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Confirmatory Evidences of "Mormonism": Baptism Early in America

Author(s): Franklin S. Harris, Jr.

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Abstract: Catholic missionaries who arrived in America found the natives practicing baptism and were horrified. Some cultures sprinkled while others immersed the infant, but it was always meant to lead the individual toward a better life and salvation in the kingdom of God. These practices are explained by the Book of Mormon text that informs the reader that baptism was introduced early in America's history.

failure. No Latter-day Saint of sound mind can ever be guilty of suicide. For all Latter-day Saints the thought of suicide is abhorrent—the act is a rebellion against God. It means the guilty person refuses to accept of God's providences. It means that Satan has captured a human soul. Of course, we deeply sympathize with the individual, but condemn the act.

Suffering may be very hard to bear, yet it is often a blessing—a blessing in disguise, it may truthfully be said. Hence, suffering serves a useful purpose in the divine economy. At times it may not carry the slightest taint of failure, Again it may; for it may be the inevitable penalty of broken law. The Lord has given great promises touching health as a reward for the complete observance of the Word of Wisdom. Good health is, then, dependent upon obeying the laws of health. Fear of the consequences—suffering—of broken laws has a wholesome effect. Some writer has said that if we can really sympathize with suffering we must have suffered. Suffering, then, may mellow, refine, sweeten what would be an otherwise hard and haughty human soul.

Yes, suffering has its place in the scheme of things. It serves a purpose even though the sufferer may be entirely free from the taint of sin. But suffering and success are not antagonistic entities. The joy of living—the reward of sacrifice and service, one or both—does not ban suffering. Among the gentlest and sweetest souls are sometimes found those who suffer much. A person that accepts his lot, does his best, loving both God and man, is a success and will experience a joy in living.

May every pure-minded and honest-hearted soul have the strength, the courage, and the will to achieve success during the year 1934.—M.

CONFIRMATORY EVIDENCES OF "MORMONISM"

BAPTISM EARLY IN AMERICA

IN the *Star* of December 21st, mention was made of the surprising customs and beliefs which Catholic missionaries found in America in their proselyting efforts after Columbus's discovery in 1492. One of the most striking of these was the practice of baptism. The meaning of the ordinance, and the way it was performed led those early Fathers to ascribe its institution either to the devil, or to some representative of the Gospel from the Church at Jerusalem—probably the Apostle Thomas. D. G. Brinton tells us:

The astonishment of the Romanist missionaries rose to horror when they discovered among various nations a rite of baptism of appalling similarity to their own, connected with the imposing of a name, done avowedly for the purpose of freeing from inherent sin, believed to produce a regeneration of the spiritual nature; nay, in more than one instance

called by an indigenous (local) word signifying "to be born again."^{*} Such a rite was of immemorial antiquity among the Cherokees (a tribe of Indians in the Eastern United States), Aztecs, Mayas and Peruvians." *Myths of the New World*, 1868, pp. 125-26.)

Of the remote antiquity of this practice we are also assured by Bancroft,[†] and by DeRoo, who says:

Christian missionaries and other writers of that time (of the Conquest by Spain) assure that baptism—to all intents the sacrament of baptism—was administered in several American districts from time immemorial." (*History of America Before Columbus*, vol. 1, p. 466.)

Sahagun, the most important authority concerning the Aztec religion of Mexico, and who lived contemporaneously with the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, gives us this concerning the rite of baptism among the Aztecs:

The one baptizing sprinkled water on the head of the infant saying, "O, my child, take and receive water of the Lord of the world, which is our life, it is to wash and to purify; may these drops remove the sin which was given to thee before the creation of the world, since all of us are under its power." . . . The rite was concluded with: "Now is he purified and cleansed afresh, and our mother the water again bringeth him into the world." (*Historia de Nueva Espana*, lib. 6, cap. 37.)

