

WAS NOAH'S FLOOD THE BAPTISM OF THE EARTH?

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“I am the Earth,
Thy mother; she within whose stony veins,
To the last fibre of the loftiest tree
Whose thin leaves trembled in the frozen air,
Joy ran, as blood within a living frame,
When thou didst from her bosom, like a cloud
Of glory, arise, a spirit of keen joy!”¹

The people who joined the Restoration in the second quarter of the nineteenth century were not *tabulae rasae*. Most, with some exceptions, came out of a Protestant background.² Therefore, it is to be expected that at least some Protestant understandings would find their way into the Restoration and remain in the Church. But the Restoration was much more than simply a rearranging of Protestant tenets or a reshuffling of contemporary ideas. In many ways, Latter-day Saint discourse ranged beyond its environment. Such is the case with Latter-day Saint understandings of the doctrinal significance of the Flood in Genesis.

This essay begins with a limited survey of traditional Protestant interpretations of the Flood. These traditional interpretations formed an interpretative backdrop for Latter-day Saints joining the Restoration. Latter-day Saint discourse, hesitatingly at first, soon blazed new trails and presented uniquely LDS understandings. One of these innovative understandings—namely, that the Flood was the baptism of a sentient earth—is based on a debatable reading of the nineteenth-century Mormon sources and can lead to questionable conclusions. Therefore, we argue for a nuanced understanding of these Restoration accretions that departs from the popular understanding that has been offered by some LDS scriptural exegetes.

PROTESTANT INTERPRETATIONS

The most prevalent nineteenth-century Protestant understandings of the Flood of Noah viewed it as a symbol of baptism—that is, the Flood was a type or symbol of Christian baptism and its cleansing nature. First Peter 3:18–21 provided the proof text for Protestant (as well as Latter-day Saint) commentators.

A sampling of nineteenth-century commentaries reveals a relatively uniform understanding that the Flood in the Old Testament cleansed the earth of wickedness. Just as Christian baptism cleanses individuals from sin, William Trollope wrote in 1835, “The preservation of Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water is emblematic of baptism, inasmuch as it is only by baptism that Christians are admitted into the Church.”³ Henry Alford similarly reasoned that “the few in Noah’s day were saved by water; we also are saved by water. The antitype to that water on which the ark floated, saving its inmates, is the water of baptism.”⁴

Even C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, two highly influential German Protestant scholars of the second half of the nineteenth century, in a sophisticated analysis of 1 Peter 3, opined that the Flood of Noah contained dual symbolism. On the one hand, according to Keil and Delitzsch, the Flood represented “a judgment of such universality and violence as will only be seen again in the judgment at the end of the world,” yet on the other, the Flood was also “an act of mercy which made the flood itself a flood of grace,

and in that respect a type of baptism (1 Pet. iii. 21), and of life rising out of death.”⁵

Even late in the nineteenth century, Protestant scholarly commentary perpetuated these themes. Edward Hayes Plumptre, in a Bible commentary published by Cambridge, observed, “At first it seems hard to see the parallelism between the flood which destroyed and the baptism which saves, but reflection will show that the Apostle may well have thought of the deluge as burying the old evils of the world and giving the human race, as it were, a fresh start, under new and better conditions, a world, in some sense, regenerated or brought into a new covenant with God, and therefore new relations to Him.”⁶

This sampling of Protestant commentaries on the Flood narrative in Genesis and in 1 Peter 3 is representative of a persistent nineteenth-century Christian understanding of the Flood as, at the very least, symbolic of baptism. Though they stopped short of labeling the Flood a literal ordinance (*sacrament* in traditional Christian language),⁷ they clearly thought of the Flood as accomplishing the same end for the earth that baptism does for mortals.⁸

EARLY LATTER-DAY SAINT TEACHINGS CONCERNING THE FLOOD AS BAPTISM OF THE EARTH

As would be expected, there is considerable overlap between nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint and Protestant understandings of the Flood as a cleansing of the earth of wickedness and therefore a symbolic prefiguring of Christian baptism. Yet Latter-day Saints seemed much more invested than Protestants in interpreting the Flood as a literal ordinance, perhaps because the Restoration presents stronger forms of sacramentalism than Protestantism does. This Latter-day Saint penchant for ordinances, as we will see, would bring its own set of complex issues into the discourse. First, though, before considering those complexities, we need to briefly outline the development of the Latter-day Saint argumentation.⁹

Apparently the first public Latter-day Saint comment came in the form of an 1832 unsigned editorial, under the nominal editorship of

W. W. Phelps, in *The Evening and the Morning Star*. "Every man lives for himself," the editorial reads. "Adam was made to open the ways of the world, and for dressing the garden. Noah was born to save seed of every thing, when the earth was washed of its wickedness by the flood; and the Son of God came into the world to redeem it from the fall."¹⁰ For all intents and purposes, the language and thought of this declaration, while containing other interesting concepts, does not vary from standard Protestant Flood interpretation.

The beginnings of variance, however, were not long in coming. In the first of two sequential 1835 editorials in the Church's *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Phelps, this time as acknowledged author, wrote about the Flood in terms of it being an instrument of cleansing. In the first of these editorials, Phelps wrote that "when the flood abated . . . the world was cleansed from iniquity."¹¹ In the second article, Phelps's language anticipates later steps beyond Protestant interpretations toward a uniquely Latter-day Saint understanding: "After the earth had been baptized by a flood, for a remission of her sins . . . [the Lord] blessed Noah and his sons."¹² Here Phelps mentions both a baptism and a cleansing of the earth from "her sins." While these may have been merely rhetorical moves, Phelps can also be seen as introducing, however preliminarily and unintentionally, an ambiguity into the discussion that still besets Mormon discourse. That is, though by "her sins" he likely referred to sins committed by mortals living on the earth, subsequent developments make his usage notable because it can be read as positing a sentient earth.¹³ This ambiguity, it turns out, would continue throughout the twentieth century in much of the Latter-day Saint discourse about the Flood.

