



“. . . brother [William W.] Phelps, in an open vision, by daylight, saw the Destroyer, in his most horrible power, ride upon the face of the waters.”

Beings Divine or Devilish: Which Is the Destroyer Riding upon the Waters?

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As Joseph Smith and several elders traveled from Missouri to Ohio, a series of events occurred that led some of the early Saints to be wary of traveling by water.¹ The journey of Joseph and the elders started uneventfully as they traveled by canoe up the Missouri River, but by the third day contention and hard feelings developed within the group. At a particularly difficult stretch of the river, one of the canoes reportedly hit a hazard in the water (an uprooted tree called a sawyer) and nearly capsized. The group was frightened and made camp on the bank of the river. William Wines Phelps saw a vision of “the Destroyer” on the water exercising power. But the contention within the group was resolved later that night, and then Joseph Smith dictated the revelation now contained in Doctrine and Covenants 61 the next day.²

To date, the identity of the Destroyer seen by W. W. Phelps has received mostly passing scholarly attention. Isaiah pronounced “woe” to those who call good evil and evil good, warning that it is important to get the sides straight (Isaiah 5:20). To this end, the intent of this paper is to explore the identity of the Destroyer seen by Phelps as an angel of God. This will be done by reviewing current scholarship and primary sources of early Church

members available in *The Joseph Smith Papers (JSP)*, by exploring the use of destroyer language in the revelations of Joseph Smith and other contemporaneous writings, and by comparing these findings to scriptural precedent in the canon of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These all represent a compelling case for the identity of the destroyer as an agent of the Almighty rather than of Satan.

Background

Scholars have explored and ignored this section of the Doctrine and Covenants over the years. The basis for any analysis or commentary includes the entry in Joseph Smith's history prefacing the reception of section 61:

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 [William W.] Phelps, in an 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.³

This entry was penned by W. W. Phelps, who served as Joseph Smith's scribe for the occasion. Although the account was recorded by the individual who experienced the vision, as one scholar frankly admitted, "what that means is not certain."⁴ In another history, Phelps wrote of this event, "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."⁵ No other personal record or reflection from Phelps about the destroyer is known.

The lack of firsthand detail has not prevented scholars and leaders of the Church from commenting on what the destroyer appears to mean. For example, Joseph Fielding Smith explained his understanding as follows:

One of that number saw him in all his fearful majesty, and the Lord revealed to the entire group something of the power of this evil personage. It may seem strange to us, but it is the fact that Satan exercises dominion and has some control over the elements. . . . Paul speaks of Satan as the "prince of the power of the air." (Eph.2:2) The Lord revealed to these brethren some of the power of the adversary of mankind and how he rides upon the storm, as a means of affording them protection.⁶

President Smith's interpretation of the destroyer as Satan is reflected in the works of some scholars and some of the scriptural record but is at odds with others.

Perhaps the best depiction of the complexity of the issue is seen in Latter-day Saint scholar Hoyt Brewster's encyclopedia.⁷ Brewster's two entries for "Destroyer" and an additional entry for "Destroying Angel" represent a more nuanced approach to identifying this being. The first entry (Destroyer #1) addresses the destroyer seen by W. W. Phelps prior to the receipt of section 61. After providing the brief description that Phelps provided for the "History," Brewster notes, "The 'destroyer' seen by William W. Phelps . . . was, in all probability, the Evil One himself."⁸ Brewster's hedged language indicates his position on the destroyer's identity as Satan with support from the scriptures of the Restoration, while leaving open the slim possibility of an alternate identity.

His second entry for Destroyer (#2) represents an alternative possibility by describing the destroyer sent from the Lord mentioned in section 105 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

In 1834, the Lord warned that "the destroyer" would be "sent forth to destroy and lay waste mine enemies" (Doctrine and Covenants 105:15). The identity of this destroyer was revealed by President Joseph Fielding Smith: "The Lord does send forth the destroyer in the shape of plague and famine, and also his angels to execute his authority from time to time upon those who blaspheme his name" (CHMR 2:4). In this sense the destroyer is something that ruins or damages, perhaps even kills.⁹

This kind of destroyer sent from the Lord to "lay waste" to his enemies could be *something* such as sickness or death instead of *someone*. Brewster attempts to separate the possibility of an inanimate destroyer from an actual destroying angel. His next entry demonstrates this with a distinct title for a *being* called to such a work as mentioned in section 89, the revelation known as the Word of Wisdom.

