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Charles Swift
charles_swift@byu.edu

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The Literary Power of the Doctrine and Covenants

Charles Swift

Charles Swift (charles_swift@byu.edu) is an assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

We often think of literature rather narrowly, as strictly a form of storytelling—a fictional work created by the human mind that relates the story of people and the various events, settings, and thoughts that make up their lives. Sometimes, though, we speak of literature in very broad terms, referring basically to anything in a written form. I prefer a definition that is broad enough to allow us to see patterns among texts but not so general that everything written can be classified as literature. Leland Ryken, a literary scholar who publishes extensively on the Bible as literature, writes that a “working definition of literature . . . is that it is an interpretive presentation of experience in an artistic form. This means that there are two criteria that must be insisted on if we are to distinguish between the literary and nonliterary parts of the Bible: (1) literature is experiential rather than abstract, and (2) literature is artistic, manifesting elements of artistic form.”¹ With this definition, literature does not have to be fictional, nor does it have to be solely of human creation, opening the door to the understanding of scripture as sacred literature.

Applying this understanding to the Doctrine and Covenants, we can find a wide variety of literary elements. “Although truly a unique religious text,” literary scholar Steven C. Walker notes, “the Doctrine and Covenants contains more than 2,000 close parallels to biblical passages, and the literary manner of the book is similar to the Bible in subject matter. Like earlier scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants

offers a rainbow of literary genres. The collection of revelations ranges from forms as transcendent as visions (sections 3, 76, 110), angelic annunciations (sections 2, 13, 27), and prophecies (sections 87, 121); through such ecclesiastical proclamations as prayers (sections 109, 121), epistles (sections 127, 128), scriptural explanations (sections 74, 77, 86), commandments (section 19), and official declarations; to down-to-earth instructions (sections 130, 131) and minutes of meetings (section 102).² Others have identified in the Doctrine and Covenants such literary devices as simile, metaphor, personification, and extensive use of imagery³ as well as such genres as narrative, short story, saga, biography, parable, proverbs, apocalypse, tragedy, and poetry.⁴

It is not enough to recognize the literary qualities of the Doctrine and Covenants, however. We also need to recognize that these qualities are not tangential but central to the Doctrine and Covenants. The literary elements of this book of scripture help convey the teachings and principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. What the great literary critic Northrop Frye had to say about symbols applies to other literary elements as well: “Originally, a symbol was a token or counter, like the stub of a theater ticket which is not the performance, but will take us to where the performance is. It still retains the sense of something that may be of limited interest or value in itself, but points in the direction of something that can be approached directly only with its help.”⁵ Symbols do not serve the role of adorning language, rather they communicate meaning; in fact, they often communicate meaning that would be lost without the symbol. Similarly, as we select a limited number of literary elements in the Doctrine and Covenants and study them closely, we see that these elements help us understand the meaning of the principles taught and have a profound experience with them. The language helps the gospel in the Doctrine and Covenants become a part of us.

Epistles

Two epistles by the Prophet Joseph are included in the Doctrine and Covenants, and both present a fascinating combination of the need to conduct rather mundane business with inspired, lofty language discoursing on the eternities. In the first epistle, section 127, the first verse could have been written as a simple statement: “I will be gone for a while, but my business concerns will be taken care of by others in my absence.” Instead, we read a bold statement about his having received a revelation that his enemies were pursuing him. He writes poetically and persuasively. “Inasmuch as they pursue me without a cause, and have not the least shadow or coloring of justice or right on their side

in the getting up of their prosecutions against me; and inasmuch as their pretensions are all founded in falsehood of the blackest dye, I have thought it expedient and wisdom in me to leave the place for a short season.” Within this one sentence we find imagery of light (“shadow,” “coloring,” “blackest dye”) and time (“short season”). Joseph writes of his persecution and troubles in the next three verses, acknowledging his tribulations while also glorying in them as a part of his sacrifice to God. He also makes a poignant observation with a metaphor: “deep water is what I am wont to swim in” (D&C 127:2). Most of us know what it means to swim in deep water, and though it may be necessary to swim in such water at times, we also feel less safe than in shallow water. To be the Prophet of the Restoration is not for the timid or cowardly.

