

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 25 · 2017 · Pages vii-xvi

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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THE LIFE-GIVING “WATER” OF THE RESTORATION

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Where there is water, there is life, not only literally, as in the Nile River in Egypt and in the cities of Mesopotamia, but also symbolically, as we read in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, who in vision saw a magnificent spring of fresh water flowing east from the temple, healing even the waters of the Dead Sea (Ezekiel 47). A psalm also testifies to the divine beneficence of water (Psalm 1) and John, in Revelation, quotes the Lord as giving to those “athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely” (21:10-14), a “crystal clear river” that flows from the center of the temple in the New Jerusalem. Also in the last days, “in the barren deserts there shall come forth pools of living water” (Doctrine and Covenants 133:29). We, the writers and volunteer staff of the Interpreter Foundation, invite readers to help spread and defend the life-giving water of the Restoration, for “the harvest is plenteous, but the labourers are few” (Matthew 9:37).*

The great ancient Greek historian Herodotus (d. ca. BC 425) is commonly believed to have remarked that “Egypt is the gift of the Nile.”¹ That this observation is true can be seen by anybody who ascends from the urban sprawl of modern Giza, directly west of Cairo, to the desert plateau on which the great pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure — or, alternatively, in the Hellenized forms of their names, Cheops, Chephren, and Mykerinos — have stood since the early third millennium before Christ.

It’s even more evident a bit south, near the still-older complex of King Zoser’s “Step Pyramid” at Saqqara: Vehicles climb up from the lush

1. Strictly speaking, he didn’t put it exactly that way. See Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.5. But it’s close enough.

agricultural land of the valley and then, suddenly, find themselves in the desert, in the Sahara (which is the Arabic equivalent of the English word *deserts*). The vegetation at Saqqara doesn't gradually grow sparse — it just ends. Instantly. Abruptly. And there's not a blade of grass, nor so much as a scrawny attempt at a tree, beyond that boundary. Even farther southward, at Luxor and at Aswan, one can sail on the mighty river and, within easy walking distance, see enormous desert cliffs and sand dunes rising immediately beyond palm trees and verdant fields.

Where there is water, there is life. Where there isn't, there's not.² That's why the great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia grew up alongside rivers, as did the cultures of the Indus River Valley and the Yangtze River Valley.

It's scarcely surprising, in that light, that the ancient Egyptians regarded the River Nile as divine. Their utter dependence on it was starkly evident. (Which is, I suppose, why the ability of Moses's God to interfere with it — demonstrated, significantly, in the first two of the ten "plagues of Egypt" — might have been so very unnerving, and so very powerful a symbolic statement, to them.)³

It's scarcely surprising, too, to see water used as a symbol of divinely given life in the Bible as well.

Consider, for example, one of the visions recorded by the seventh-to-sixth-century BC prophet Ezekiel. He sees a future temple, located among the hills of Jerusalem, a city that sits on a ridge running north-south between the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the Jordan River Valley (and the much lower Dead Sea) on the east. Significantly, too, it's a city that was sustained, anciently, by one main but relatively small and vulnerable source of water, the Gihon Spring — which was associated with the New Testament's Pool of Siloam and with Hezekiah's remarkable eighth-to-seventh-century BC tunnel.

An angelic guide calls Ezekiel's attention to specific features of the visionary Jerusalem that he's being shown:

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water

2. See the 2015 film *The Martian* for a vivid illustration of this fact. The movie was filmed in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan's spectacular red-desert Wadi Rum.

3. See Exodus 7:14-8:15. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations in this article are drawn from the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Bible.

was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?”⁴

Of course, neither Ezekiel nor any other ancient or modern resident of the city had ever seen such a quantity of water in the area before, let alone so rich a spring emerging from beneath the temple itself. And, unsurprisingly in such a dry region, the water is powerfully life-giving:

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh.”⁵

The “sea” in question is the Dead Sea, which, as any visitor to the region will readily confirm, abundantly deserves its name. (Hebrew prose works sometimes actually call it “the Sea of Death.”) But the river issuing from the temple, Ezekiel is told, will heal even the life-denying waters of the Dead Sea, which are nearly ten times as salty as Earth’s oceans:

And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh;

4. Ezekiel 47:1-6 (English Standard Version or ESV).

5. Ezekiel 47:6-8 (ESV). Anciently the term *Arabah* (or, in Hebrew, *Arava* or *Aravah*) referred to pretty much the entirety of the Jordan Rift Valley, from the southern end of the Sea of Galilee to the northern end of what Israelis call the Gulf of Eilat and Arabs refer to as the Gulf of Aqaba.

so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea.⁶

The “Great Sea” is the Mediterranean, so very different from the Sea of Salt (as the Hebrews often called the Dead Sea) or the Asphaltite Lake (as it was inauspiciously known to the Greeks).⁷

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.⁸

This will be a blessed state, reminiscent of the divine beneficence described in the first psalm:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.⁹

Contrast it with the condition of the wicked, those who remain untouched by the blessed waters:

The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

6. Ezekiel 47:9-10 (ESV).

7. Engedi or EnGedi (“Spring of the Young Goat”) is a large oasis in the cliffs directly to the west of the Dead Sea. The location of Eneglaim (“Spring of the Two Calves”) is unknown, but it was, presumably, somewhere in the vicinity of EnGedi.