In this, the promise is made that all who abide by the principles of health set forth therein by the Lord would find "the destroying angel" passing them by (Doctrine and Covenants 89:21). In 1940 J. Reuben Clark Jr. commented on this promise: "This does not say and this does not mean, that to keep the Word of Wisdom is to insure us against death, for death is, in the eternal plan, co-equal with birth. . . . But it does mean that the *destroying angel*, *he who comes to punish the unrighteous for their sins*, as he in olden time afflicted

the corrupt Egyptians in their wickedness (Exodus 12:23, 29), shall pass by the Saints, ‘who are walking in obedience to the commandments,’ and who ‘remember to keep and do these sayings.’”¹⁰

Perhaps because of the complexity of the issue, Brewster also includes two additional quotes from prominent leaders.¹¹ These three entries represent a nuanced treatment of the identity of the destroyer, demonstrating that the task of unmasking this mysterious being is no easy feat.

In contrast to Brewster, some scholars have removed any nuance in the identity of the destroyer, assume it refers to Satan, and replace any mention of the destroyer with the name Satan.¹² Of the events preceding this revelation, they wrote, “After the party had left the river, William W. Phelps saw, in broad daylight, a vision of Satan riding upon the waters of the river.”¹³ They noted the link between the murmuring of the men the day before the revelation was received and the commensurate susceptibility to the power of the destroyer. While they wrote of the destroyer as Satan, it should be noted that wickedness would also provoke a destroying angel, according to scriptural precedent.¹⁴

In contrast to the position that the destroyer is Satan, other scholars have explored the identity of the destroyer as an agent of God.¹⁵ They follow the parallels between this section and the creation and curse motifs in Genesis 1–3, the destroyer sent from God in Exodus 12, the angels of God who release destructive plagues in Revelation 8–10 and 15–18, the angels pleading before God to be sent to destroy the wicked in Doctrine and Covenants 86:5, and the destroyer sent by God to fight the battles of the Saints in Doctrine and Covenants 105:15. After examining these evidences, they conclude that “it seems likely that the being seen in vision by William W. Phelps was a servant of God.”¹⁶

In the absence of clarity in the historical information and current scholarly commentaries, further analysis of sources now available through The Joseph Smith Papers Project, other scholarship, and the scriptures is warranted.

Uses of “the Destroyer” in *The Joseph Smith Papers*

An analysis of contemporaneous use of “destroyer” and “destroying angel” in *The Joseph Smith Papers* provides little clarity on the issue. These words were used sporadically between 1831 and 1844, and the meaning was rarely consistent across users and uses. The earliest mention of the destroyer is in an entry from Joseph Smith’s journal, an entry preceding the receipt of

section 61. Smith provides no greater detail in his journal entry than previously noted. When the revelation was recorded in Revelation Book 1, John Whitmer's introduction noted it was "given Aug 12th 1831 on the Bank of the River Distruction (or Missorie) unfolding some mysteries &c &c."¹⁷ The renaming of the river indicates the impact this revelation had on the Saints and that they took seriously the warning against traveling on the waters of the Missouri.¹⁸ A footnote in the *JSP* adds, "In the context of this revelation, 'destroyer' apparently refers to death. This usage, which appears in the biblical account of the Passover, was present in discourse of Protestant America in the 1830s, in which the 'destroyer' was often equated with death or the 'Angel of Death.'"¹⁹ While this aids in the interpretation of some later usages of destroyer, it does not account for all of them. Nor does it settle the debate of whether the destroyer is animate or inanimate, as death would be inanimate, but an Angel of Death would be animate. It carefully leaves room for either interpretation.

When section 61 was published in the *Times and Seasons* in December 1832, consistent with the other revelations published, there was no mention of Phelps's vision or other historical background that led to the receipt of the revelation. The heading simply states, "The Way of Journeying for the Saints of the Church of Christ."²⁰ That same month Smith received section 86, which indicates angels are ready and waiting to be sent to destroy the wicked, though the Lord is concerned about the destruction of the righteous if this takes place too soon (see Doctrine and Covenants 86:5–7).