For Latter-day Saints, the distinction between a formal, literal ordinance and a symbolic immersion is important. Simple immersion in water does not constitute an ordinance. First, the baptismal ordinance must be a complete immersion in water performed by a priesthood holder who has the requisite authority and commission. In addition, the person being baptized must have been found worthy to be baptized.¹⁴ Otherwise, the baptism is just an immersion, or a sprinkling, or a washing with no salvific efficacy, though perhaps symbolically significant. If the Flood constituted

a literal baptism, in other words, it would raise significant questions for Latter-day Saints.¹⁵

Phelps was not the only early Latter-day Saint to speak of the Flood as a baptism. While serving as a missionary in England in 1841, Elder Lorenzo Snow published an important missionary tract on the foundational principles of the gospel in which he called the Flood of Noah “typical” of Christian baptism: “The destruction of the Antediluvian world, by water, was typical of receiving remission of sins through baptism. The earth had become clothed with sin as with a garment; the righteous were brought out and saved from the world of sin, even by water; the like figure, even baptism, doth now *save* us, says Peter (1 Peter iii. 21).” With wording and theological reasoning that would have found ready home in contemporary Protestantism, Snow went on to state that “Noah and family were removed, and disconnected from sins and pollutions, by *means* of water; so baptism, the like figure, doth now remove our souls from sins and pollutions, through faith on the *great* atonement made upon Calvary.”¹⁶ Though Snow did not follow Phelps in arguing that the earth was literally baptized, in returning to 1 Peter 3, Snow put the Flood in the context of the ordinance of baptism: “Peter, when speaking of Noah and family being saved by water, would have said, The like figure whereunto even baptism doth now save us;—1st Peter iii.21.”¹⁷

As Church members migrated west, the idea of the Flood being the earth’s baptism came with them. Elder Orson Pratt began as early as 1851 to follow Phelps in framing the Flood as a literal baptismal ordinance, with all that might mean for Latter-day Saints. “The first ordinance instituted for the cleansing of the earth, was that of immersion in water,” Elder Pratt explained. “It was buried in the liquid element, and all things sinful upon the face of it were washed away. As it came forth from the ocean flood, like the new-born child, it was innocent, it arose to newness of life; it was its second birth from the womb of mighty waters—a new world issuing from the ruins of the old, clothed with all the innocence of its first creation.”¹⁸

Important questions, however, were left unaddressed: Why would wicked inhabitants necessitate a literal baptism of the earth rather than their own repentance? Was the earth’s baptism *necessary*, that is, salvific, or

was it both more literal than the Protestants had provided for and yet still symbolic in some way? Such unanswered questions can easily lead to creative interpretation and perhaps misunderstanding, as will be seen.¹⁹

Pratt would teach this same doctrine a number of times during his tenure as an Apostle. During his missionary experience in Europe, he published a series of tracts that touched on the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. In his tract on the subject of "Water Baptism," Pratt again reiterated his ideas about the Flood as the baptism of the earth. "Even the very earth itself was Baptized in the mighty flood," Pratt wrote. "The Baptism of the earth, to wash away its sins, was a literal representation of the baptism of all penitent believers to wash away their sins." Pratt concluded his argument by citing 1 Peter 3:20–21 as a proof text.²⁰

On another occasion, Pratt, after detailing a litany of sins committed by the antediluvians, with no mention of sins the earth might have committed, explained that the waters of the Flood "then made an entire sweep of the wicked, they were laid low, and the earth was cleansed. We might, in other words, call it a baptism of the earth by water, or a cleansing of it from sin. You know that baptism is intended for the remission of sins; it is the ordinance through which our heavenly Father forgives the sins of those who believe in his Son Jesus Christ."²¹

Finally, in a sermon delivered in 1880, Pratt's words evidenced the persistent ambiguity introduced into Latter-day Saint Flood discourse by Phelps. In this sermon he again explicitly taught that the earth "was baptized by water." This, Pratt explained, was because "God requires the children of men to be baptized. What for? For the remission of sins. So he required our globe to be baptized by a flow of waters, and all of its sins were washed away, not one sin remaining."²² Again, Pratt offered no sustained explanation of why the earth would require a baptism over and against the cleansing effect the Flood ostensibly represented in removing wicked inhabitants. Moreover, his usage of phrases such as "its sins" left open the question for later commentators of whether or not the earth itself might be viewed individualistically, even animistically, in Mormon theology.

Presidents of the Church in the nineteenth century tended to affirm the Flood as a baptism, even as they too avoided some of the complexities

inherent in such a characterization. In his usual forthright style, President Brigham Young taught:

The Lord said, "I will deluge (or immerse) the earth in water for the remission of the sins of the people;" or if you will allow me to express myself in a familiar style, to kill all the vermin that were nitting and breeding, and polluting its body; it was cleansed of its filthiness; and soaked in the water, as long as some of our people ought to soak. The Lord baptized the earth for the remission of sins and it has been once cleansed from the filthiness that has gone out of it which was in the inhabitants who dwelt upon its face.²³

In a subsequent sermon, President Young used words associated with human baptism to describe the immersion of the earth: "This earth . . . has been baptized with water, will be baptized by fire and the Holy Ghost, and by-and-by will be prepared for the faithful to dwell upon."²⁴ Perhaps because President Young's language can easily be construed to be analogous to priesthood ordinances for mortals, the quotes that follow below will demonstrate, using Pratt and Young's words as their source, that many Latter-day Saint writers speak of the baptism of the earth as a literal ordinance, and one pertaining to the earth's own destiny at that.

