

Baptism for the Dead and the Twelve Oxen Under the Baptismal Font

By Sandra Tanner

In 1840 Joseph Smith declared that those who had died before hearing the LDS gospel could have vicarious baptisms done on their behalf. RLDS historian Roger D. Launius observed:

Joseph Smith apparently first considered the propriety of baptism for the dead after reading the only biblical reference to it: “Else what shall they do, which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?” (I Cor. 15:29). His consideration led to the full-fledged development of the doctrine. He made the first public disclosure of it on 15 August 1840 in Nauvoo at the funeral sermon of Seymour Brunson. Simon Baker later remembered that Joseph Smith told the congregation that although baptism was necessary for salvation, “people could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and . . . the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God” (in Ehat and Cook 1980, 49). At the October 1840 conference the Prophet instructed the Saints of Nauvoo about baptism for the dead and called for the construction of a temple, in part to accommodate the ritual which was then being conducted in the Mississippi River . . . (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 63)

Joseph Smith’s plans for the temple included the design an unusual baptismal font in which they could perform their proxy baptisms. Historian M. Guy Bishop wrote:

At the Church’s October 1841 general conference, Joseph Smith shocked the gathered congregation by stating, “There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord’s House” (HC 4:426). The Nauvoo Temple project had been announced the previous January, but little progress had been made. In this instance Joseph Smith may have suspended the baptisms to motivate the Saints to press forward with the temple since it was just one month later that the baptismal font in the temple’s basement was finished and dedicated. The oval-shaped wooden font was to be temporary until it could be replaced with one of cut stone (Colvin 1962), but must have seemed elegant. (*Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 92-3)

In the *History of the Church* we read:

The baptismal font is situated in the center of the basement room, under the main hall of the Temple; it is constructed of pine timber, and put together of staves tongued and grooved, oval shaped, sixteen feet long east

and west, and twelve feet wide, seven feet high from the foundation, the basin four feet deep, the moulding of the cap and base are formed of beautiful carved work in antique style. . . .

The font stands upon twelve oxen, four on each side, and two at each end, their heads, shoulders, and fore legs projecting out from under the font; they are carved out of pine plank, glued together, and copied after the most beautiful five-year-old steer that could be found in the country, . . . (*History of the Church*, vol. 4, p. 446)



1912 Photo of the Salt Lake Temple Baptismal Font
(*The House of the Lord*, p. 117)

The idea for a large basin on the backs of twelve oxen came from the description of Solomon’s temple in the Old Testament, I Kings 7:25 and 2 Chronicles 4:1-4. However, this basin was used by the priests for cleansing while officiating in the sacrifices of animals. It was never used for baptism, let alone baptism for the dead.

The baptismal fonts in the LDS temples are only used for proxy baptisms of the dead. Baptisms of the living are preformed in the local Stake Center and would resemble other church’s fonts.

Oxen Cut From Twelve To Six

In some of the newer, smaller LDS temples they are only using six oxen in a half circle, against a wall of mirrors. In 1982 Peggy Fletcher commented:

Some months ago, while perusing periodicals for our section called “Mormon Media Image,” I spotted a curious item in the newsletter of a group who call themselves,

“Saints Alive in Jesus” (a group fervently dedicated to “exposing the Mormon fraud and reconverting its members to Christianity”). It read:

The LDS church unveiled plans for the smaller, economy size one story temples recently. Ten of the already announced new temples will use the new design. One interesting difference is that the baptismal font will rest on 6 oxen rather than 12, and a mirror will be used to create the other 6.

The newsletter went on to query sarcastically, One can only wonder which of the 12 tribes have been disenfranchised for the sake of a little economy?

Naturally I presumed it to be a false rumor, a bit silly at that, another attempt by this group to discredit the Church, but thought it worth checking out anyway. To my dismay the Church Building Department confirmed it to be a fact. Six oxen and mirrors. The brain reels with the possibilities that introduces. Said one of my editors, “Effective placement of mirrors in local chapels could quickly double sacrament meeting attendance while cutting in half the number of officers needed to staff the ward.” Missionaries wouldn’t need companions, only mirrors.