In the same verse, however, the Prophet writes in a formal, almost mechanical, tone: “I have left my affairs with agents and clerks who will transact all business in a prompt and proper manner, and will see that all my debts are cancelled in due time, by turning out property, or otherwise, as the case may require, or as the circumstances may admit of” (D&C 127:1). The next order of business is to discuss the process of making a record of when someone is baptized for the dead and where to archive those records. He then closes the epistle as “[our] servant in the Lord, prophet and seer of the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints” (D&C 127:12).

Joseph’s second, much longer epistle, written just five days later, continues this pattern of combining what might be considered mundane with the sublime. He writes of the need to have both local and general recorders, requiring that the ward recorder be “well qualified for taking accurate minutes” and be “very particular and precise in taking the whole proceedings, certifying in his record that he saw with his eyes, and heard with his ears, giving the date, and names, and so forth, and the history of the whole transaction” (D&C 128:3). The Prophet continues by explaining the duties of the general recorder, who must “enter the record on the general church book, with the certificates and all the attending witnesses, with his own statement that he verily believes the above statement and records to be true” (D&C 128:4).

From these particulars, Joseph moves into the much more spiritual realm of the doctrine of baptism itself, explicating scripture in Revelation, Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Malachi, even noting about the last scripture that he “might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit [his] purpose as it stands” (D&C 128:18). For these several verses, the Prophet carefully discusses the doctrine and

makes clear that the living and dead need one another to be saved. We can repeatedly sense his personal testimony of this doctrine and practice.

The epistle concludes, however, with neither the technical instructions of the first part nor the doctrinal exposition of the second, but introduces almost a hymn of praise and exultation. The prophet writes metaphorically of a voice: “Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! A voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth; glad tidings for the dead; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy” (D&C 128:19). He encourages the reader, as though calling a people to battle: “Brethren, shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory!” (D&C 128:22). He personifies nature, calling upon the earth herself to praise the Lord in a way that “is not only remarkable prose but sheer poetry”:⁶ “Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord; and ye solid rocks weep for joy!” (D&C 128:23). As we read the poetry in this epistle, we not only learn of the Prophet’s commitment to the restored gospel and his enthusiasm for the work of the Lord but also experience it. And this experience helps us to feel more committed and more enthusiastic. The language the Prophet uses does not just inform us—it *changes* us.

Archetypes

An archetype is a symbol that recurs throughout literature, having a consistent pattern of meaning. For example, the image of a lamb can be used as an archetype representing innocence; we do not find a lamb in literature representing evil or violence. Archetypes are “universal symbols.”⁷ As Frye explains, archetypes are “images of things common to all men, and therefore have a communicable power which is potentially unlimited.”⁸ These symbols are not confined to secular literature and can be found in scripture as well. Just as Ryken writes about how being “sensitive to archetypes is one of the most fruitful literary approaches we can take to the Bible,”⁹ we can benefit from studying the archetypes in the Doctrine and Covenants as well.

Joseph Smith uses a number of archetypes throughout the Doctrine and Covenants. For example, we can see such archetypes as rock (D&C 6:34; 10:69; 33:13), fire (D&C 29:12, 21, 28; 43:32–33; 63:17, 34, 54; 97:7, 26), water (D&C 5:16; 10:66), and the sword (D&C 1:13; 6:2; 14:2; 87:6) carefully and effectively used in the Doctrine and Cov-

enants.¹⁰ By closely studying one particular archetype, the *veil*, we can see how such a literary element can convey doctrine. The Lord speaks of how “the veil of darkness shall soon be rent” (D&C 38:8), “the veil shall be rent and you shall see me and know that I am” (D&C 67:10), and “the veil of the covering of my temple, in my tabernacle, which hideth the earth, shall be taken off, and all flesh shall see me together” (D&C 101:23); Joseph writes that the “veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened” (D&C 110:1). A veil is a fairly well-known item; we recognize it as a piece of material that covers something. Women may use veils to cover their faces in some cultures, and we see a connection to this practice when looking at a wedding dress that includes a veil. However, this veil imagery is not simply verbal adornment—it teaches an important doctrine of the gospel. We are not meant to know or see all things in this life. There are things in the spiritual dimension that are generally hidden from us in mortality. Yet, these sacred things do not need to be permanently hidden from our view. By using veil imagery rather than an image of a wall, for example, the Lord conveys to us that what we are not to see for a time may be shown us in the future. Even if the veil is of such thin material that one can see through it to a large extent, one is still not seeing what can be seen when the veil is removed. A veil does not cover a face all of the time; it is meant to be eventually parted or removed. Likewise, we are meant to know these sacred things covered by this archetypal veil when we are ready and in the Lord’s own time.