President John Taylor, who would succeed President Young as the prophet, did not impute any sins to the earth, but he continued to speak of the Flood as the earth's literal baptism. For example, he taught that at the time of the Flood "the earth was immersed," and this was, accordingly, "a period of baptism."²⁵

A turn-of-the-century Apostle, Elder Orson F. Whitney, built on these foundations to establish another layer of interpretation about the Flood. On at least three occasions, Whitney added his voice to that of these earlier commentators in teaching that the earth received its baptism by means of the Flood, and these teachings were widely dispersed over his lifetime. In his first sermon mentioning the Flood, delivered more than twenty years before he became an Apostle, he stated, "The earth underwent a baptism by being immersed in water, for the remission of sins, the washing away of its iniquities. 'As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man' [Luke 7:26]. . . . Not

only man, but the earth itself, which is a living creature, must undergo this ordinance.”²⁶

The parallels he drew between the baptism of the earth “in water, for the remission of sins” to the ordinance of baptism for “man” could certainly leave the impression that the earth had sinned and therefore needed “its iniquities” washed away in an ordinance. This impression is reinforced by Whitney’s mention that the earth “is a living creature.” Though the concept taught by Brigham Young and others that the earth has a spirit (see below) could stand behind Whitney’s comment, calling the earth “a living creature” goes beyond saying the earth has a spirit. It implies that as a “living creature” which “must undergo” baptism, the earth could sin.

After becoming an Apostle, Whitney continued to speak of the baptism of the earth in subsequent general conference addresses. In 1908 he stated that in Noah’s day “the earth was baptized with water.”²⁷ Then, more than forty years after he first mentioned the baptism of the earth, he taught in 1927: “Baptized with water in the days of Noah, the earth will yet be baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost.”²⁸ These three Whitney sermons feature three strands that would enliven twentieth-century Latter-day Saint commentaries: that the Flood was the earth’s literal baptism, that the earth constitutes an individualized living being, and that baptism is somehow central to its eschatological destiny. While he hardly brought all three together in any meaningful way at any one given time, his statements form a kind of pivot from the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of nineteenth-century utterances and the more speculative systematizers of the twentieth century.

LATER LATTER-DAY SAINT TEACHINGS CONCERNING THE FLOOD AS BAPTISM

Far from being an archaic teaching found only in its developmental stage, the teaching that the Flood was an immersion analogous to a salvific ordinance can be found in more recent Latter-day Saint discourse. For instance, Elder John A. Widtsoe, in his popular compendium first published in 1943, articulated what has become something of the codified

understanding of Noah's Flood in the minds of many Church members: "Latter-day Saints look upon the earth as a living organism, one which is gloriously filling 'the measure of its creation.' They look upon the flood as a baptism of the earth, symbolizing a cleansing of the impurities of the past, and the beginning of a new life. This has been repeatedly taught by the leaders of the Church. The deluge was an immersion of the earth in water."²⁹

Widtsoe took pains to point out that the earth was completely covered by water. This concept of total immersion, combined with his use of the term *baptism*, would suggest to Latter-day Saint readers the priesthood ordinance. Yet readers should note that Widtsoe was careful to stop short of equating the Flood with the baptismal ordinance for mortals by his use of words such as "as a baptism" and "symbolizing a cleansing."

Elder Joseph Fielding Smith wrote more forcefully: "Now a word as to the reason for the Flood. *It was the baptism of the earth, and that had to be by immersion.* If the water did not cover the entire earth, then it was not baptized, for the baptism of the Lord is not pouring or sprinkling."³⁰ By declaring that "the entire earth" was immersed in water, Smith not only validated the Latter-day Saint mode of baptism, but he also staked claim for a literalist approach to biblical interpretation. Likewise, Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, "In the days of Noah the Lord sent *a universal flood* which completely immersed the whole earth and destroyed all flesh except that preserved on the ark. . . . This flood was the baptism of the earth."³¹ Both Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie come close to equating the Flood with baptism for mortals, implying that the Flood was an ordinance.

Understandably, commentators publishing in official organs of the Church followed the lead of these General Authorities. In a 1980 article in the *Ensign*, F. Kent Richards wrote: "The worldwide flood of Noah's time has been accepted as a benchmark historical event by Jews and Christians for thousands of years. . . . The worldwide flood of Noah's time, so upsetting to a restricted secular view, fits easily into place. It is the earth's baptism."³² Likewise, in a 1998 article in the *Ensign*, Donald W. Parry stated, "Latter-day prophets teach that the Flood or the total immersion of the earth in water represents the earth's required baptism."³³ His use of the words "required

baptism” unequivocally puts the Flood in the category of a salvific ordinance. One month later the *Ensign* printed an article on Noah by Joseph B. Romney, wherein Romney remarked, “Modern revelation teaches that God indeed suffered great sorrow over the Flood, which served as the baptism of the earth.”³⁴

The Church’s 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood study manual, written by Hugh Nibley, spoke of a certain “Jewish tradition that tells of how the baptism of the earth by water in the days of Noah, purging it from wickedness, was later followed by a baptism of wind, to be followed in turn at the end of the world by a baptism of fire.”³⁵ The Church’s institute manual on the Old Testament, in its discussion of the significance of the Flood, teaches that the Flood was the earth’s baptism by quoting the statements by Young, Taylor, and Pratt examined above.³⁶ Finally, a recent statement on the Church’s website affirmed that “during Noah’s time the earth was completely covered with water. This was the baptism of the earth and symbolized a cleansing (1 Peter 3:20–21).”³⁷

