point of view.

This revelation was first published in the Evening and Morning Star, volume 1, number 7, page 53, dated December 1832. It was published in the Book of Commandments in 1833, pages 145-148. It was published in the Kirtland edition Doctrine and Covenants in 1835, pages 199-201. It was published in Times and Seasons, volume 5, number 6, pages 464-465, dated March 15, 1844. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 5, number 10, pages 145-146, dated March 1845.

Excerpt from History of the Church

On the 9th, in company with ten Elders, I left Independence landing for Kirtland. We started down the river in canoes, and went the first day as far as Fort Osage, where we had an excellent wild turkey for supper. Nothing very important occurred till the third day, when many of the dangers so common upon the western waters, manifested themselves; and after we had encamped upon the bank of the river, at McIlwaine's Bend, Brother Phelps, in open vision by daylight, saw the destroyer in his most horrible power, ride upon the face of the waters; others heard the noise, but saw not the vision.

The next morning after prayer, I received the following:

[text of D&C 61 quoted]

(Joseph Smith, History of the Church, volume 1, pages 202-203)

Excerpt from Comprehensive History of the Church

During the three days upon the river some disagreements and ill feeling had developed among the brethren and explanations and reconciliations had become necessary; it had also been discovered that progress on their journey by the river in canoes was slow, and hence it became necessary for those who had been appointed to purchase the printing press, Sidney Gilbert and William W. Phelps; and the Prophet, Sidney Rigdon, and Oliver Cowdery, who had been commanded to hasten their return to Kirtland, found it imperative to find a more expeditious means of travel than by the canoes. The greater part of the night at McIlwaine's Bend was devoted to these matters. The brethren became reconciled to each other, and those whose affairs more especially cried haste started overland the next morning for St. Louis, and the rest of the company continued the journey via the river. (B. H. Roberts, Comprehensive History of the Church, volume 1, pages 262-263)

Excerpt from The Ohio Star

The commandment we received to purchase, or make a water craft, directed us to proceed down the river in it as far as St. Louis, and from thence, with the exception of Joseph and his two scribes, we were to proceed on our journey home two by two. The means of conveyance being procured, we embarked for St. Louis, but unpropitious events rolled on, superceded the commandment, frustrated our plans, and we had separated before we had accomplished one half of the voyage. The cause which produced this disastrous result, was a spirit of animosity and discord, which made its appearance on board, the morning after we left Independence. The conduct of the Elders became very displeasing to Oliver, who, in the greatness of his power, uttered this malediction: "as the Lord God liveth, if you do not behave better, some accident will befall you." The manner in which this was handed out, evinced it to be the ebullition of a spirit, similar to that which influenced Joseph in the school-house. No accident, however, befel them, until Joseph, in the afternoon of the third day, assumed the direction of affairs on board that canoe, which, with other matters of difference, together with Oliver's curse, increased the irritation of the crew, who, in time of danger, refused to exert their physical powers, in consequence of which they ran foul of a sawyer [i.e., a snag, a tree fallen into the river], and were in danger of upsetting.

This was sufficient to flutter the timid spirit of the Prophet and his scribe, who had accompanied him on board of that canoe, and like the sea-tossed mariner, when threatened with a watery grave, they unanimously desired to set their feet once more upon something more firm than a liquid surface; therefore, by the persuasion of Joseph, we landed before sunset, to pass the night upon the bank of the river. Preparations were made to spend the night as comfortably as existing circumstances would admit, and then an attempt was made, to effect a reconciliation between the contending parties. The business of settlement elicited much conversation, and excited considerable feeling on both sides. Oliver's denunciation was brought into view; his conduct and equipage were compared to "a fop of a sportsman;" he and Joseph were represented as highly imperious and quite dictatorial; and Joseph and Sidney were reprimanded for their excessive cowardice. Joseph seemed inclined to arm himself, according to his usual custom, in case of opposition, with the judgments of God, for the purpose of pouring them, like a thunder bolt upon the rebellious elders; but one or two retorted, "none of your threats:" which completely disarmed him, and he reserved his judgment for a more suitable occasion. Finding myself but little interested in the settlement, believing the principles of discord too deeply rooted to be easily eradicated, I laid myself down upon the ground, and in silence contemplated awhile the events of the evening, as they passed before me. [...] The next morning Joseph manifested an aversion to risk his person any more upon the rough and angry current of the Missouri, and, in fact, upon any other river; and he again had recourse to his usual method, of freeing himself from the embarrassments of a former commandment, by obtaining another in opposition to it. A new commandment was issued, in which a great curse was pronounced against the waters: navigating them was to be attended with extreme danger; and all the saints, in general, were prohibited in journeying upon them, to the promised land. From this circumstance, the Missouri river was named the river of Destruction. It was decreed that we should proceed on our journey by land, and preach by the way as we passed along. Joseph, Sidney, and Oliver were to press their way forward with all possible speed, and to preach only in Cincinnati; and there they were to lift up their voices, and proclaim against the whole of that wicked city. [...] The next day after, we were cast upon the shore, and had commenced our journey by land, myself and three others went on board of a canoe, and recommenced our voyage down the river. From this time a constant

gale of prosperity wafted us forward, and not an event transpired, but what tended to our advancement, until we arrived at our much desired homes. At St. Louis, we took passage in a steam-boat, and came to Wellsville; and from thence in the stage home. We travelled about eight hundred miles farther than the three who took their passage in the stage, and arrived at our homes but a few days later. It is true, we violated the commandment by not preaching by the way, and so did they by not preaching at Cincinnati. But it seems that none of us considered the commandment worthy of much notice. (Ezra Booth, letter to Edward Partridge published in [The Ohio Star, November 24, 1831](#) edition, Booth submitted the letter to the newspaper with additional comments on September 20, 1831)

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