In regard to the manner of baptism and the age of those baptized, Brinton tells us:

In Peru the child was immersed in the fluid. . . . In either country sprinkling could take the place of immersion. The Cherokees believe that unless the rite is punctually performed when the child is three days old it will inevitably die." (*Myths of the New World*, p. 128.)

Kastner, an authority, also speaks of immersion.[‡] J. Eric Thompson wrote (1931) that among the Maya, children were baptized when about twelve years old.[§]

That baptism was not just a formal ceremony is shown by the respect and meaning which was attached to it in Yucatan and in Central America. Bishop Landa, a bishop of Yucatan, who wrote about the middle of the sixteenth century on the religious beliefs of the Mayas, says this:||

They have such a respect for baptism that those who have sins on their consciences or who feel themselves inclined to commit sin, confess to the priest in order to be in a state to receive baptism. . . . They believe that they receive therefrom a disposition inclined to good conduct, that it guarantees them from all temptations of the devil, with respect to temporal things, and by means of this rite and a good life they hope to secure salvation.

This aid made possible in leading a good life and in obtaining "salvation" is told also by DeRoo:

It was the duty of all the Mayas to have their children baptized, for

^{*}Also stated by Herrera, *History of America*, quoted in *Scrapbook of Mormon Literature*, vol. 2, p. 288; Gann and Thompson, *History of the Maya*, p. 140.

[†]Bancroft, *Native Races*, vol. 3, p. 119 (quoted by Lesuer, *Indian Legends*, p. 151).

[‡]Quoted by DeRoo, *History of America Before Columbus*, p. 466.

[§]Gann and Thompson, *History of the Maya*, p. 140.

^{||}Quoted in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 11, p. 529.

they believed that by this ablution they received purer nature, were protected against evil spirits and possible misfortunes. They held, moreover, that an unbaptized person, whether man or woman, could not lead a good life nor do anything well. (*History of America Before Columbus*, vol. 1, p. 467.)

From these various quotations that have come to us through historical research, it is evident that baptism was practised in America by various peoples. It is also evident that they understood baptism to be a "rebirth," cleansing them from sin and making possible a better life and salvation. But the source from whence the knowledge of such an ordinance, and its significance, came to the Indians is still a puzzle to historians.

Once more, however, Scripture holds the key. The Book of Mormon tells us that the meaning and mode of baptism was taught to the ancestors of the Indians by prophets of God (read 2 Nephi 9 : 22-24 ; Moroni 6 and 8), and, indeed, the Saviour during His visit to the Nephites gave the following instructions regarding baptism :

Behold, ye shall go down and stand in the water, and in my name shall ye baptize them . . . saying : Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. And then shall ye immerse them in water, and come forth again out of the water. (3 Nephi 11 : 23-26.)

That baptism was practised in America before the Spaniards arrived there is evidence that the ordinance was given and explained to them at some previous time. Its importance in the religious life of the people is shown by the belief, in Yucatan, that it was necessary for salvation ; by the anxiety of the Cherokees to insure that baptism be performed ; and by the custom of the Mayas—that of waiting, as stated by Thompson, until the children reached an age of relative accountability before baptism. The dilemma in which the Catholic Fathers found themselves in trying to explain such a ritual among "savages" is solved by the Book of Mormon, which tells that the ancestors of the Indians were taught baptism by prophets of God, divinely commissioned to baptize, and also by Christ Himself.

The practice of baptism in America is another very striking evidence of the truth of the claims of the Book of Mormon, and a confirmatory evidence of "Mormonism."—FRANKLIN S. HARRIS, JR.

THE LEGEND OF QUETZALCOATL

(*Concluded from page 7*)

cured their ills and afflictions. When he wished to promulgate a law, he sent a hero whose voice could be heard a hundred leagues away, to proclaim it from the summit of Tzatzitepetl ("mountain of clamors"). Even their calendar, that causes modern science to marvel, was attributed to him.

In Quetzalcoatl's time, according to the legend, maize attained such enormous dimensions that a single ear was all a man could carry. Gourds and melons measured not less than four feet, and it was no longer necessary to dye cotton, because all colours