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Abstract Review of *An Epistle from the New Testament Apostles* (1999), by John W. Welch.

A NEW WAY TO READ THE EPISTLES

Frank F. Judd Jr.

Over the past thirty years, John W. Welch has published an enormous amount of material dealing with the Book of Mormon, LDS Church history, and biblical studies. His latest book, *An Epistle from the New Testament Apostles*, is a creative way of presenting the epistles of the New Testament. In the preface, he asks readers to imagine what it might be like to receive a letter from the church leaders who lived right after the resurrection of Jesus Christ (p. ix). He answers this inquiry by rearranging all the epistles of the New Testament into one single epistle: an epistle from the New Testament apostles. This includes all the epistles of Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude. The book is arranged topically and includes the following features in the text itself: Old Testament references, the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), alternate translations, and variant readings. I will review each of these features in turn.

First, Welch has arranged the New Testament epistles according to primary and secondary topics. Primary topics include introductions, biographical and personal statements, God and Christ's atonement, faith and obedience to divine law, salvation's history and future, leadership instructions, church policies and practices, domestic

Review of John W. Welch. *An Epistle from the New Testament Apostles*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999. xix + 204 pp., with scripture and subject indexes and bookmark with editorial symbols. \$19.95.

guidance, Christian living, and closing personal remarks. Reading all the introductions and closing personal remarks of these epistles can get very redundant. On the other hand, the topical arrangement of the bodies of these epistles is very enlightening. It is convenient and instructive to have all the scriptures about a particular topic together in one place. For example, one learns that Paul was the only one among these New Testament authors to discuss the sacrament of the Lord's supper (pp. 111–12). The biographical and personal statements are important because they represent the precious few accounts we have about the actual lives of these early church leaders (pp. 9–32). As Welch points out in the preface, readers can learn from this topical arrangement that “most of the teachings of the Articles of Faith can be found in the letters of the New Testament” (p. xv). One does sacrifice a holistic reading of an epistle when passages are taken out of context and rearranged to allow a comparison of their theological teachings. But if readers are looking for a particular topic or a scriptural quotation from the New Testament epistles for a talk or a lesson, this format is helpful.

Second, this book encloses Old Testament citations in quotation marks and also includes the actual references in brackets following each quotation. This is especially helpful because the New Testament portion of our current LDS edition of the King James Version (KJV) does not enclose these passages in quotation marks, which sometimes makes them difficult to recognize. Nor does the LDS edition always include Old Testament references in the footnotes. Enclosing Old Testament citations in quotation marks allows readers to spot them quickly and to know immediately which Old Testament passage the author is quoting. One discovers that Paul, for example, was heavily dependent on the Old Testament for much of his teaching.¹ Having these references readily available gives the reader a sense of how important the Old Testament was to these early Christian leaders.

1. See, for example, Romans 3:9–20 (p. 42); 10:5–13 (p. 56); and Galatians 3:10–14 (p. 62), just to name a few.

A third important feature of this book is its inclusion of the JST. Welch crosses out the affected KJV words or phrases and inserts the JST in the text, enclosed by braces. By presenting the JST in this way, he gives a sense of the editorial work involved as the Prophet Joseph Smith and his scribes worked on that project. Welch might have indicated, however, that although this book presents a letter from the actual authors of the New Testament epistles, it is not certain that the JST changes always involve restoration of the original text of the Bible. Robert J. Matthews, former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, has proposed that JST changes could be more than simple restorations of original text. Other possibilities include: (1) the restoration of actual events that were never originally recorded, (2) commentary on the text by the Prophet Joseph Smith, including likening the scriptures to the Latter-day Saints, and (3) correction of the text where it happened to be wrong, even though it was original.² If, as Matthews has postulated, portions of the JST fall into any of these other three categories, then those particular JST segments would technically not be part of the original text.