Metaphors and Similes

While there are metaphors used throughout the Doctrine and Covenants, section 121 presents an interesting study in how one specific image is used in differing ways.¹¹ There are three instances of water in this section that are not symbolic in nature, but merely refer to the sea as a part of the earth: “O Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven, earth, and seas, and of all things that in them are” (D&C 121:4); in describing those who claim that the Prophet has fallen into transgression, it “had been better for them that a millstone had been hanged about their necks, and they drowned in the depth of the sea” (D&C 121:22); and “if there be bounds set to the heavens or to the seas, or to the dry land, or to the sun, moon, or stars” (D&C 121:30). The first use of water as simile in this section is when the Lord tells Joseph that they “who do charge thee with transgression, their hope shall be blasted, and their prospects shall melt away as the hoar frost melteth before the burning rays of the rising sun” (D&C 121:11). According

to Webster's 1828 dictionary (the best dictionary to turn to in trying to understand the meaning of American English words at Joseph Smith's time), "hoar frost" is the "white particles of ice formed by the congelation of dew or watery vapors."¹² This image of congealed, white ice particles is not inviting, reminding us of early, cold mornings in which we would rather be inside by a warm fire than outside surrounded by the frost. Frost can harm crops and signals that the season of planting and growth is coming to an end. The sun, on the other hand, is a very positive image; we welcome the sun and its warmth on such cold mornings. This imagery shows how the future of those who accuse the Prophet of transgression will not amount to much, disappearing once light is shed on their accusations. We associate the frost with their unfounded accusations and the light of the sun with truth. The sun also points to the Son—the source of all light and knowledge that, like the sun, gives us life. As with the sun and the frost, the Savior triumphed over those who attacked Joseph Smith.

The next symbolic use of water imagery occurs when the Lord asks a key question: "How long can rolling waters remain impure? What power shall stay the heavens? As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints" (D&C 121:33). Water imagery is used three times in this verse. First, the "rolling waters" that will not "remain impure" is a metaphor for the inevitability of God's will coming to pass. Just as rolling water cannot remain impure indefinitely (before the intervention of modern pollution, that is), no power can stop the heavens; the Lord's will shall conquer all opposition. Second, water imagery is used to strengthen this idea of the inevitability of God's will when the Lord proclaims that trying to make it difficult for Him to reveal divine knowledge to the Latter-day Saints is as foolish as a man trying to stop the Missouri River from its course—or even trying to make the river flow upstream. The word *hinder* is significant here: while the word can mean to stop, it can also mean to impede or slow down. In other words, it is impossible to prevent God from giving knowledge to His people. Preventing His will from coming to pass is simply impossible.

Water imagery is used once again in speaking of the Almighty "pouring down" knowledge upon the Saints. This phrase makes us think of a powerful rain, a downpour that saturates the ground, coming down upon everyone and everything. Just as such a life-giving rain is prayed for and welcomed after a long drought, so is the Lord's pouring

knowledge upon His people a great, miraculous blessing after centuries of living in the darkness of the apostasy.

We see water imagery used one more time in this section. When speaking of the blessings of being filled with charity and letting “virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly,” the Lord promises that “the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven” (D&C 121:45). Distillation is a process that requires two fundamental steps: an evaporation in which some component (such as pure water) of a liquid is extracted, and a condensation in which this extracted, purified component returns from the vapor and can be utilized. At the time of this revelation, the Prophet Joseph was a prisoner in Liberty Jail. He had been through yet another “distillation” of his soul, experiencing the heat of trials and challenges that extracted his spirit from the world and purified it, making the Prophet even more refined as a servant of the Lord.

Unlike the hoar frost mentioned earlier in the section, the “dews from heaven” present a much more favorable impression to our minds and hearts. Dew is gentle, peaceful, and life-giving, associated with spring (a new life in Christ) rather than with the coming of winter (the end of life). There is also a certain element of pleasant surprise with the dew—when we retire in the evening, there is no dew on the ground or on the flowers, but we awaken to find its presence. Similarly, the doctrine of the priesthood will not fall upon our souls like a heavy burden from the sky, but rather come quietly, gradually, peacefully. We may come to know some eternal truths without fully being aware of the process involved.