The idea that the Flood was the baptism of the earth is likewise found in popular Latter-day Saint literature. W. Cleon Skousen, writing in the 1950s, opined, “The great flood is spoken of as the ‘baptism’ of the earth or burial of the earth in water.”³⁸ Skousen has been followed by Victor L. Ludlow, who wrote that “the earth itself was a living entity and desired a rest from wickedness . . . [and] needed to go through its own baptism of water preparatory for a later baptism of fire and eventual celestialization.”³⁹

More recently, D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner have not only written that the Flood was the earth’s baptism but also that the earth is a sentient, living entity. “It is apparent from Ether 13:2 that the Flood was not just a local phenomenon but covered all of earth’s lands.” Ogden and Skinner continue, “The Flood, as the earth’s baptism by water, was a complete immersion.” After quoting Elders Mark E. Petersen and Joseph Fielding Smith on the Flood constituting the earth’s baptism, Ogden and Skinner argue, “The earth is a living entity, and Enoch had heard Mother Earth yearn for a cleansing of ‘the filthiness which is gone forth out of me’ (Moses 7:48). The Flood removed that filthiness or wickedness, just as baptism removes sin from human beings.”⁴⁰

As this sampling of literature shows (and we have by no means exhausted the sources),⁴¹ there has been a general continuity of thought

among modern Latter-day Saint leaders and writers on this subject.⁴² Beginning in the early days of the Church down to the present, many Latter-day Saints have understood that the Flood of Noah constituted the baptism of the earth. Even so, no Latter-day Saint author has made an attempt to distinguish between the purpose and result of the immersion of a mortal and the cleansing of the earth in water. In fact, all the Latter-day Saint comments we have quoted that speak of the baptism of the earth have done so without indicating exactly what they mean by *baptism*. As mentioned above, unless further explanation is given, for most Latter-day Saints the immediate connotation is the salvific priesthood ordinance of immersion for the remission of personal sin.⁴³

Although the understanding of Noah's Flood as a salvific ordinance for a sentient earth, parallel to baptism for mortals, has become popular among some members of the Church, we feel a different reading of the nineteenth-century sources is in order. We believe that a distinction must be made between baptism for mortals and any cleansing of the earth by water, and that the distinction should be made explicit to clarify doctrine, eliminate potentially problematic ideas, and provide a more nuanced understanding.

The first step to bringing the problematic issues into sharper focus is to discuss why Latter-day Saint commentators have drawn attention to what we believe is a doctrinal red herring, namely, that the earth is alive or that the earth has a spirit. This assumption allows "many Latter-day Saints and students of our theology [to] make us out to be animists who believe the earth to be a living thing and therefore in need of baptism."⁴⁴ We will dissect this red herring along two lines: First, we will analyze the statements that the earth is alive. And second, we will discuss the issue of the earth needing baptism. As we will discuss below, part of the issue hinges on whether the scriptures are read literally or metaphorically. We will suggest that reading some scriptures exclusively literally can lead to questionable conclusions.

IS IT A LIVING EARTH?

The unique Latter-day Saint discourse about the earth as a living entity⁴⁵ would seem to require a formal, salvific immersion of the earth. We have

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seen this idea mentioned already by Whitney in 1885, Widtsoe in 1943, Ludlow in 1981, Ogden and Skinner in 2013, and many others. In fact, the idea that the earth is a living entity is mentioned so often in conjunction with the earth's baptism that it seems to be the cornerstone of the Latter-day Saint belief that the earth was required to undergo a salvific ordinance analogous to baptism for mortals.

Though we cannot pinpoint the time and place of the origin of the idea of a sentient earth, we believe the concept could have found its origins in what would later become canonized scripture, the Book of Moses. The relevant passage reads as follows:

And it came to pass that Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?

And when Enoch heard the earth mourn, he wept. (Moses 7:48–49)

Extracts of the Book of Moses, including the words of these verses, were published as early as 1832 in *The Evening and the Morning Star* and again in the *Times and Seasons* in 1840 and in 1843.⁴⁶ Given the frequency of the publication of this passage, it is likely that many Latter-day Saints were aware of its content even before its inclusion in the 1851 Liverpool publication of the Pearl of Great Price. A literal interpretation of the scriptures, if imposed on Moses 7:48, would certainly make it easy to view the earth as a living entity, and female at that. Certainly, a talking, feeling, tired, mourning earth sounds like it may be alive. But there are other ways of looking at these verses.

Although it is tempting to view this passage literally, it is more likely that the passage is speaking poetically, employing figurative language to personify the earth.⁴⁷ There are indications in the pericope itself that metaphor, hyperbole, and symbolism are at play. For example, Moses 7:41 waxes poetic when it states that when Enoch beheld the wickedness on the earth “his heart swelled wide as eternity.” No one would take literally the phrase “his heart swelled wide as eternity.” It is, simply put,

poetically and beautifully symbolic of Enoch's love and compassion for the earth's inhabitants.

Of particular importance is the statement in verse 48 that the earth is "the mother of men." If mortals were actually fashioned from the dirt or clay of this earth, and had their beginning here in this physical world, it might be possible to believe that "the mother of men" literally applies to the earth. But for Latter-day Saints the earth is not the literal "mother of men."⁴⁸ The earth can only be the "mother of men" in a symbolic manner.⁴⁹ These examples make it clear that symbolism and metaphor are part and parcel of this passage in which the earth is said to bemoan the "the filthiness which is gone forth out of" it. Therefore, it seems likely that a speaking earth is a symbolic personification, a beautiful and poignant poetic expression of the earth's condition in the days of Noah.