Following this, the destroyer next appears in an Old Testament context in an address given by Sidney Rigdon at a conference of elders on 21 April 1834.²¹ This occurrence appears consistent with the Protestant usage. Several additional occurrences referring to Exodus use the term "destroying angel" instead of "destroyer."²² While this appears to indicate a distinction between the two terms, there is a notable exception in a letter dated August 1834. The letter states, "All that mean to have the 'destroyer pass over them, as the children of Israel and not slay them,' may live according to the 'Word of Wisdom'; that the saints by industry, diligence and faithfulness, and the prayer of faith, may become purified, and enter upon their inheritance, to build up Zion according to the word of the Lord."²³ Clearly referring to the promised blessing in the revelation recorded as section 89, this entry conflates the titles "destroyer" and "destroying angel," once again suggesting inconsistency.

The destroying angel in Exodus is not the only one mentioned. In 1843 Willard Richards recorded notes in Joseph Smith's journal about a discussion of John's symbolism in Revelation.²⁴ Apollyon is an angel and king of the bottomless pit with charge over a symbolic plague of locusts that may afflict people who are not marked by God's seal (see Revelation 9:1–11). Apollyon is a Greek word that translates to "destroyer" in English.²⁵ Richards's notes are scattered and difficult to follow, so it is unclear whether the identity of Apollyon was linked to the angel from heaven, Satan, or one of the beasts previously mentioned in his notes. Nevertheless, the use of the term demonstrates that destroyers of various kinds were features of the theological discussions of the Saints.

In an entry from the 1838 Kirtland Camp Journal, the elders stood between the destroyer as they rebuked diseases and evil spirits.²⁶ On 23 July 1839 Joseph Smith instructed a few elders to administer to the sick by "commanding the destroyer to depart, and the people to arise and walk."²⁷ In a discourse on 20 March 1842, a speaker requested the assembled Saints to join in prayer and ask God "that the inhabitants of [Nauvoo] may escape the power of the disease, pestilences & destroyer that rideth upon the face of the earth."²⁸ This language of the destroyer "riding" is reminiscent of that used by W. W. Phelps in describing his vision of the destroyer. In 1841 Orson Hyde wrote in a letter to Rabbi Solomon Hirschell of a vision in which Hyde was instructed to declare to Judah that they were to gather in "defenced cities" because "the destroyer of the Gentiles is on his way."²⁹ Several recorded blessings promised protection against the destroyer.³⁰ One particularly unique occurrence was William Goforth's reference to the Extermination Order issued by Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs as "the woman and babe destroyer."³¹ Taken with all the others, these instances confirm that the meaning of these titles is dependent on the context and is a contemporaneous connotation somewhat lost to time. There is no definitive support for a single interpretation of the destroyer as Satan, sickness, or as an agent of God in *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

Other Contemporaneous Sources

In other contemporaneous sources, the inconsistency pervades. Wilford Woodruff once called on the power of the priesthood to "rebuke the Destroyer" from his wife Phebe, who suffered from a fever and headache.³² While this seems to apply to the destroyer as an illness, one scholar collected several instances in which early Saints believed Satan was directly responsible

for causing illness and other physical harm, including Wilford Woodruff.³³ At Winter Quarters Erastus Snow wrote that the abundance of water “spread disease and death through all our camps and weakened our hands as though the Lord . . . had as in days of old given the Prince of the Power of the air especial leave to open his floodgates upon us.”³⁴ Another scholar noted that Brigham Young believed Satan was responsible for some of the deaths in Winter Quarters, “for the devil is making war with everything that has a tabernacle especially the saints.”³⁵ While some were quick to blame the devil for their afflictions, the Saints also recognized that physical measures would improve their health and attempted to improve their situations by moving above ground instead of living in dugouts, eating fish and potatoes, using herbal remedies, and eliminating mosquitoes.³⁶ Scholar Richard E. Bennett insightfully noted, “It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that they saw the devil as the root cause of all illness and death. Disease was a natural part of living, and death was ultimately in the hands of Providence.”³⁷ Thus, it is difficult to gauge whether the Saints meant “destroyer” to be understood as animate or inanimate and how ardently they believed he impacted their world.

In the revelations of Joseph Smith, destroyers as agents of God are discussed by name and function.³⁸ In one revelation dated March 1832 (Doctrine and Covenants 77), Joseph came to understand that the four angels in Revelation 7:1 refer to “four angels sent forth from God, to whom is given power over the four parts of the earth, to save life and to destroy; these are they who have the everlasting gospel to commit to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; having power to shut up the heavens, to seal up unto life, or to cast down to the regions of darkness” (77:8). These appear to be actual beings with power to take life. Another revelation, dated December 1832 (Section 86), describes angels begging to be sent to complete the work of gathering and burning:

Behold, verily I say unto you, the angels are crying unto the Lord day and night, who are ready and waiting to be sent forth to reap down the fields; But the Lord saith unto them, pluck not up the tares while the blade is yet tender (for verily your faith is weak), lest you destroy the wheat also. Therefore, let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest is fully ripe; then ye shall first gather out the wheat from among the tares, and after the gathering of the wheat, behold and lo, the tares are bound in bundles, and the field remaineth to be burned. (Doctrine and Covenants 86:5–7)

These examples demonstrate that the work of angels is both salvific and destructive under the direction of the Lord, though both are reserved for specific times and seasons. This understanding mirrors the language of Doctrine and Covenants 61:4–5 in which the Lord declares that he will both destroy and protect those on the waters.

