

Section 61

The interpretation history of section 61 is a good example of what happens when scripture is not read in context and when it is too quickly applied universally instead of limited to the situation it was originally about. It does not say that Satan controls the water.

The Missouri River was well known to be dangerous, “ever-varying,” and full of submerged trees that could capsize or sink a steamboat, not to mention a canoe.¹ Joseph and the elders launched their canoes at the Missouri River landing just north of Independence, Missouri, and headed home to Ohio. They camped at Fort Osage and “had an excellent wild turkey for supper.” The good food did little to keep the men satisfied under the stressful conditions.

During their second day on the river, “a spirit of animosity and discord” infected the group. “The conduct of the Elders became very displeasing to Oliver Cowdery.” He prophesied, “As the Lord God liveth, if you do not behave better, some accident will befall you.”² At some point William Phelps “saw the Destroyer, in his most horrible

¹ See “[Historical Introduction](#)” to “Revelation, 12 August 1831 [D&C 61],” p. 101, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 5, 2020.

² Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio, 1834), 204.

power, ride upon the face of the waters,” though what that means is uncertain and ought not to be interpreted to mean that Satan controls the waters without more revelation.³

Contention continued the next day. Joseph got frustrated. Some of the elders refused to paddle, and at least one of the canoes hit a submerged tree and nearly capsized. Joseph urged the frightened group to get off the river. Some of the men called him a coward. They landed on the north side of the river at McIlwaine’s Bend (now Miami), set up camp as best they could, and convened a council to address the contention. Some of the elders were critical of Oliver’s rebuke. Some criticized Joseph for being “quite dictatorial.” Joseph got defensive and the council went on for some hours until, early in the morning, everyone reconciled.⁴

Speaking of section 61, Joseph’s history says, “The next morning after prayer, I received the following.”⁵ John Whitmer described the revelation as a “commandment given Aug 12th 1831 on the Bank of the River Distruction (or Missorie) unfolding some mysteries.”⁶

In section 61, the omnipotent Lord commands the elders gathered on the banks of the Missouri River to hear and obey him. He forgives their sins. He mercifully forgives the sins of all who humbly confess them. He says they don’t all need to travel quickly down the river while settlers on either side need to be taught the gospel.

The Lord explains that he let the elders experience the river’s terrors so they could testify of the danger to others. The Lord has angrily decreed that water will be a destructive element, especially the Missouri River. But he holds mankind in his hands and will preserve the faithful among this group of elders from drowning. The Lord has kept the group together this long so they can be corrected and purified from their sins, become unified, and thus escape the punishment for their wickedness. Now it’s time

³ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 142, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 5, 2020; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 164.

⁴ Ezra Booth to Edward Partridge, September 20, 1831, in the *Ohio Star*, November 24, 1831.

⁵ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 142, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 5, 2020.

⁶ “[Revelation, 12 August 1831 \[D&C 61\]](#),” p. 101, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 5, 2020.

to split up, and the Lord gives specific assignments and instructs Sidney Gilbert, the bishop's assistant, to give them enough money to fulfill their assignments.

Close reading of section 61 shows that the Lord controls the waters, not Satan. That is true for dry land as well. God blessed the waters during the creation process. He later cursed them (see Revelation 8:8–11). The day will come when only the honest-hearted will be able to safely travel to Zion by water. The Lord explains that after the Fall he cursed the land for Adam's sake, but in the latter days he blessed it to be fertile for the Saints' sake. The Lord commands the elders to warn the other Saints not to travel on the dangerous Missouri River without faith.

William Phelps carried out the commandment in this revelation to tell all the Saints about the dangers of traveling to Zion in Missouri on the Missouri River. He published the revelation in the Church's newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, along with an editorial listing the most notable "risks and dangers." First, there were frequent disasters on the river. Second, he warned, there was cholera, a devastating waterborne illness "which the Lord has sent into the world, and which may, without repentance, ravage the large towns near the waters, many years, or, at least, till other judgments come."⁷

Phelps also wrote a short history of his stay in Missouri, in which he told how section 61 influenced his return to Ohio:

I, in company with Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery and others started by water for Ohio, but being cautioned in a Revelation given at, McElwains bend, that Missouri River was cursed, all the company save myself and brother Gilbert left the river and proceeded by land. I was assured by revelation, to be safe by land or water.⁸

⁷ William Phelps, "The Way of Journeying for the Saints of the Church of Christ," *The Evening and the Morning Star* (December 1832): 1:52–53.

⁸ Short History of WW Phelps' Stay in Missouri, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.