In addition to Moses 7:48–49, another early Latter-day Saint scripture could be used to posit a living earth. D&C 88:26, given as part of a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith on December 27, 1832, reads in part, "[The earth] shall die, it shall be quickened again, and shall abide the power by which it is quickened." Reading the verse literally, as if it were speaking of a mortal, would suggest that if the earth will "be quickened again" (the verb *quicken* means to be made alive), it will have to die. Just as with Moses 7:48–49, D&C 88:26 can be read poetically rather than literally. If taken literally, it would suggest that the earth has a distinct, particular spirit of its own that can die. While this is possible, Orson Pratt, in speaking about the earth being alive, made the interesting statement, "That which quickens the earth is the Spirit of God."⁵⁰ In other words, if the Spirit of God makes the earth alive, then when God withdraws his Spirit from the earth, it in essence "dies." That is, as long as the Spirit of God is present, the earth may be said to be alive. The quotes about the earth being alive and dying at some time in the future can be understood to mean that God will withdraw his Spirit and the earth will cease to sustain life as we know it. Then the earth will be quickened again as if, speaking metaphorically, from the dead and made capable of supporting celestial life. In other words, just as the separation of spirit and body define mortal death for humans, the separation of the Spirit of God from the earth would define the earth's death.

We have demonstrated that both passages of scripture that appear to imply that the earth is alive and has a distinct and sentient spirit can be read symbolically and metaphorically and need not be interpreted literally. With the symbolic nature of Moses 7:48–49 and D&C 88:26 in mind, we now turn to the words of Latter-day Saints who speak of the earth being alive. We believe that a careful reading of their words does not imply that the earth has a distinct, sentient spirit that quickens the earth. Rather, as can be understood from Orson Pratt's statement quoted above, the earth is alive because the Spirit of God quickens it.

The first public Latter-day Saint sermon we could find where the earth is declared to be alive was given by Orson Pratt in 1852. In this sermon, rather than reading Moses 7:48 or D&C 88:26, Pratt quoted Isaiah 51:6 and interpreted Isaiah's poetry quite literally:

The earth itself, as a living being, was immortal and eternal in its nature. "What! is the earth alive too?" If it were not, how could the words of our text be fulfilled, where it speaks of the earth's dying? How can that die that has no life? "Lift up your eyes to the heavens above," says the Lord, "and look upon the earth beneath; the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner" [Isaiah 51:6]. In like manner! What! The earth and the heavens to die? Yes, the material heavens and earth must all undergo this change which we call death; and if so, the earth must be alive as well as we.⁵¹

Pratt is consistent when he states that the earth is alive, but not as some would understand him.⁵² In the quote cited earlier, given more than a quarter century after the quote immediately above, he defines what he means for the earth to be alive, and his full statement is worth quoting: "What is it that will make the earth die? It will be the withdrawing of the spiritual portion from it, that which gives it life—that which animates it, and causes it to bring forth fruit; that which quickens the earth is the Spirit of God."⁵³ Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the Spirit of God makes the earth capable of sustaining life, that the earth will eventually die when

the Spirit of God is removed, and that the earth will be resurrected to a new level of life-sustaining existence.

Other Latter-day Saint authorities have also spoken of the earth being alive, but note how Pratt's statement about the Spirit of God making the earth alive colors the sense of these statements. In 1856, about four years after Pratt first spoke of an earth that is alive, Brigham Young also taught that the earth is a living entity with a spirit: "There is life in all matter, throughout the vast extent of all the eternities; it is in the rock, the sand, the dust, in water, air, the gases, and, in short, in every description and organization of matter, whether it be solid, liquid, or gaseous, particle operating with particle."⁵⁴ Besides insisting that all matter has life, President Young also evidently believed that a living spirit inhabited all matter:

The spirit constitutes the life of everything we see. Is there life in these rocks, and mountains? There is. Then there is a spirit peculiarly adapted to these rocks and mountains. We mark the progress of the growth of grass, flowers, and trees. There is a spirit nicely adapted to the various productions of the vegetable kingdom. There is also a spirit to the different ores of the mineral kingdom, and to every element in existence. And there is a spirit in the Earth.⁵⁵

Besides expressing ideas similar to Orson Pratt's claim that the earth is alive, Brigham Young also took the next step beyond Pratt and proclaimed that "there is a spirit in the Earth."

Heber C. Kimball, counselor to Brigham Young, also taught that a living spirit inhabited all matter, including the material earth. "Some say the earth exists without spirit; I do not believe any such thing; it has a spirit as much as anybody has a spirit. How can anything live, except it has a living spirit? How can the earth produce vegetation, fruits, trees, and every kind of production, if there is no life in it?"⁵⁶

While some have seen Pratt, Young, and Kimball as moving in animistic directions with these statements, it should be noted that it remains unclear whether each was working within a framework of universal "intelligence" or a universal "light of Christ," both posited in Joseph Smith's revelations. It is far from clear what each metaphysically intended with these teachings.

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Especially if their statements are taken together, it seems clear to us that no single view of the earth's spirit existed among early Church leaders.

The bottom line is that comments about the earth having a spirit need not be interpreted *a priori* to mean that the earth has its own particular, discrete, and sentient spirit and therefore needs baptism. While this argument works for mortals, it does not necessarily work for the earth. This brings us to the second part of our dissection of the red herring: the earth's need of baptism.

WHY WAS THE EARTH CLEANSED BY IMMERSION?