8. Ezekiel 47:12 (ESV).

9. Psalm 1:1-3.

For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.¹⁰

Ezekiel's was a vision of things future, of things yet to come. And, six or seven centuries later, according to the New Testament, John the Revelator received a similar divine disclosure:

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.¹¹

Rather like the oxen that support the baptismal fonts in the temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the gates of this New Jerusalem number twelve, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel and facing, in groups of three, toward each of the four quarters of the Earth:

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal;

10. Psalm 1:4-6.

11. Revelation 21:2-6.

And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:

On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates.¹²

Moreover, symbolically and like the Church itself, the city is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone”:¹³

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.¹⁴

Also reminiscent of the temple is the fact that only the righteous are permitted to enter into the city; the unrighteous are denied admission to it:

Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.¹⁵

In this light, initially it may be rather surprising to notice that John’s vision of the new Jerusalem mentions no separate and distinct temple. But this is so, plainly, for the simple and sufficient reason that the city itself, as the residence of the Father and the Son, seems to be a kind of temple:

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.

And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.

12. Revelation 21:10-13.

13. Ephesians 2:20.

14. Revelation 21:14.

15. Revelation 22:14-15.

And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.

And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it.

And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life.¹⁶

The “oracle” or “most holy place” of Solomon’s ancient temple is said to have been “twenty cubits in length, and twenty cubits in breadth, and twenty cubits in the height thereof” — in other words, perfectly cubical — and to have been “overlaid with pure gold.”¹⁷ Similarly, Ezekiel’s angelic guide had previously shown him “the most holy place” and had “measured the length thereof, twenty cubits; and the breadth, twenty cubits.”¹⁸

Accordingly, maintaining its temple-like status, John’s new Jerusalem is also, itself, a perfect cube:

And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.¹⁹

And just as with Ezekiel’s visionary temple, a life-giving river flows from the center of John’s city-temple, from beneath the throne of the Father and the Son:

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him:

16. Revelation 21:22-27.

17. 1 Kings 6:20.

18. Ezekiel 41:4.

19. Revelation 21:16.

And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.

And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.²⁰

Now, precisely how literally all of this is to be taken, I do not know. Will the Dead Sea really be healed by water flowing from Jerusalem's Temple Mount? It's difficult to see how this could be done. But, of course, the God who created the universe, parted the waters for the exodus of the children of Israel, and raised Jesus from the dead is capable of a very great deal more than we can predict. And modern revelation is consistent with the prophecies of Ezekiel and John when it predicts, for instance, that in the last days, "in the barren deserts there shall come forth pools of living water; and the parched ground shall no longer be a thirsty land."²¹

Whether these accounts are meant to be taken as fully literal or not, however, their symbolic significance is clear and readily apparent:

Life-giving water comes from the temple. And it's surely very significant that it actually comes from *below* the temple and that, in the temples of the Latter-day Saints, the life-giving water of the baptismal font is located in the lowest room. For, as the Prophet Joseph Smith taught in a 6 September 1842 epistle to the Latter-day Saints,

the baptismal font was instituted as a similitude of the grave, and was commanded to be in a place underneath where the living are wont to assemble, to show forth the living and the dead, and that all things may have their likeness, and that they may accord one with another — that which is earthly conforming to that which is heavenly.²²

Moreover, the temple can be seen as standing in for, representing, the gospel as a whole. The good news of Jesus Christ is life-giving.

Most of all, though, life comes from God — from the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost — "for in him we live, and move, and have our being."²³

20. Revelation 22:1-5.

21. Doctrine and Covenants 133:29.

22. Doctrine and Covenants 128:13.

23. Acts 17:28.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any
thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness
comprehended it not.²⁴

It is this conviction that motivates the work of the Interpreter
Foundation.

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, an evidently substantial
number of the very first Christian converts are offended by something
that Jesus has just said. “From that time,” the evangelist reports,

many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?

Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go?
thou hast the words of eternal life.

And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son
of the living God.²⁵

To us, the restored Gospel of Christ represents the very best of all
good news, the most important message in the world, the greatest hope
for this life and the next. And because we believe that, we seek to extend
and deepen knowledge of the Restoration in ourselves and in others, as
well as to encourage others to adopt and share our belief.

Brethren [and sisters], shall we not go on in so great a cause?
Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren [and
sisters]; and on, on to the victory! Let your hearts rejoice, and
be exceedingly glad.²⁶

We’re grateful to all of those who serve in the Kingdom and to all
of those who seek to build it up, in any capacity and anywhere in the
world. Not as a substitute for service in the Church, but as a supplement
to that, we invite any and all who would like to participate in the efforts

24. John 1:1-5.

25. John 6:66-69.

26. Doctrine and Covenants 128:22.

of the Interpreter Foundation, to share in its mission of commending and defending the claims of the Restoration, to join us. In this, as in so many worthy fields of labor, “the harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few.”²⁷

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27. Matthew 9:37.

