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The Baptism of Little Children in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

In a letter to his son Moroni, Mormon warns against the practice of baptizing little children. He identifies two false assumptions of his day used to justify infant baptism: little children are born with sin (see Moroni 8:8) and will suffer divine punishment in hell if they die without having been baptized (see Moroni 8:13). While the exact nature of this aberrant practice is unknown, it was apparently common enough among the Nephites of Mormon's day to warrant swift and unequivocal prophetic censure. Mormon describes the rite as particularly wicked and erroneous in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When the Spanish arrived in the New World in the mid-16th century, Mesoamericans were practicing several different kinds of water purification rituals that involved young children. Bernardino de Sahagún reported that the Aztec midwives ritually bathed newborn children, invoking the cleansing power of the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue. Implicit in the practice was the assumption that infants may inherit evil and impurity at birth, as can be seen from the words the midwife spoke during the ceremony:

Perhaps he cometh laden with evil; who knoweth the manner in which he cometh laden with the evil burdens of his mother, of his father? With what blotch, what filth, what evil of the moth-

er, of the father doth the baby come laden? He is in thy hands. Receive him, cleanse him, wash him, for he is especially entrusted to thee, for he is delivered into thy hands. Remove the blotch, the filth, the evil of his mother, of his father! And possibly he cometh laden with vile [*sic*]. May that with which he cometh laden, the evil, the bad, be washed away, be destroyed. . . . May the filth be washed away! May it be washed away, may it be destroyed in the way that has been assigned.¹

The midwife's prayer also reflects the belief that infants can be cleansed of those inherent sins and impurities through ritual washing with water: "May she [the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue] receive thee! May she wash thee, may she cleanse thee! . . . May she cleanse thy heart; may she make it fine, good! May she give thee fine, good conduct!"² After the baptism it was said, "Now the baby liveth again; he is born again; now he becometh clean, he becometh pure again."³


The Codex Nuttall, a pre-Conquest painted picture book from the area of Oaxaca, Mexico, shows what appears to be a Mixtec baptism by immersion. The drawing depicts a woman underwater emerging from a tortoise shell, an iconographic statement of rebirth (see the accompanying illustration).⁴



The Mixtec Codex Nuttall from ancient Mexico depicts a woman being reborn (baptized) underwater. © Dover Publications, Inc.

According to Friar Diego de Landa, the Maya of Yucatán practiced a pre-Columbian water purification ritual known as *caput sihil*, meaning "to be born anew or again." No one could marry or become a Maya priest without having been thus purified. Children may have been baptized in this manner as early as three years of age.⁵ Of the ancient Maya community once located in present-day Mérida, Mexico, Landa recorded, "[I]f anyone died without baptism they believed he would have to suffer more torments in hell than a baptized person."⁶

Thus the idea that little children who die unbaptized will suffer torment for their inherited evil or impurity was not peculiar to American discourse in the early 19th century, as some detractors of the Book of Mormon have claimed.⁷ Rather, apparently it was current in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica as well. From the Book of Mormon, we learn that the beliefs underlying

the practice of baptizing little children were known in the New World at least as early as the fourth century A.D. 

Notes

1. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (1969), bk. VI, sec. 32, pp. 175–76.
2. *Ibid.*, 175.

3. *Ibid.*, 202.
4. *The Codex Nuttall: A Picture Manuscript from Ancient Mexico*, ed. Zelia Nuttall (1975), folio 16.
5. See Alfred M. Tozzer, trans., *Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (1941), 102.
6. *Ibid.*, n. 462.
7. Alexander Campbell, for example, made this claim in “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (7 February 1831): 93.

By Matthew P. Roper

Conference continued from page 1

Terryl L. Givens, author of the notable recent Oxford University Press book *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*, spoke on “The Book of Mormon and the Future(s) of Mormonism.” He observed that the factual historicity of the Book of Mormon is the peculiar “scandal” of Mormonism, just as the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus is the “scandal” of Christianity in general, and argued that the Book of Mormon finds its full power only among those who accept the supernatural account of its origins offered by the Prophet Joseph Smith and endorsed by the Witnesses to the plates.

Other speakers treated such topics as the vital place of the Bible in Mormonism, Book of Mormon teachings on the redemption of fallen humanity, Latter-day Saint Christology, the location of Mor-

mon theology on the American religious landscape, and the future of studies of Latter-day Saint doctrine. One panel discussion concentrated on plural marriage and the Latter-day Saint family.

Most of the respondents to the presentations—including philosophers Stephen Davis and Nicholas Wolterstorff, historian Ann Taves, and British theologian and social scientist Douglas Davies—were not Latter-day Saints. They represented diverse disciplines such as philosophy, theology, American religious history, and biblical studies and were drawn from a variety of institutions. Exchanges between presenters and respondents were uniformly respectful, even friendly, although respect did not necessarily guarantee agreement. Conversations continued, among both participants and members of the audience, during lunches and dinners throughout the course of the program.

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FARMS Review continued from page 1

Readers will appreciate the fuller picture of Cowdery’s character that emerges in this review essay.

Readers interested in the intersection of Mormon and Jewish thought will enjoy the illuminating background information in Jeffrey R. Chadwick’s review of *Covenants and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, edited by Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward; and *Jews and Mormons: Two Houses of Israel*, by Frank J. Johnson and Rabbi William J. Leffler. Chadwick also reviews Harris Lenowitz’s *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights*, a fascinating look at Jews who during their lifetimes were thought to be the promised Messiah, beginning with Jesus and ending with Menachem Mendel Schneerson in New York.

Noel B. Reynolds and John L. Sorenson separately review Terryl L. Givens’s *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*. Reynolds sketches the book’s contents and praises Givens’s originality of thought and exemplary professional approach that helped it “[break] through the publishing barrier that has prevented other related manuscripts from being brought out by leading academic presses.” Sorenson adds, “The combination of Givens’s careful scholarship, felicitous writing, and wide scope combine to make *By the Hand of Mormon* one of a handful of must-read, must-own volumes for serious students of the Book of Mormon.”

John W. Welch reviews the rise of chiasmus in biblical studies in the 1820s, commencing with works [continued on page 4](#)