If, as we've argued, the "spirit" of the earth, whatever its nature, does *not* make it truly sentient like a human being, then why would the earth need to undergo a salvific ordinance? This is essentially the critique that has been made by a number of recent Latter-day Saint authors. We begin by calling attention to the points raised by Duane E. Jeffery a decade ago.⁵⁷ Jeffery, in his article exploring the discussion of the Flood of Noah being a global versus a local event, examines the rationale given for the Flood being the salvific baptism of the earth. After reviewing a few of the statements of past General Authorities on this topic, Jeffery correctly observes, as we have quoted above, that "many Latter-day Saints and students of our theology make us out to be animists who believe the earth to be a living thing and therefore in need of baptism."⁵⁸ This, it seems, was clearly the belief of a number of modern interpreters quoted above. Given this, Jeffery continues to articulate what he thinks are problematic aspects of this belief. "By this logic," Jeffery concludes,

then every living thing needs to be baptized. I'm not sure we'd want to take that on. If we choose to argue in some fashion that the earth needs baptism because it is a sentient entity with some capability of moral decision-making like that of humans, we run into further difficulty. Just for the sake of clarification, many animals have sentience far beyond anything we could likely adduce for the earth. Latter-day Saints also have a longstanding ecclesiastical policy that humans who lack the ability to make and exercise genuine moral decisions (i.e., those who are mentally handicapped or under eight

years of age) do not need baptism. But many such persons surely have sentience beyond anything we could likely identify for the earth as a planet.⁵⁹

Jeffery is not alone in raising these important points. Ben Spackman, an independent Latter-day Saint scholar with graduate training in ancient Near Eastern studies, also recognizes that the insistence that the earth needed to be baptized raises further questions of what else might need to be baptized. With tongue firmly in cheek, Spackman asks, “Why does the planet need baptism? Do dogs? Plants? Can it make decisions, or repent? Did someone lay hands on it? What sins had it committed? Is it now a member of the church?”⁶⁰ All things considered, Spackman concludes, the rationale behind this teaching leaves much to be explained.

These questions should be considered by anyone arguing that a sentient earth is culpable for its conjectured sins. However, a different reading of the nineteenth-century sources avoids the problems raised by Jeffery and Spackman.

If the earth does not have a separate, sentient spirit, but is quickened by the Spirit of God, why should it be baptized? The first point to be made is that the earth was not baptized for any sins it committed. As was pointed out above, Brigham Young clearly made the claim that mortals befouled the earth with their sins. Yet the statements of Pratt, Young, Kimball, and others clearly declare that the earth was washed clean, as if its baptism were an ordinance.⁶¹

The fundamental question is, if the earth committed no sins, what is the relationship of its immersion to the baptism of mortals who have sinned? Obviously, there are parallels. But we suggest that the parallels are more analogous than functional. Orson Pratt, as quoted earlier, stated, “The earth is to die; it has already received certain ordinances, and will have to receive other ordinances for its recovery from the fall.”⁶² As Elder McConkie wrote, “The earth itself is subject to certain laws of progression and salvation because of which it eventually will become a fit abode for exalted beings. This earth was created as a living thing, and the Lord ordained that it should live a celestial law. It was baptized in water and will receive the baptism of fire; it will die, be resurrected and attain unto a state of celestial exaltation.”⁶³

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More recently, Elder Tad R. Callister restated this concept, with an explicit parallel drawn between the plan for God's children and the plan for the earth:

The consequences affecting the earth following the Fall [of Adam] mirrored the consequences that came upon man. . . . Both are subject to death, both will be resurrected, both fell from the presence of God, both need to be born of water to be cleansed (i.e., the earth being baptized at the time of Noah), both need to be cleansed by fire (i.e., the earth being baptized by fire at the Second Coming and also prior to its final judgment), and both seek the day of their celestialization and return to God's presence.⁶⁴

Just as there is a plan for the Creation, Fall, and Atonement for God's children, so this line of argumentation goes, there is also a plan for the earth that was laid out from the beginning and that shares some common external features with the plan of salvation, including analogs of what are salvific ordinances for God's children. Given that the earth's cleansing by water is analogous to baptism, it would be easy to posit a dichotomy: either the Flood constituted a salvific and therefore necessary ordinance for the earth, or the Flood was a magnificent symbol of cleansing and nothing more. But there may be an alternative explanation.

PERHAPS THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE

As we have interpreted the evidence, the Spirit of God quickens the earth, giving it life. The earth received and is guided by laws, and a path was laid out for it to follow. As a thing to be acted upon,⁶⁵ it has followed that path without variance and will continue to move along that prescribed path. In short, the cleansing of the earth with water was a necessary and foreordained event in its chain of becoming our celestial abode but not a baptism for remission of any sins it committed. How, then, do we explain the discourse about the earth being baptized? As we have emphasized above, one of the Lord's most often used and inspired teaching methods employs symbols, types, shadows, similes, metaphors, and similitudes. Because "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth,

and all things that are upon the face of it” (Alma 30:44), we suggest that the path laid out for the earth from its creation to its celestialization is designed to teach us about and to bear witness of the great plan of salvation that we mortals must follow.

Returning specifically to the immersion of the earth, that it was cleansed from others’ sins rather than its own is not without precedence. In like symbolism, the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob told his people, “Behold, I take off my garments, and I shake them before you . . . that the God of Israel did witness that I shook your iniquities from my soul, and that I stand with brightness before him, and am rid of your blood” (2 Nephi 9:44). Note that Jacob was not concerned publicly with his own sins and transgressions. He was worried about the sins of others making him unclean. King Benjamin also performed the same ritual: “I say unto you that I have caused that ye should assemble yourselves together that I might rid my garments of your blood, at this period of time when I am about to go down to my grave, that I might go down in peace, and my immortal spirit may join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God” (Mosiah 2:28). Like Jacob, Benjamin was worried about being soiled with others’ sins. Moroni expressed the same sentiment in one of his last homilies, namely, that the Book of Mormon was “written that we may rid our garments of the blood of our brethren” (Mormon 9:35).⁶⁶

It would also seem that prophets are not the only individuals who must become clean from the wickedness in their environment. In the early years of the Restoration, the Lord told the “first laborers in this last kingdom” to “assemble yourselves together, and organize yourselves, and prepare yourselves, and sanctify yourselves; yea, purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, that I may make you clean; that I may testify unto your Father, and your God, and my God, that you are clean from the blood of this wicked generation” (D&C 88:74–75).