Other revelations indicate that protection from “the destroying angel” is available by living in accordance with the wisdom of God (see Doctrine and Covenants 89). Some scholars suggest the interpretation of this passage is intended to be both literal and figurative. Of the literal fulfillment of the promise, they state, “Given also that this revelation cannot, in the proper sense, be lived in isolation of all the commandments of the Lord and thus all the promises of the Lord, we would also think that the time must surely come when the angels of heaven will take vengeance on the wicked as they did among the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:23, 29).”³⁹ The scholars’ interpretation of the promise to be fulfilled in a literal time when angels destroy the wicked is consistent with the Lord’s decrees of destruction by the hands of destroyers mentioned in sections 61 and 86.

Additionally, in June 1834 a group of Saints in Ohio (later called Zion’s Camp) traveled to Missouri with the intention of providing armed protection against the mobs who were persecuting the Saints there.⁴⁰ In a revelation to Joseph Smith shortly after their arrival in Missouri, the Lord explicitly informed the camp that they would not fight but that “I will fight your battles. Behold, the destroyer I have sent forth to destroy and lay waste mine enemies” (Doctrine and Covenants 105:15). In this use it is unlikely that the destroyer in question is Satan because the Lord takes ownership of the destructive action. Instead, this use appears most closely related to the description of the four angels in Doctrine and Covenants 77:8 (and Revelation 7:1) who are sent forth with power to destroy.

Overall, the revelations of the Prophet Joseph during this time period are replete with examples of destroying angels who are serving God and acting out the destruction and preservation of his children. These revelations may be a more accurate reflection of Joseph’s understanding of a destroyer (like the one seen by W. W. Phelps) than the other recorded instances of various other early Saints’ understandings.

Textual Analysis of Doctrine and Covenants 61

The most important evidence to consider may be within section 61 itself. A close textual analysis reveals that the destroyer and the Lord are linked and that the Lord is in control of the situation. Verse 1 begins with an exhortation to “hearken unto the voice of him who has all power.” Though they were in peril from another being, God ultimately has all power. Verse 2 includes the Lord’s power to forgive sins and extend mercy to the humble—which is relevant given the contentious and divisive behavior of the traveling companions. In verse 4 the Lord declares that he allowed them all to travel via water at first, even though it was not needed, so that they could “bear record” of the dangers of the water.⁴¹ In verse 5 he clarifies those dangers: “I, the Lord, have decreed in mine anger many destructions upon the waters; yea, and especially upon these waters.”⁴² The Lord indicates that the dangers of traveling on the waters are based on his words and according to his will.

Though destruction is decreed, God continues to emphasize his control over the situation in Doctrine and Covenants 61:6 by saying that “he that is faithful among you shall not perish by the waters.” It is God who determines who perishes or not by the destruction decreed on the waters. The bounds set by the Lord are clarified in verse 8, which identifies the wickedness that could destroy them: “Ye should [not] part until you were chastened for all your sins, that you might be one, that you might not perish in wickedness.” The complaining traveling companions who fought against each other were not united in their purpose.⁴³ The division and contention were the wickedness that almost caused their destruction. Verse 10 gives the promise that if they are faithful, “they shall be preserved.”

Verse 14 continues to support the interpretation that the destruction on the waters is the Lord’s doing. “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.”⁴⁴ Thus, the destroyer stands in contrast to the Spirit of the Lord riding upon the deep in Genesis 1:2. The message of this contrast is not that the destroyer is on a different side, that is, God’s team versus the devil’s team, but that the destroyer operates in a different *time*. *In the beginning* the Spirit of God was over the waters, but now *in the last days* the destroyer plays his destructive part. Scholars have noted the difference between waters blessed to bring forth abundantly versus the waters seen by John the Revelator that were cursed and all life therein was subsequently destroyed.⁴⁵ It appears that

both the blessings and the curses (and their agents) come from God in different temporal spheres.