Parables

One of the most literary elements in scripture is the parable. Ryken observes that the “parables of Jesus are at once thoroughly literary and thoroughly laden with religious meaning. As for their literary dimension, they are the indisputable example of fiction in the Bible. They incarnate their meaning in story or metaphor in such a way that we cannot possibly ignore their literary nature. Yet they are a didactic genre that Jesus used to teach basic Christian doctrine and morality.”¹³ Parables are the perfect bridge between the literary and the religious: stories that convey eternal truths. Unlike the Book of Mormon, which does not contain any parables, the Doctrine and Covenants includes a number of parables: the parable of the twelve sons (D&C 38:26–27); the Lord’s explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares (D&C 86:1–7); the parable of the man who sent his servants into his field

(D&C 88:51–61); the parable of the nobleman and the tower (D&C 101:43–62); and the parable of the woman and the unjust judge (D&C 101:81–91). The Lord also refers to the parable of the fig tree (D&C 35:16) and the parable of the ten virgins (D&C 45:56–57). Ryken proposes a four-step process in studying parables that involves narrative analysis, interpretation of allegorical and symbolic elements, determination of the theme, and application of the theme.¹⁴ As we apply this process to the longest of the parables in the Doctrine and Covenants, the parable of the nobleman and the tower, we can see how this literary story conveys doctrine.

A nobleman had some very choice land. He told his servants to plant twelve olive trees on the land and set watchmen around the land to protect the trees. Essential to his instructions was the requirement to build a tower so that “one may overlook the land round about” (D&C 101:45) and see enemies in the distance. The servants plant the twelve olive trees, build a hedge around them, set watchmen, and even begin to build a tower, but during the work of laying the tower’s foundation they begin to question the necessity of the tower. They “consulted for a long time, saying among themselves: What need hath my lord of this tower, seeing this is a time of peace? Might not this money be given to the exchangers? For there is no need of these things” (D&C 101:48–49). While they are discussing this issue, they become lazy and do not complete what the nobleman had instructed them to do. During the night, the enemy comes and breaks down the hedge. The servants wake up and, frightened, run away, leaving the olive trees unguarded. The enemy breaks down the trees.

The nobleman calls upon his servants and chastises them for not completely following his instructions. He points out that “the watchman upon the tower would have seen the enemy while he was yet afar off; and then ye could have made ready and kept the enemy from breaking down the hedge thereof, and saved my vineyard from the hands of the destroyer” (D&C 101:54). The nobleman tells one of his servants to gather together many of his other servants and redeem his vineyard by breaking down the walls of his enemies that they have built on his land, throwing down their tower and scattering their watchmen. “And inasmuch as they gather together against you,” he tells his servant, “avenge me of mine enemies, that by and by I may come with the residue of mine house and possess the land” (D&C 101:58). His servant asks him when he will come and possess the land, and the nobleman replies that it will happen when he decides it will happen. The nobleman promises to bless the servant as a faithful and wise stew-

ard in his house and a ruler in his kingdom. The servant then does all that he was commanded to do, and “after many days all things were fulfilled” (D&C 101:62).

When we interpret the individual elements of this parable, we can see its allegorical nature. For example, the nobleman is the Savior; the vineyard is the earth; the choice piece of land is Jackson County, Missouri; the servants are the Church members; the olive trees represent the settlements of the Saints; the watchmen are the officers in the Church; the tower represents the temple; and the servant is Joseph Smith.¹⁵ In fact, the Lord Himself identifies one element of the parable when He says that “my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., is the man to whom I likened the servant to whom the Lord of the vineyard spake in the parable which I have given unto you” (D&C 103:21). This reference indicates that the Lord had specific historical details in mind when relating the parable. While such an awareness of the historical details of the time this revelation was received leads to an interpretation that is instructive and appropriate in many ways, it is also limiting. Though this is a parable with an important historical context, it is still a parable with meanings at different levels. To look at the parable only in terms of the events in Jackson County would be like interpreting the parable of the prodigal son to refer only to a particular wayward person at the time of the Savior who had finally repented; the parable may shed light on that individual’s circumstances, but it certainly is not limited to them.

If we take this more literary approach to the parable, we see that it is the story of the Lord asking something of His people and their deciding, using their own logic and experience, that what they are being instructed to do is not necessary or worthwhile. Because they are disobedient, they suffer. If they had only done as instructed, they would not have fallen prey to their enemy. The parable ends with hope, however, because the Lord of the vineyard tells His servant how to regain what was lost. The servant is obedient, and what was lost is now recovered.