Though the Lord was surely concerned that the “first laborers in this last kingdom” repent of their personal faults and sins, this passage seems to suggest the same concept that Jacob, Benjamin, and Moroni expressed. As Elder McConkie explained, “Thus through their faithfulness the elders have power to become clean from the blood and sins of this generation.”⁶⁷

It is possible that the earth, in like manner and in preparation for eventual celestialization, was physically washed and symbolically cleansed so that it could become free from the blood and sins of the mortals who polluted its surface. So might the earth, like King Benjamin, metaphorically sing the praises of a just God for the Flood of Noah that washed away the blood and sins of the generations who inhabited or will inhabit this earth.

NOTES

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, act 1, lines 152–58.
2. David Holland has tangentially explored Mormonism's relationship to nineteenth-century evangelicalism, including the Methodist background of some of its early converts. See David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 141–57.
3. William Trollope, *Analecta Theologica: A Digested and Arranged Compendium of the Most Approved Commentaries on the New Testament* (London: T. Calldel, 1835), 2:625.
4. Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers, Volume II: The Epistle to the Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and the Revelation* (London: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1866), 816.
5. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume I: The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866), 141.
6. Edward Hayes Plumptre, *The General Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890), 136.
7. For most traditional Christians, the words *sacrament* and *ordinance* are somewhat interchangeable, though some congregations prefer one or the other. In this paper, we will consistently follow Latter-day Saint practice of speaking of all Christian sacraments as ordinances.
8. It must be added parenthetically that, though important to some, for many Christian groups the distinction between symbolic immersion and sacramental baptism is purely academic.
9. We want to thank Spencer Fluhman for suggesting some of the ideas in this paragraph.

10. “To the Honorable Men of the World,” *The Evening and the Morning Star*, August 3, 1832, 21.
11. W. W. Phelps, “Letter No. 4,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 67.
12. W. W. Phelps, “Letter No. 9,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, July 1835, 146.
13. In fact, most of the statements we review about the “sins of the earth” being washed away in the Flood are ambiguous. The straightforward reading would be that “her sins” were sins the earth had committed. However, in each case, a more nuanced reading would be that earth was cleansed of human sins.
14. See, for example, the beliefs outlined already in Mosiah 18:12–14 and Moroni 6:2–3.
15. Without mentioning “remission of her sins,” Phelps again spoke in similar terms in his 1844 pamphlet for Joseph Smith’s presidential platform: “God . . . cleansed the violence of the earth with a flood.” W. W. Phelps, “Gen. Smith’s Views on the Government and Policy of the U.S.,” *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1844, 532. This piece was initially published in pamphlet form as *General Smith’s Views on the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States* (Nauvoo, IL: John Taylor, 1844), 8. Although authorship of this piece is attributed to Joseph Smith, it was in fact ghostwritten by Phelps. See Michael Hicks, “Joseph Smith, W. W. Phelps, and the Poetic Paraphrase of ‘The Vision,’” *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 74; Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 47–48.
16. Lorenzo Snow, *The Only Way to Be Saved* (London: D. Chalmers, 1841), 3–4; italics in original.
17. Snow, *The Only Way to Be Saved*, 6–7.
18. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 1:331.
19. Pratt does discuss this issue more fully in this speech (on the same page, 331) but only in that he says the earth was polluted by the “sins of the posterity of Adam.” He generally leaves the impression implicitly that the baptism of the earth was the same priesthood ordinance performed for mortals.
20. Orson Pratt, *Water Baptism* (Liverpool: L.D.S. Book and Star Depot, 1856), 37.
21. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:314.
22. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:323.

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23. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:274.
24. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:83.
25. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:74–75.
26. Orson F. Whitney, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:266.
27. Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, April 1908, 91.
28. Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, April 1927, 100.
29. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 127.
30. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:320; emphasis in original. One year earlier, in an antievolution polemic, Smith made this same point, with the same citations of Young and Pratt as his support. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 433–36.
31. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 289; italics in original. McConkie made similar remarks on this subject in his commentary on the life of Jesus. See Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary, Book II* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 356.
32. F. Kent Nielsen, “The Gospel and the Scientific View: How Earth Came to Be,” *Ensign*, September 1980, 67.
33. Donald W. Parry, “The Flood and the Tower of Babel,” *Ensign*, January 1998, 41.
34. Joseph B. Romney, “Noah, The Great Preacher of Righteousness,” *Ensign*, February 1998, 22.
35. The quote is from the updated publication of the original book, Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 333.
36. *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 55.
37. “Flood at Noah’s Time,” online at <http://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/flood-at-noahs-time>. See also “Noah,” online at <https://www.lds.org/topics/noah?lang=eng>. “In the New Testament, Peter explained that the flood was a ‘like figure’ or symbol of baptism (1 Peter 3:20–21). Just as the earth was immersed in water, so we must be baptized by water and by the Spirit before we can enter the celestial kingdom.” The use of the word *cleansing* in this quote makes the Flood at least a symbol but not necessarily an ordinance.
38. W. Cleon Skousen, *The First 2,000 Years* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1953), 217.