If there was any doubt about this destroyer's employment, it is shattered in Doctrine and Covenants 61:19 wherein the Lord declares, "I, the Lord, have decreed, and the destroyer rideth upon the face thereof, and I revoke not the decree." The destroyer is there to stay at the Lord's behest, carrying out judgment based on the Lord's anger (61:20). The Lord prepared a way for his Saints to travel by land and canal (61:23–24); nevertheless, he can give power over the waters by the Spirit. Where a persistent urban legend fears Satan's control over the waters, this firmly establishes that it is God who has command over the waters. These messengers are to take what they have learned from this experience and warn people at whom the Lord continues to be angry, namely, the wicked who are "well-nigh ripened for destruction" (61:31). This language is also reminiscent of Alma, "For behold, there is a curse upon all this land, that destruction shall come upon all those workers of darkness, *according to the power of God*, when they are fully ripe; therefore I desire that this people might not be destroyed" (Alma 37:28; emphasis added). God may order destruction of the wicked by his power (not Satan's), but faithfulness provides protection against such a decree.

In the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ, Satan rebels against God and seeks to thwart his will. While God may turn Satan's actions to his own purposes, Satan cannot be said to be working with or for God; the scriptures make this abundantly clear.⁴⁶ Thus the curse of destruction upon the waters may be a form of divine judgment, not a stronghold of Satan's power. It is those who are wicked who are threatened by God's power, not the righteous and upright. Something similar is depicted in Doctrine and Covenants 105:31–32, "But first let my army become very great, and let it be sanctified before me, that it may become fair as the sun, and clear as the moon, and that her banners may be terrible unto all nations; that the kingdoms of this world may be constrained to acknowledge that the kingdom of Zion is in very deed the kingdom of our God and his Christ." This sanctified and terrible army of the Lord is not threatening to those who acknowledge him—the power threatens and is terrible (or in the words of W. W. Phelps, "most horrible")⁴⁷ to those unprepared to meet it.

Problems with Satan as the Destroyer

There are multiple issues with considering Satan as the destroyer in Phelps's daytime vision. If the dangers on the waters were caused by Satan's power, then there are two ways to approach his opportunity to attack. One scholar addresses both thusly:

In general terms, it seems correct to say that those who disobey God's commands place themselves outside the protection of the Holy Spirit and are thus in potential subjection to the devil and his influence. Nevertheless, the righteousness of men like Joseph Smith, Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, or George A. Smith seems to be a given. In their specific encounters with Satan, a lack of personal righteousness does not appear to be the cause. Rather, as Joseph Smith taught, such attacks are evidence that the adversary feels his kingdom and power are being threatened by the work, faith, and righteousness of those whom he therefore chooses to attack.⁴⁸

The Book of Mormon lists several men who come under the power of Satan by ignoring God's commands, such as Sherem (Jacob 7:18–19), Korihor (Alma 30:52–53), and the Gadianton robbers (Helaman 7:4–5). In each of these accounts, though, the men are influenced by Satan's power to persuade others to join them in their wickedness, not to be destroyed. Their destruction comes after God's curse, rather than from Satan's power.⁴⁹ These examples indicate that God destroys the wicked, whereas Satan leads them to wickedness. On the other hand, Satan's influence in the attacks on the righteous are well-attested in Restoration scripture.⁵⁰

Some may consider the alternate possibility that Satan is working against God but destroys within the bounds the Lord sets around him. President George Q. Cannon cautioned the Saints that Satan would shed the blood of everyone on earth if he could.⁵¹ As part of an explanation regarding Doctrine and Covenants 129:8, one scholar notes that Satan and his spirit followers are "bound by divine law, by which God keeps the adversary of all mankind 'in check,' as it were. Thus, as the Prophet Joseph states, we know that 'wicked spirits have their bounds, limits, and laws by which they are governed or controlled.'"⁵² While it may be that God's decreed curses upon the waters allow Satan to act, it is difficult to picture Satan's complicity in the will of God against God's enemies, especially in light of the imagery of destroying angels pouring out judgments over the earth in response to God's decrees, such as in Revelation 16:4: "And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood." This is one example

of twenty in which angels are given charge to administer such curses to the earth in Revelation 8–11 and 16–20.⁵³