What sort of mind, I asked myself, came up with this innovative scheme to save money, substituting tricks and sleight of hand for sacred symbolism? (*Sunstone Magazine*, July 1982, p. 18)

Forerunner To LDS Baptism For The Dead

The following quote from *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* may provide some clues for those wondering if Joseph Smith could have gotten his idea for proxy baptism from a contemporary source:

Guy Bishop’s comment [in *Dialogue*, vol. 23, no. 2] that baptism for the dead was not a part of nineteenth-century American religion and that it was left to Joseph Smith and the Mormons “to establish a doctrinal stance on the subject” (p. 85) led me to reflect on a piece of information I picked up some years ago. This historical reference links the doctrine and practice with the eighteenth-century Seventh Day German Baptists of the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania, and I thought it might be worth sharing with DIALOGUE readers.

In his book *Conrad Weiser: Friend of Colonists and Mohawk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945), Paul A. Wallace gives an account of eighteenth-century frontiersman Conrad Weiser’s experience at Ephrata (c. 1738). In a chapter entitled “Conrad Weiser Becomes A Priest After the Order of Melchizedek” Wallace says:

Out of the brain of Emanuel Eckerling (Elimelech) there sprang that same year, 1738, the ingenious concept of the Baptism for the Dead.

Persons who had died without the grace of total immersion might yet be saved if they were baptized by proxy. Peter Miller, who never lost his head amid all these insinuating mumeries, was against it; but [Conrad] Beissel [leader of the Seventh Day Baptists], ready as always to follow a religious wil-o’-the-wisp, set his seal upon it. Emmanuel Eckerling was the first to receive baptism in this kind. In a pool of the Cocalico, under Beissel’s hands, he was immersed on behalf of his departed mother. The principle once accepted, the thing became popular, and the next world must soon have been swarming with souls so astonished to find themselves sainted by Cocalico immersion in abstentia. (p. 104)

Wallace cites as his source volume 1 of J. F. Sachse’s *The German Sectarians of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1899), which adds that baptism for the dead was “practiced for many years” at Ephrata, that it outlived and went beyond that community and was accepted by people of other faiths. Sachse also claims that as late as the 1840s there were traditions of “children having become substitutes in Baptism for parents, or vice versa” (p. 366).

Whether there is any connection between Emanuel Eckerling’s baptism for the dead in Pennsylvania and Joseph Smith’s thinking a century later in Nauvoo would no doubt be difficult to ascertain. However, if we have learned anything about Mormon history over the past couple of decades, it is that nothing is as simple or as obvious as it seems—including perhaps what we thought was our unique Mormon concept of baptism for the dead. (Letters to the Editor, Frederick S. Buchanan, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 24, no. 1, p. 9)

Mormons commonly refer to Hebrews 11:40 as a support for their ordinances for the dead. However, this particular verse was rewritten by Joseph Smith in his revision of the Bible. Brent Metcalfe gave the following critique of Smith’s change:

Smith periodically incorporated revisions into the Bible he later discarded because the King James Version (KJV) better articulated his Nauvoo, Illinois, theology. For example, the KJV renders Hebrews 11:40, “God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”

Smith altered this to read: “God having provided some better things for them through their sufferings, for without sufferings they could not be made perfect.” [See *Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible*]

Later, however, when he enunciated a doctrine of vicarious baptism for the dead, he reverted to the KJV as a proof text. Salvation of the dead, he insisted, “is necessary and essential to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers—that they without us cannot be made perfect [KJV Heb. 11:40]—neither can we without our dead be made perfect” (D&C 128:15). Smith here specifically

ascribed authorship of the KJV rendition to Paul, yet the JSR had suggested otherwise. Smith abandoned his JSR emendation that the living faithful are purified by suffering in favor of the KJV as the redemption of the unconverted deceased. (Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions About Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 179)

Interestingly, Smith's revision of Hebrews 11:40 is listed in the footnote of the current LDS printing of the King James Version (see p. 1534). Thus leaving one to ponder which reading is considered the "inspired" one.

For a good treatment critiquing the LDS doctrine of baptism for the dead, see this online article: <http://www.irr.org/mit/baptism-for-the-dead.html>



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