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Grant Underwood

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Some Reflections on the Revelation of John in Mormon Thought: Past, Present, and Future

Grant Underwood

WHEN THE INVITATION TO JOIN THIS PANEL was issued, session conveners sent me a copy of Richard Draper's paper, indicating it was "based on his Commentary on Revelation" and as such offered a glimpse of the volume's content and approach. "Feel free," they wrote, "to comment on specific things from his paper, his commentary, or the broader topic." I shall do a bit of all three in the reflections that follow.

Among the first questions that arise when approaching any new work is the matter of audience. I had always assumed that the BYU New Testament Commentary series was conceived first and foremost to speak to the broader scholarly community, to demonstrate, if you will, that LDS engagement with the Bible deserves a place at the biblical-studies table. Naturally the volumes would also be of interest to Latter-day Saints, but they would not be the target audience. Reading Richard's paper, though, made me wonder if the primary audience has actually shifted to Latter-day Saints. Statements indicating that the book of Revelation is instructive "for those living in the last days," or "the point is that the Saints must

This paper was originally presented in the Latter-day Saints and the Bible session of the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature as part of a panel response to a paper by Richard Draper entitled "Some Aspects of the Apocalypse of John from an LDS Perspective" and the recent commentary on Revelation by Draper and Rhodes: Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, BYU New Testament Commentary Series (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2013). The other panelists were Professor Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary and Professor Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary.

endure,” or “it behooves all of us to repent and help Him move the work forward,” while perfectly fine in an LDS context, strike me as in-house language less suited for an academic setting like this. While helping direct the Mormon Studies group in the American Academy of Religion, we urged LDS presenters at our annual sessions to keep the wider audience in mind and stressed that the AAR is a venue for the academic, rather than the confessional, study of religion. I imagine that the Society of Biblical Literature has a similar vision for its constituent units as well.

In this regard, I would also suggest a revision of the commentary’s promotional blurb on the series website. “Latter-day Saints,” it proclaims, “are in an excellent position to decipher and understand [Revelation’s] symbols. To these people the Lord promised [quoting the Book of Mormon] . . . ‘great and marvelous things which have been hid up from the foundation of the world. . . . And [the] revelations which I have caused to be written by my servant John [shall] be unfolded in the eyes of all the people’ (Ether 4:15–16). Now is the time of that unfolding.” Despite the excitement one might feel at the publication of a work many years in production, we should be careful not to let our enthusiasm carry us into overconfident triumphalism. On what grounds did the blurb writer decide to speak for God in proclaiming that the day of Revelation’s unfolding is now or to imply that Draper and Rhodes are the ones to unfold it? Along these lines it would also seem prudent to avoid disparaging other religious perspectives with statements like, “There is no good news in its worldview, only a lot of hokey advice,” ironically the very barb often hurled at Mormonism.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of considering a non-Mormon audience is the need to speak the language of scholarship by employing methodologies that produce reasoned argumentation rather than doctrinal assertion. Let me illustrate by referring to Joseph Smith’s reading of Revelation 1:6, something Richard references in his paper. The King James Version (KJV) renders the verse “and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father.” Richard correctly points out, “Joseph stated this should be taken literally and that the passage proved that God himself had a father.” Although it may be possible to read the

passage in this fashion, the dominant theological presuppositions and exegetical practices of Christian scholars make it unlikely that they will be persuaded by this reading. Indeed, not even Joseph Smith himself read it this way until *his* theological presuppositions about God changed later in his life. Only when he began to expound a literal, familial relationship between Deity and humanity, along with the possibility of their never-ending progress and development, could such a reading of Revelation 1:6 be imagined. Earlier, in 1832, Joseph Smith did modify the wording of the verse in what Latter-day Saints today call the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), a project he undertook to revise or amplify certain passages of the Bible that he deemed incorrect or incomplete. In this case, he dropped the crucial “and” in “God and his father” so that it read “God, his father.” This reference to a single God, of course, rather than a suggestion of divine plurality, is how virtually every other known Bible translation, including the rendition offered in the Draper and Rhodes commentary, translates the passage. Yet by the 1840s Joseph Smith was exuberantly proclaiming his new understanding and reading of the Bible in support of that view. Contrary to the usual interpretation of the statement in 1 Corinthians 8:5 that “there be gods many and lords many,” Joseph declared, “I testify that Paul had no allusions to [pagan gods]—I have it from God & get over it if you can.”¹

So, what happens if most of the Christian world *cannot* “get over” Joseph’s claim that his unique interpretations came directly from Deity? What if, to mention several more arcane ideas highlighted by Richard, non-Mormons struggle to see being made “kings and priests unto God” as receiving the “fulness of the priesthood” in a culminating temple ordinance, or the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17 as a revelatory Urim and Thummim? Must the dialogue stop there? Latter-day Saints may rejoice in what they take to be revealed glosses on the book of Revelation even when they seem to defy history, language, or context. But a sympathetic Christian friend might reasonably reply: “You invite me to

1. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 379.

lay aside the careful textual and contextual analyses of biblical scholars to accept the word of your prophet, who provides no reasoned exegesis but merely asserts as a fact divinely revealed to him that John was referring to God's father or that Paul had no reference to pagan gods or . . ."—and here a long list of idiosyncratic interpretations could be inserted. "I'm open-minded," continues the friend, "but I need more intellectual traction. Please set forth the logical, literary, and historical arguments in support of these views." That is precisely what I would hope would happen in an LDS commentary such as this. Though Richard devotes little space to it in the body of his paper, his two long footnotes engaging scholarship on the question of the authorship of the book of Revelation hint at his willingness to do so. If we Latter-day Saints want our writings to be more than curiosity shops where non-Mormons come to view the theologically exotic Other, it will be through such reasoned argumentation.

I turn now to methodological considerations and begin by interrogating Richard's practice of speaking of and for Latter-day Saints as a uniform collectivity. Is that desirable? Have Latter-day Saints spoken univocally across time and space? Can one really talk of *the* LDS view as if it were monolithic? Religious thought, whether in institutions or individuals, is not a static essence that moves unchanged across time and space. It is constantly, if subtly and perhaps not altogether consciously, being shaped and reshaped in response to changing circumstances and new ideological resources. This is true of each and every individual who constitutes the collectivity known as Latter-day Saints. Here I will take Joseph Smith as an example. In the 1832 document "Revelation Explained" (now D&C 77), Joseph offers answers to several questions about the first eleven chapters of John's Apocalypse. In response to a query regarding Revelation 4:6, "what are we to understand by the four beasts," he replies, "they are figurative Expressions used by the revelator John in discribing heaven the paradise of God" and were "shewn to John to represent the glory of the classes of beings . . . in the enjoyment of their eternal felicity." Revelation 4:6 (KJV) also describes the four beasts as being "full of eyes before and behind." Joseph explained that these eyes were "a representation" of knowledge and their wings were "a

representation of power to move to act &c.”² Further on in Revelation 13:1, where a seven-headed beast rising up out of the sea is depicted, Joseph revised the verse to read, “*And I saw another sign, in the likeness of the kingdoms of the earth; a beast rise up out of the sea . . . having seven heads and ten horns*” (JST).

A decade later, Joseph Smith found himself in the midst of national agitation over the predictions of William Miller, a New York farmer who believed he had cracked the Bible’s prophetic code and thereby learned that the second coming would take place about the year 1843. On several occasions Joseph explicitly repudiated Millerite teaching, but what particularly drew his ire was the historicist hermeneutics that underlay Miller’s reading of Revelation.³ “John’s vision was very different from Daniel’s Prophecy,” insisted Joseph Smith. John’s vision referred “to things ex[is]ting in heaven,” whereas Daniel saw “a figure of things ~~on~~ ~~the~~ which are on the earth.” Joseph returned specifically to the subject of the four beasts, this time to argue for “the a[c]tual existenc[e] of beasts in heaven.”⁴ John’s “grand secret was to tell what was in heaven.”⁵ Rather than being “figurative expressions,” as he earlier declared, he now opined that they probably “were beasts which had lived on another planet. than our’s.”⁶ More broadly, focusing on “every creature in heaven” mentioned in Revelation 5:13, Joseph said John saw “strange beasts of which we have no conception” that had been “saved from ten thousand times ten thousand earths like this.”⁷ As for the beast of Revelation 13 that Joseph

2. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 209–10 (hereafter cited as JSP D2).

3. For more on the Latter-day Saint encounter with Millerism, see Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 112–26.

4. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 325 (hereafter cited as JSP J2).

5. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 188.

6. JSP J2:325.

7. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 185.

had previously described as being “in the likeness of the kingdoms of the earth,” he now declared that “the beast John saw as spoken of in the 13th chapter was an actual beast to whom power was to be given. An actual intelligent being in heaven.”⁸ Here is his reasoning for laying aside a figurative interpretation: In Revelation 13:4 the earth’s inhabitants are amazed at the beast and ask, “Who is able to make war with him?” “Suppose we admit,” asked Joseph, that the beast “means the kingdoms of the world [which he himself had suggested in 1832], what propriety would there be in saying, who is able to make war with myself. If these spiritualizing interpretations are true, the book contradicts itself in almost every verse, but they are not true.”⁹

So here we have Joseph Smith offering figurative interpretations at one point in his life and arguing against them in another. How might an LDS scholar explain this in a commentary? In speaking to other biblical scholars, an LDS biblical commentator could simply say that Joseph changed his mind or point out that differing contexts elicited different expressions. Individuals rarely systematize their thought, certainly not when speaking extemporaneously as Joseph almost always did. Systematizing and harmonizing is what followers do to such key religious figures as Augustine or Aquinas, John Calvin or Joseph Smith. The need here is to be discriminating enough to distinguish between the Joseph Smith of developed Mormon theologies and the Joseph Smith that can best be reconstructed from the historical documents. As my evangelical copanelists know, much has been said over the years in the name of John Calvin that is more Calvinism than Calvin himself.