There is no dearth of evidence of these angels in the scriptures. In Ezekiel's eschatological vision, the Lord shows Ezekiel the idolatrous abominations of the people in Jerusalem. The Lord looks down on a people who "provoke [him] to anger" with their worship of other gods in dark chambers and even in the temple of the Lord (Ezekiel 8:17). The Lord then calls "them that have charge over the city to draw near, even every man with his destroying weapon in his hand" (Ezekiel 9:1). The instructions he gives them is to mark those people who weep because of the abominations and smite any who do not have the mark. As these destroying angels fulfill the instructions of the Lord, Ezekiel asks God, "Wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel in thy pouring out of thy fury upon Jerusalem?" (Ezekiel 9:8). This pericope demonstrates what it may look like at the time "when the angels of heaven will take vengeance on the wicked."⁵⁴ Given that a similar chain of events led to the receipt of section 105 and that some scholars point to a future fulfillment of this pericope or instead suggest past fulfillments that have existed since 1834, the time of angels seeking vengeance on the wicked appears to be present and ongoing.

Finally, there is no canonized scriptural precedent that indicates Satan has power to take life directly, as the destroyers in the previous examples appear able to do.⁵⁵ In every instance of murder or destruction recorded in the scriptures of the Church, Satan influences mortals or uses other means (e.g., fire, water, cliffs) to take lives that he cannot take himself.⁵⁶ Examples include Satan's influence over Cain to commit the murder of Abel to get gain (Moses 5:29, 38), the Lord's bounds around Satan that kept him from taking the life of Job (Job 2:6), the possessed swine that ran off a cliff to be destroyed in the sea (Matthew 8:31–32), a possessed son whose devil "cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him" (Mark 9:22),⁵⁷ Satan entering Judas Iscariot to contribute to the murder of Jesus (John 13:27), and Satan's influence with the Gadianton robbers to commit murders in the garb of secrecy (Helaman 6:26–30). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated, "Satan cannot directly take a life. That is one of many things he cannot do."⁵⁸ Satan's influence to deceive and destroy is limited. Based on the scriptural record, the destroyer seen by W. W. Phelps cannot be Satan. Death or Death's Angel are possibilities, but an intracanonial analysis provides stronger support for a destroying angel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a thorough textual analysis of section 61 demonstrates that the destroyer in the context of this section is linked to the destroying angels in Doctrine and Covenants 86:5; 89:21; and 105:15—angels who are agents of God carrying out divine judgments on the wicked. While Satan is represented as a destroyer elsewhere in scripture (such as Doctrine and Covenants 101:51), his destructive power is limited in the physical realm and most often comes in his influence over mortals to carry out the destruction. The message of any discussion about destroyers, divine or devilish, is that God's power supersedes that of the adversary and that the faithful will prevail. As Paul counseled the Corinthians in the first century,

Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them [the children of Israel] also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:9–13)

Phelps and company experienced the destroyer so they could be examples and admonish the Saints to be faithful. They bore record of their experience as the Lord commanded them to (Doctrine and Covenants 61:4), and the Lord prepared a way for them to escape the hands of the destroyer by blessing the land and instructing his people to journey to the land of Zion “like unto the children of Israel, pitching their tents by the way” (61:25). So long as the Saints “do as the Spirit of the living God commandeth him, whether upon the land or upon the waters,” it remains with God to determine what to do hereafter (61:28). **RE**

Notes

1. The following sources provide some examples of events likely related to the wariness of the Saints to travel by water: Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, 28 January 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-oliver-cowdery-28-january-1832/3>; “The Way of Journeying for the Saints of the Church of Christ,” in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, December 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning>

-star-june-1832-june-1833/11; Revelation, 16 November 1835, p. 45, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-16-november-1835/2>. All quotations from *The Joseph Smith Papers* in this paper retain the original spelling and grammar.

2. For a comprehensive treatment of the background and sources available for this information, see Historical Introduction to Revelation, 12 August 1831 [D&C 61], p. 102, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-august-1831-dc-61/2>. See Steven Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 212; Matthew McBride, “Ezra Booth and Isaac Morley,” in *Revelations in Context*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 133–34; Bruce Van Orden, *We’ll Sing and We’ll Shout: The Life and Times of W. W. Phelps* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 45–49.

3. Joseph Smith History, vol. A-1, 193, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/148>.

4. Harper, *Making Sense*, 212.

5. William W. Phelps, “Short History of WW Phelps’ Stay in Missouri,” Church History Library, Salt Lake City (n.p., n.d.). Cited in Harper, *Making Sense*, 215n7.

6. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1947), 1:207.