The major theme of this parable, of course, is the importance of obeying the Lord. There is safety and wisdom in doing what the Lord asks of us. However, there are other important themes as well. The foolishness of relying on the “arm of the flesh,” for instance, is conveyed by the way the servants talk themselves out of the need to build the tower. Similarly, the dangers of not being truly unified can be seen in the fact that their contention makes them lazy. “And while they were at variance one with another they became slothful, and they hearkened not unto the commandments of their lord” (D&C 101:50). This is a

very important point: it is not that the servants decided not to obey their Lord, but it is that their lack of unity and their wasting effort in discussing something that should have already been decided made them lazy and careless. As far as we can tell from the parable, the servants were not openly rebellious; they simply did not get around to obeying because they were so busy disagreeing. Another theme is quite different from the others: forgiveness. Though the servants greatly erred, the lord showed them the way the situation could be corrected and gave them the chance to make things right. One other theme is that of the blessings that come through obedience to the Lord. The servant whom the lord chose to lead the others to reclaim his land receives a “seal and blessing” to be “a faithful and wise steward in the midst of [the Lord’s] house, a ruler in [the Lord’s] kingdom” (D&C 101:61).

In describing application, the last step of the literary analysis of parables, Ryken points out that it can have two levels: how the hearers of the parable could apply it at the time the Lord spoke it and how readers can apply it now.¹⁶ The Saints in Joseph’s time could understand the parable to mean that they had been slothful in keeping all of the commandments, particularly in building the temple, and that they were to return to Jackson County and reclaim the land.¹⁷ In our day, we can find multiple applications of this parable, from the need to obey the Lord’s commandments to the importance of not giving up on those we lead but patiently helping them learn and correct their mistakes.

If the literary form of the parable had not been used in D&C 101 and if the Lord had only told the people that they should have been more diligent in keeping His commandments and now needed to return to Missouri and get their land back, then many of the themes and applications would have been lost. It is by using the form of the parable that the meaning is broadened and deepened and the application becomes universal.

Conclusion

Though the Doctrine and Covenants is unique among our books of scripture in that it is predominantly a collection of revelations rather than a narrative account of the people’s lives and their interactions with the Lord, it is still a book of sacred literature. These revelations utilize a variety of literary devices and conform to a number of literary genres that strengthen the message of the book, helping to deliver it deeper into our hearts and minds in order to change our souls. The Doctrine and Covenants is full of masterful language that helps us as readers experience the word of God as we read. **RE**

Notes

1. Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 13–14.

2. Steven C. Walker, “Doctrine and Covenants as Literature,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:427.

3. D. Kelly Ogden, “Biblical Language and Imagery in the Doctrine and Covenants,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants, a Book of Answers*, ed. Leon R. Hartshorn, Dennis A. Wright, and Craig J. Ostler (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 169–89.

4. William H. Brugger, “Section 76 as Literature in the Doctrine and Covenants” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1993), 9–41.

5. Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the “Bible and Literature”* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 109.

6. Steven C. Walker, “The Voice of the Prophet,” *BTU Studies* 10 (Autumn 1969): 103n1. Walker continues discussing this passage by writing that the “poem, it will be observed, resolves itself into triadic form on the basis of both synonymity of content and parallelism of grammatical structure so that three sets of independent clauses form the three stanzas of the work, the internal pattern reflecting the total form. Careful cadences and subtle syntactic rhythms imbue the passage with the richness of poetic flavor as does the pervasively metaphorical nature of the verses. The passage is, moreover, highly lyrical; it could be set to music.”

7. Wilfred L. Guerin and others, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 160.

8. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 118.

9. Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 28.

10. Only a few references are cited.

11. Steven Walker briefly identified the use of water imagery in his article in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* which has already been cited (“Doctrine and Covenants as Literature,” 1:427).

12. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828, Facsimile First Edition* (San Francisco: The Foundation for American Christian Education, 1989), s.v. “hoar-frost.”

13. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 403.

14. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 409.

15. Leann G. Otten and C. Max Caldwell, *Sacred Truths of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 2:189. Modern editions of the Doctrine and Covenants explain that pseudonyms were used to protect many identities. Originally the servant (Joseph Smith) was identified as “Baurak Ale.”

16. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 409.

17. This determination to reclaim their land in Jackson County was the original, expressed purpose of Zion’s Camp.