On the other hand, if a commentator is writing as a believing Latter-day Saint to other believing Latter-day Saints, then it is necessary to consider some of the popular LDS paradigms for prophetic functioning. Did Joseph *always* speak the word of God? He himself answered that question on one occasion, remarking famously that a “‘Prophet is not always a Prophet’ only when he is acting as such,”¹⁰

8. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 186.

9. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 187.

10. JSP J2:256.

echoing Paul's clarification to the Corinthians, "To the rest speak I, not the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:12). Over the years Latter-day Saints have created several rudimentary theological grids for plotting the relative authoritativeness of church leaders' expressions, including Joseph's, but the matter has yet to receive the detailed and careful calibration that centuries of Catholicism have brought to the question of what constitutes official or dogmatic pronouncements in their communion. Still, LDS commentators can make some assessments about levels of authoritativeness in the prophet's expressions. We might invoke the LDS construct of "line-upon-line" development, what others would call the evolutionary model of Joseph's thought, whereby the Nauvoo expressions are considered more mature and refined, more completely "true," than earlier statements. Or we might argue that in Nauvoo Joseph was overreacting to historicist hermeneutics and overstating his case, thus enabling those remarks to be gently laid aside. Of course, there is always the harmonizing move that leaves no expression behind and attempts to weave them all together into a consistent theological tapestry, or the Procrustean intervention that stretches or lops off parts of the body of a person's thought in order to make it fit the desired theological bed. Such are the activities that turn Calvin into one's preferred version of Calvinism or Joseph into a particular Mormonism. However LDS commentators proceed, they will want to maintain a rigorous approach to Joseph Smith's thought, one that does not ahistorically smooth out ambiguities or allow subsequent theologizing in his name to be taken as identical with his teaching. Even if LDS commentators are writing with an LDS audience in mind, what won't do is to silence variety in the name of seamless consistency.

If a single individual's thought is not monolithic or uniform, that of institutions or entire traditions is even less so. Consider the case of the "man-child" mentioned in Revelation 12, which Richard discussed. For much of Mormon history, it has been common to interpret it as the priesthood or ministerial authority "caught up to heaven" during the great apostasy that drove the woman or true church into the wilderness. Alternatively, following the death of the Prophet, Elder Orson Hyde opined that the man-child taken to heaven was the martyred Joseph

Smith.¹¹ As the JST gloss that Richard shared became more widely known in the second half of the twentieth century, the idea has circulated that the man-child was the political kingdom of God destined to govern during the millennium. Regardless of the exegetical difficulties in sustaining any of these, the point is that LDS interpretation has not been univocal—a reality nicely illustrated in the contrasting views of twentieth-century apostles and in-laws Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie. In a 1940s volume written for Sunday class use, Smith invoked the “priesthood” interpretation.¹² A generation later, McConkie—in his own commentary on the New Testament, which is consistently informed by JST readings—wrote that the man-child was the kingdom that would “hold sway during the Millennial Era.”¹³

Similar variation characterizes understanding of the two witnesses (Gk. *martyres*) in Revelation 11. Although many Christian commentators over the centuries have interpreted them figuratively, the idea that they were two actual individuals, such as Elijah and Enoch or Elijah and Moses, has not been unknown. In the past two hundred years, the human-witness interpretation has been popularized by dispensationalist eschatology that typically construes them as two individuals who will play a role in the dramatic events depicted in Revelation. Joseph Smith offered similar views: “They are two prophets that are to be raised up to the Jewish nation in the last days, at the time of the restoration and to prophesy to the Jews after they are gathered and have built the city of Jerusalem.”¹⁴ Well into the twentieth century, LDS commentators tended to follow the view of Elder Parley P. Pratt, who wrote in his influential *Voice*

11. Orson Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde delivered before the High Priests quorum in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845 upon the course and conduct of Mr. Sidney Rigdon, and upon the merits of his claims to the presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Liverpool: James and Woodburn, 1845), 33.

12. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 2:118.

13. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 3:511.