7. Hoyt W. Brewster Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 132–33.

8. Brewster, *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia*, 132.

9. Brewster, *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia*, 132. Of note is Brewster’s reliance on Joseph Fielding Smith’s interpretation for the identity of this destroyer, but he did not refer to Fielding Smith’s comment on the destroyer in section 61. As stated earlier, Joseph Fielding Smith also wrote of the destroyer in section 61 as Satan; however, Brewster relied on other Restoration scripture for this point.

10. Brewster, *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia*, 133.

11. Brewster, *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia*, 133.

12. Stephen E. Robinson and Dean H. Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 2:174–82.

13. Robinson and Garrett, *Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, 174.

14. Precedent can be found in the accounts of the destruction of the firstborn of the Egyptians via a destroying angel (Exodus 12), the path of Balaam impeded by an angel with a sword drawn (Numbers 22), Ezekiel’s vision of the Lord’s fury poured out on the idolatrous in Jerusalem by angels of destruction (Ezekiel 8–9), the flight of Jonah from the Lord’s command and subsequent storm (Jonah 1), the storm Lehi’s family experienced as a result of exceeding rudeness (1 Nephi 18), and multiple angels seen in Revelation who pour out judgments upon the wicked (Revelation 8, 16–20).

15. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration: A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants and Other Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 439–44.

16. McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration*, 442. From a theological standpoint, it is interesting that section 61 draws on biblical imagery from the first and last books of the Bible. This may suggest that the judgments seen and prophesied by John in Revelation are in process of fulfillment in the last days—an idea consistent with the Lord’s contrast

of blessings and curses for the waters and land in the beginning and now in the last days (Doctrine and Covenants 61:14, 17).

17. Revelation, 12 August 1831 [D&C 61], in Revelation Book 1, p. 103, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-august-1831-dc-61/3>.

18. See also Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, 28 January 1832, p. [3], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-oliver-cowdery-28-january-1832/3>, which states, “Advise the brethren by all means to Come by land and this [thus] obey the command of the Lord.” See Revelation, 16 November 1835, in JS Journal 1835–1836, p. 45, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-16-november-1835/2>, a revelation for Erastus Holmes that also warns against traveling by water.

19. Revelation, 12 August 1831 [D&C 61], in Revelation Book 1, p. 103n18, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-august-1831-dc-61/2#foot-notes>.

20. Revelations printed in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832–June 1833, p. [5], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning-star-june-1832-june-1833/11>.

21. Joseph Smith History, volume A-1, p. 528, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/534>.

22. See, for instance, Joseph Smith History, 1834–1836, p. 144, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/148>.

23. Joseph Smith History, volume A-1, p. 528, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/534>.

24. Joseph Smith, Journal, 8 April 1843, 2019, p. 103, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/103>.

25. Joseph Smith, Journal, 8 April 1843, p. 103n217, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/111>.

26. Joseph Smith History, vol. B-1, p. 813, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/267>; Blessing to Jedediah M. Grant, 28 February 1835, p. 167, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-jedediah-m-grant-28-february-1835/1>; Lucy Mack Smith, History, p. 329, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/338>.

27. Joseph Smith History, vol. C-1 Addenda, p. 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-addenda/18>.

28. Joseph Smith, Discourse, 20 March 1842, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff, p. [138], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-20-march-1842-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/5>.

29. Letter from Orson Hyde, 15 June 1841, p. 553, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-orson-hyde-15-june-1841/3>.

30. Joseph Smith History, p. 144, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/148>. This source refers to the destroyer as “that wicked one”; Joseph Smith, Journal, p. 147, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1834-1836/147>.

josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/148. This source refers to the destroyer as Satan.

31. Joseph Smith History, vol. F-1, p. 46, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/52>.

32. As related in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 28. Woodruff also attributed physical suffering to Satan in other ways. See also page 7.

33. Alonzo Gaskill, "Doctrine and Covenants 129:8 and the Reality of Satan's Physicality," *Religious Educator* 8, no. 1 (2007): 32–35. For example, Gaskill includes Heber C. Kimball's report of Joseph Smith Jr. battling Satan over the health of a child, the possession of Isaac Russell who believed he would die if not exorcised, and physical harm committed by Satan against Wilford Woodruff and George A. Smith, who were miraculously healed by three men in white, among others.

34. Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, Winter Quarters 1846–1852* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 133.

35. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 147. Perhaps Joseph Fielding Smith's understanding of the destroyer was shaped by these early leaders. Other scriptural accounts of Satan cast as the destroyer include Doctrine and Covenants 10:5–6 or 101:54.

36. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 142–143.

37. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 289n88.

38. In contrast, revelations that discuss Satan or an enemy of God destroying or bringing about destruction include Doctrine and Covenants 8:4; 10:5–43; 38:13; 44:5; 64:17; and 101:51, 54. Addressing these revelations with the attention they deserve is outside the scope of this paper.

39. McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration*, 657.

40. For details of the events leading to the receipt of section 105, see Church Education System, *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual (Religion 341–343)*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 148.

41. Scholars who have identified fulfillment of this prophecy include E. Cecil McGavin, *Historical Background of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Sandy, UT: Leatherwood Press LLC, 2005), 176; and Susan Easton Black, *400 Questions and Answers about the Doctrine and Covenants* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2012), 125.

42. Additional scriptural precedents establish that, at times, God orders destruction at the hands of his servants. See Judges 6:16; 1 Kings 18:36, 40; Matthew 10:34; Revelation 19:13–15; 1 Nephi 4:12–13; Alma 60:28–29.

43. Harper, *Making Sense*, 212.

44. Note that even though John performs the curse, the Lord takes ownership of the action with the statement "I cursed the waters." This is consistent with the language in 1 Nephi 4 when Nephi performs the action of slaying Laban, but the Lord states, "Behold, the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes" (1 Nephi 4:13; emphasis added).

45. McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration*, 440.

46. Jesus also explained of Satan's kingdom, "if Satan rise up against himself, and be divided, he cannot stand, but hath an end" (Mark 3:22–26). Other examples include Job 1:6–12; Matthew 4:1; 2 Nephi 2:27–29; Mosiah 4:14; 16:5; and 27:9.

47. See note 3 of this paper.

48. Gaskill, "Doctrine and Covenants 129:8," 49n31.

49. Sherem (Jacob 7:14–20), Korihor (Alma 30:49–60), and the Gadianton robbers (Helaman 11:4–11). Jesus also accuses the Pharisees of being the seed of Satan (John 8:42–47) and prophesied of their destruction (Matthew 23:13–38).

50. See 1 Nephi 14:9–13; 2 Nephi 2:17–18; Alma 54:5–13; Moroni 1:1–3; Doctrine and Covenants 10:22–27; Moses 1:12–22; 5:29.

51. Gaskill, “Doctrine and Covenants 129:8,” 39.

52. Gaskill, “Doctrine and Covenants 129:8,” 42. B. H. Roberts (as a member of the First Council of the Seventy) reiterated this: “Even the destructive forces themselves have their bounds and limitations fixed by the decree of God—the law.” B. H. Roberts, in Conference Report, October 1917, 102.

53. The other instances involving angels in Revelation include another angel who causes voices, thunderings, and an earthquake (8:3–5); a set of seven angels with trumpets that signal judgments (8:7–11:19); another mighty angel who causes thunders and time to cease (10:1–6); another set of seven angels who each have a vial with a plague (15:1–16:21); another voice who rewards Babylon a double punishment (18:4–8); a mighty angel who casts a millstone into the sea to symbolize the violence of Babylon’s judgment (18:21); an angel who turns carrion birds on the dead (19:17–18); and an angel with a chain who bound Satan (20:1–3).

54. McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration*, 657.

55. Gaskill, “Doctrine and Covenants 129:8,” 32–35. Gaskill provides the examples of Joseph Smith Jr., Isaac Russell, and Wilford Woodruff, all of whom believed they would have been destroyed by Satanic forces were it not for divine intervention. The interventions took the forms of the appearance of God the Father and Jesus Christ, men with priesthood authority to cast Satan out, and three personages dressed in white, respectively. Because Satan was stopped before he was able to successfully take their lives, it does not appear to be something he is capable of within the bounds God sets for him. Earlier in the Restoration the Lord stated, “I will not suffer that they shall destroy my work; yea, I will show unto them that my wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:43).

56. As previously mentioned, Smith and Young believed illness was within the means of Satan’s power to destroy; however, scriptural attestations are limited to Job’s boils (Job 2:3–7) and the various accounts of possessions in the New Testament, though they relate unusual behavior more than illness.

57. Note in these New Testament examples Satan does not have power over the water or fire, only power to cast a physical body into it by means of possession.

58. Jeffrey R. Holland, “We Are All Enlisted,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 44.