39. Victor L. Ludlow, *Unlocking the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 9.
40. D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *The Old Testament Verse By Verse: Volume One, Genesis through 2 Samuel, Psalms* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 76–77.
41. For other recent and similar commentary, see Susan Easton Black, *400 Questions & Answers about the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 2013), 38. See also Ronald P. Millett, “In Defense of the Prophet Noah and the Great Flood,” *Meridian Magazine*, posted on March 12, 2014, online at <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/1/14059>. Somewhat surprisingly, given the recent trend, BYU religion professor Kerry Muhlestein does not include a discussion of the Flood being the earth’s baptism in his recent commentary. See Kerry Muhlestein, *The Essential Old Testament Companion* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 2013).
42. As we will mention later, some Latter-day Saint scholars have objected to this general view.
43. However, this un-nuanced connotation may not always be intended. For example, President Taylor’s quote cited above, speaking of the time “the earth was immersed” as “a period of baptism,” may mean nothing more than that the earth was symbolically cleansed by water. Or, he could have meant an ordinance involving immersion that was necessary for the earth’s salvation. Without more clarification, readers are left to their own interpretation. *Journal of Discourses*, 26:74–75. His words could be construed as a tautology, since *baptism* can mean *immersion*: “the earth was immersed,” and this was, accordingly, “a period of immersion.”
44. Duane E. Jeffery, “Noah’s Flood: Modern Scholarship and Mormon Traditions,” *Sunstone*, October 2004, 36.
45. We have been unable to locate anything akin to this in mainstream nineteenth-century Protestant teaching, though no doubt there were spiritualists who saw living spirits in inanimate objects and Romantic thinkers like Goethe—as well as the seventeenth-century philosopher and pantheist Spinoza—who saw various levels of some kind of “divine” nature in all objects.
46. *The Evening and the Morning Star*, August 1832, 18; “Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch,” *Times and Seasons*, November 1840, 193–96; “Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch,” *Times and Seasons*, October 1843, 336–38.

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47. Since in older English, before grammatical genders were dropped for nouns, the word *earth* was construed as feminine, and since both words in Hebrew for *earth* are grammatically feminine, it would not have been as anachronistic (least of all as poetic license) to speak of the earth as female. For example, note the use of the feminine pronoun *her* in a scripture that was familiar to nineteenth-century Bible readers, “And now *art* thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand” (Genesis 4:11). Even today many people lovingly call the earth and its environments “Mother Nature.”
48. Brigham Young explained, “Adam was made from the dust of an earth, but not from the dust of this earth. He was made as you and I are made, and no person was ever made upon any other principle.” *Journal of Discourses*, 3:316. That is, as he said on another occasion, “When you tell me that father Adam was made as we make adobies from the earth, you tell me what I deem an idle tale. When you tell me that the beasts of the field were produced in that manner, you are speaking idle words devoid of meaning. There is no such thing in all the eternities where the Gods dwell. Mankind are here because they are the offspring of parents.” *Journal of Discourses*, 7:285. Similarly, in verse 43, in speaking of saving Noah in the ark, the text states that the Lord “held it [the ark] in his own hand.” It would be absurd to assume the verse is saying that God literally held the ark in his hand during the Flood. Instead, the image of God holding something “in His own hand” is a beautiful metaphor for his watchful care and particular protection, much like the poetic image of God protecting Isaiah “in the shadow of his hand” (Isaiah 49:2). The same is true of the phrase in verse 47: “the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world.” There is no literal ovine lamb that will be offered as sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Literal lambs were offered only in similitude of the one salvific offering of the Savior, who is symbolized by the “lamb without blemish” (1 Peter 1:19; cf. Leviticus 23:12; Exodus 12:5).
49. See also the poetic symbolism in the Doctrine and Covenants 88:45, “The earth rolls upon her wings.”
50. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:199.
51. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:281–82.
52. Orson Pratt makes a philologic leap that may not be justified when he interprets Isaiah. Isaiah does not say the earth will die, only that it will “wax old.” Without going too much into Isaiah’s meaning, the Hebrew word for *wax old* is *bālāb*, “to be used up, to be worn out.” Ludwig Kohler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew*

- and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:132. The word carries the connotation not of dying but rather of reaching the condition where the object is no longer useful. For example, Isaiah's word that is translated "wax old" is the same word that is used in Genesis 18:12 to describe Sarah, who is too old to have children. Sarah was certainly not dead, though she considered herself "waxed old," that is, "worn out." Nevertheless, even though we believe that questionable proof texting is involved, Orson Pratt is correct when he states that the earth is alive, but not in the sense of having a separate, sentient spirit. It is alive in that it sustains life, will cease to sustain life, and will again be raised to a life of service.
53. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:199. In an article in the *Seer*, Orson Pratt gave a more lengthy explanation of what he believed: "Unintelligent materials are incapable of being endowed with any kind of powers, much less with the wise and intelligent powers that characterize the workings of the universe. God is every moment in nature, and every moment acts upon nature, and through nature. . . . If God should withdraw himself from nature or should cease to act upon it, that portion of it without life or intelligence, (if there be any such portion) would immediately cease all action . . . or in other words unintelligent nature would be entirely dead." Orson Pratt, "Powers of Nature," *The Seer*, March 1854, 227.
 54. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:277.
 55. Fred C. Collier, comp., *The Teachings of President Brigham Young, vol. 3: 1852–1854* (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1987), 240–41.
 56. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:172.
 57. Jeffery, "Noah's Flood," 27–45.
 58. Jeffery, "Noah's Flood," 36.
 59. Jeffery, "Noah's Flood," 36–37.
 60. Ben Spackman to Stephen O. Smoot, email. Some of Spackman's work on Latter-day Saint topics includes the following: "Swimming in Symbols," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 329–36; "Negative Questions in the Book of Mormon," *Insights* 26, no. 4 (2006): 2–3; "The Story of Judah and Tamar," *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 65–76; "Why Bible Translations Differ: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Religious Educator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 31–66.
 61. As Pratt stated it, "It has seemed good unto the great Redeemer to institute ordinances for the cleansing of the earth, not from the original sin, but from the sins of the posterity of Adam." *Journal of Discourses*, 1:331.

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62. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:290.
63. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, "Earth," 210.
64. Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 86.
65. Perhaps 2 Nephi 2:14 applies to the earth, insomuch as the earth is a thing "to be acted upon."
66. See also Acts 18:6 and Ezekiel 3:20; 33:6, 9.
67. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, "Cleanliness," 147.