14. JSP D2:213.

of *Warning* that they were “a couple of *Jewish* Prophets.”¹⁵ This is certainly a reasonable understanding of Joseph’s statement, but because Bruce R. McConkie believed God would not raise up *Jewish* prophets outside his latter-day church, he declared, “No doubt they will be members of the Council of the Twelve or of the First Presidency of the Church.”¹⁶ As with his interpretation of the man-child, Richard again embraces McConkie’s view, which requires him to read Joseph’s statement so as to stress that “these prophets do not come *from* the Jews but are *raised up to* them.” Missing in his paper, in either case, is the acknowledgment that other LDS apostles interpreted John’s visions differently, and consequently there is no reasoned analysis from Richard as to why he favors the view of one apostle over another. But these are matters one would wish to see addressed in an LDS commentary on Revelation.

Of course, the practice of picking a particular voice and presenting it as *the* LDS view is all too common in Latter-day Saint writing. Nonetheless, it is incumbent on scholars to acknowledge variety where it exists and not perpetuate the myth of a single Mormon view, especially because very few biblical interpretations have been officially, dogmatically endorsed. Presentations of LDS teachings should be richly textured, Kodachrome assessments of Mormon thought rather than monochrome portraits of perfect consistency in prophetic expression or churchwide uniformity in biblical interpretation.

The idea that biblical commentaries are straightforward, theology-free expositions of a perspicuous Bible text is widely acknowledged to be an illusion. Even with the classic commentaries, what we are still getting is *Karl Barth’s* Romans or *Raymond Brown’s* John. That this commentary, therefore, is *Draper and Rhodes’s* Revelation rather than *the* LDS Revelation is no indictment, merely a reminder that the personal and the idiosyncratic are unavoidable. The challenge is to discipline theological idiosyncrasy through the rigor of time-honored scholarly

15. Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People: Containing a Declaration of the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, Commonly Called Mormons* (New York: Sandford, 1837), 82, emphasis added.

16. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3:509.

methodologies. It is, for instance, to avoid letting textual exegesis drift into theologically driven eisegesis, something that can be subtle as well as overt. To interpretively link passages from one biblical book with another where there is no direct quotation or clear allusion involved, as Richard does with Isaiah 51 and Revelation 11, is a mild form of eisegesis rather than exegesis. It may be fine for Sunday sermons and devotional literature, but not for biblical commentaries. A full commentary provides ample space to set forth both the methodological principles and reasoned analyses by which we arrive at our own creative interpretations of Revelation, or come to favor certain LDS interpretations over others, or by which, to fill in the gaps left by a paucity of LDS engagement with the entire book of Revelation, we may depend on certain non-Mormon commentaries more than others.

At one point Richard correctly observes that “Restoration materials have not solved all the problems associated with Revelation.” I would adjust that to say they have not solved *many* of the interpretive problems. Given the modicum of *official* LDS interpretation of Revelation, given Joseph Smith’s own differing interpretations, and given the varying views found throughout the corpus of LDS literature, it seems premature to claim much about what Latter-day Saints have “solved” with regard to the book of Revelation. Moreover, despite Joseph Smith’s intense interest in the last days, he was not nearly as enraptured with the book as other eschatologically oriented individuals in his or any other era. Not until April 1843, just a year before his death, did Joseph Smith give an extended discourse on the Apocalypse of John. “This is the fi[r]st time I have ever taken a text in Revelati[o]n.— and if the young elders would let such things alone it would be far better.”¹⁷ “To have knowledge in relation to the meaning of beasts with seven . . . heads and te[n] horns and other figure[s] made use of in the revelations,” he added, “is not very essential to the Elders.”¹⁸ Perhaps that is part of the reason Joseph Smith did not include the brief “explanation” of the book’s first eleven chapters

17. JSP J2:325.

18. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 183.

now known as Doctrine and Covenants 77 in either the original 1835 compilation of his revelations or the 1844 second edition.

Be that as it may, there is still much that a broad audience will find fascinating, possibly even insightful, about the ways in which Latter-day Saints have interpreted Revelation. Given the time, energy, and resources that are being devoted to this milestone series, it has the chance to be the standard for a generation or more. Few living Latter-day Saints have spent more time researching and reflecting on the Apocalypse of John than Richard Draper. Perhaps by drawing on the talented pool of younger LDS scholars trained in New Testament studies, he and Michael Rhodes can extend their work in ways that more effectively bring LDS views into tough-minded conversation with biblical scholarship generally. I do hope my few remarks will be received as a modest assist to that end. Along with others who care about the project, I, too, would like to see the Revelation commentary, as well as the series generally, be “all that it can be.”

Grant Underwood is professor of history at Brigham Young University and founding cochair of the American Academy of Religion’s Mormon Studies group.