

Book of Mormon Anachronisms Part 5: Christianity in the pre-Christian Book of Mormon

Most of the Book of Mormon takes place prior to the coming of Christ, yet the Nephite scripture includes what many believe are uniquely Christian doctrines and terminology. This paper explores the accusation that the Book of Mormon—if authentic—should not be using Christian terms and ideas in a pre-Christian text.

There are three important factors to note in an attempt to understand this issue:

(1) We know from modern scripture that the Gospel was revealed to Adam and other pre-Christian prophets. Just as the Lord restored the fullness of the gospel through Joseph Smith, so likewise, Jesus restored teachings to His Church that had previously been taught prior to the apostasy of the Jews. The same thing had happened centuries before with Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses—each of whom restored truth to their dispensation (the ancient Apocalypse of Adam, claims that Adam was baptized).¹

While basic Gospel principles have been taught through various dispensations, we should not expect that the Book of Mormon Church exactly resemble the New Testament Church, nor that they exactly resemble the modern LDS Church. New revelations and insights have been given to the modern Church that these other churches may not have had.

It's also important to note that since all other Gospel dispensations have ended in apostasy, that some of the basic Gospel principles might have disappeared or become corrupted. And just as other non-LDS Christians retained many truths, so likewise when Jesus restored the gospel, contemporary Jews believed authentic doctrines that had been revealed to their ancestors ages ago (although some of these teachings had also become corrupt).

(2) Mormon, who edited and abridged most of the Book of Mormon, lived after the visitation of Christ. His Christian understanding and hindsight would certainly have influenced his retelling of events.

(3) Joseph Smith “translated” the plates into the common scriptural vernacular of his day—King James English. He, like Mormon, would have translated the text into familiar concepts and terminology.² For example, some detractors have criticized the Book of Mormon for using the French word “adieu” (Jacob 7:27), claiming that surely the Nephites didn't speak French! No, and neither did they speak English, and yet we have an English translation. Joseph used the terms in his vocabulary to convey the intended meaning of the Book of Mormon text. The same thing is true for the Book of Mormon's use of the word “Christ.” Whereas pre-Christian Lehités would not have been familiar with such a term, “Christ” correctly connotes a particular person to a modern audience.

Baptism

Many critics have charged the Book of Mormon with fraud for claiming that the Nephites were baptized by immersion for the remission of sins centuries before the coming of Christ. Today, however, we find that many supposedly unique Christian doctrines had roots in early Judaism (it is also interesting to note that a form of baptism was known and practiced in ancient Mesoamerica).³

Shortly after the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, an article in Time magazine noted that the most “startling disclosure” of the documents was that “the sect possessed, years before Christ, a terminology and practice that have always been considered uniquely Christian... They believed in redemption and in the immortality of the soul... Many phrases, symbols and precepts similar to those in Essene literature are used in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of John and the Pauline Epistles.”⁴

For many years most scholars claimed that “baptism”—as Christians understand it—was unknown prior to New Testament times. Some scholars conceded that the Jews practiced a type of baptism but they made great efforts to point out that the Jewish baptism was a ritual washing and it was very different from the *unique* Christian baptism. Although acknowledging the existence of baptism outside of and older than Christianity, one non-Mormon scholar wrote: “Different reasons have been sought to explain what John meant by the baptism that he administered: a unique baptism, by *immersion and involving moral undertaking*.”⁵

The Dead Sea Scrolls presented scholars with a wealth of information concerning ancient Jewish practices. Interestingly, a number of large water basins were discovered at Qumran (the location of the Dead Sea Scroll community). Nibley recalls that when he first visited Qumran in 1966, “Christian and Jewish scholars vigorously denied that the tanks, basins and water-conduits connecting them had anything to do with baptism or ritual ablutions [Jewish baptism]....”⁶ Likewise, one non-Mormon scholar, writing in the Biblical Archaeology Review (BAR) noted:

Strangely enough, although a large number of water installations were found [at Qumran] during the seven-year course of the excavations, none was originally identified as a *miqueh* [the word for the Jewish baptisms]. Instead, they were regarded as ordinary baths or as cisterns for the collection of water in this arid area.⁷

Thanks to further findings, however (both in the writings of the Qumranian sect and by the discoveries of archaeologists), we now know that the pre-Christian Qumranians were practicing a ritual not unlike Christian baptism. La Sor, writing for the BAR, noted that as late as 1973 one renowned

Bible scholar—while recognizing that the cisterns were “baths”—was still unsure as to their ritual significance. Five years later, this same Bible scholar believed that evidence did, in fact, suggest that the baths were “intended for the ceremony of ritual immersion.”⁸

Another non-Mormon scholar has noted:

The discovery that the Qumran sect practiced baptismal rites is nothing new; so too did most Jewish sects in the New Testament period. What is new is that these rites were practiced in relation to a movement of repentance, of entry into a new Covenant (and a new Covenanted Israel, the sect itself) in preparation for an impending divine judgment.⁹

It was becoming clear that Christian baptism for the cleansing of sins, by immersion, did *not* begin in the New Testament. As La Sor explains:

Until the discoveries of modern archaeology, we knew about ancient Jewish ritual immersion baths only from literary texts. Now, however, archaeology has provided us with numerous examples of Jewish ritual immersion baths, called *miqva'ot* (singular, *miqveh*), dating to the late Second Temple period, prior to and during the time when John the Baptist lived. These *miqva'ot* undoubtedly provided the background for Christian baptism....¹⁰

La Sor adds that a 1984 study by Bryant G. Wood of the University of Toronto “has shown rather conclusively that some of the water installations at Qumran were indeed *miqva'ot*.... The importance the Qumranites attached to purificatory rites and water ablutions is now documented in the Temple Scroll.... almost surely these Jewish *miqva'ot* provided the background for Christian baptism.”¹¹ In addition he notes that “complete immersion was required,” and then he quotes from one ancient text:

“Whosoever immerses himself must immerse his whole body.... Even the hair must be totally immersed.... For immersion to be valid, no part of the body’s surface may be untouched by water.”¹²

Pre-Christians practiced baptism, by immersion, for the remission of sin and covenantal entrance into a community of believers, just as the Book of Mormon reveals.



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¹ *Apocalypse of Adam* 3-5, as cited in Blake Ostler, “Clothed Upon: A Unique Aspect of Christian Antiquity,” *BYU Studies* v22:1 (Provo: BYU, Fall 1982), 39.

² See Blake Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Spring 1987): 66-123

³ John L. Sorenson, “Digging into the Book of Mormon: Changing Understanding of Ancient America and Its Scripture,” *Ensign* (September 1984), 60.

⁴ Quoted in Hugh Nibley, “More Voices from the Dust,” *Instructor* (March 1956), 71.

⁵ J.J. Von Allman, *A Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 31; italics added.

⁶ Hugh Nibley, *Nibley On The Timely And The Timeless* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1978), 177.

⁷ William Sanford La Sor, “Discovering What Jewish Miqva’ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (January/February 1987), 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁹ Matthew Black, *The Scrolls And Christian Origins* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 97.

¹⁰ La Sor, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 52, 54.