Further, as Matthews has also noted, it is beyond our ability, without additional revelation on the subject, to know specifically what portions of the JST fall into which of the above categories.³ All of this means, of course, that while the JST is true, inspired, and profitable for study, reflection, and interpretation, the mere presence of a JST change for a particular passage does not necessarily render the corresponding biblical passage wrong.⁴ Including the JST in braces, while simultaneously crossing out the affected KJV words, can send the message to the average reader that the JST changes automatically signal that a particular biblical passage is not the original reading and that we can therefore just cross it out, as it were.

2. See Robert J. Matthews, "A Plain Translation," *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 253.

3. Ibid.

4. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), xiv–xv.

It is not impossible to read through the cross-outs, naturally. But trying to read through this book's eight-hundred-plus cross-outs sometimes interrupts the flow of the text and makes it difficult to read. Further, a number of these JST changes turn out to be quite small, such as pronoun changes from *which* to *who*. In my view, it would be more beneficial to present just those JST changes that affect the biblical text substantially and then include them in footnotes. The LDS edition of the Bible presents the JST in this way. This approach allows the reader to see clearly the complete reading of the biblical text, as well as selections from the JST.

The fourth important feature of this book is the inclusion of alternate translations of difficult words, which are found in the text between forward slashes. Because the English language has changed so much over the past four hundred years, readers of the KJV are sometimes confronted with words that have either changed in meaning or have become almost obsolete. A classic example is the word *let*. Today the word often means the same as the word *permit*. But in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 KJV the word *let* means "prevent"—the opposite sense of how *let* is used today. This book presents readers with more accurate modern translations of Greek terms, though Welch has regrettably omitted the phrase *letteth will let* from his reproduction of 2 Thessalonians 2:7 (p. 85).⁵ Approximately 765 alternate translations in this book help readers understand difficult words in the KJV. Since many readers might not take the time to look up such words in a dictionary when studying the KJV, Welch has saved time and energy for them by providing alternate translations next to those words.

Another helpful feature of this book is the inclusion of variant readings. Before the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth century, copies of the New Testament were made by hand. It was inevitable that scribes would make mistakes. Most of these changes were certainly unintentional, though some changes seem to have been made deliberately. Although most of the variant readings do

5. According to the author's editorial symbols, the phrase *letteth will let* should be included in the text and crossed out, because it is part of the KJV reading but is replaced by the JST. Next to this phrase the word *prevent* could be included between forward slashes as an alternate translation.

not substantially affect the meaning of the biblical text, some are significant. As Welch acknowledges in his preface, "most of these variants involve differences in spelling, word order, or grammar that make little difference in meaning." He further explains that "on some occasions, however, it is interesting to look behind the English translation to see these variants." He has included about eighty of these variant readings in his book, which he inserts in the text between back slashes.⁶ In the preface, Welch states that "words found in the back slashes are found in some, but not all, of the earliest manuscripts" (p. xviii).

However, a fundamental problem arises. In his attempt to keep things as simple as possible for readers, Welch uses a system of editorial symbols that is too simplistic to convey the complexities of many of the variants in the Greek manuscripts. The result is a number of factual errors with respect to some of the variant readings.⁷ A few other difficulties remain.⁸ As mentioned, Welch includes back slashes around a word or phrase to indicate that it is not present in all ancient manuscripts (p. xviii). In most cases the word or phrase in back

6. It is not readily apparent to me exactly why Welch chose to include certain variant readings while excluding so many others. It would have been helpful if Welch could have included a footnote for each variant reading or maybe even an appendix. He could then briefly explain to his readers why he felt that, out of so many possible choices, each particular variant reading was interesting enough, either to himself or to a Latter-day Saint audience in general, to include in his book. This would have made this particular feature of the book a much more useful study tool.

7. For example, see 1 Thessalonians 1:1 (p. 2): "from \God our\ Father and the Lord Jesus Christ\." Although there are a number of variants of this phrase, no manuscripts omit either "God our" or "Jesus Christ." See Kurt Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1968), 704 n. 1.

Another example appears in Romans 15:29 (p. 16): "of \the gospel of\ Christ" (*tou euangeliou tou Christou*). Some manuscripts do not have the words *tou euangeliou tou*. The first two words are translated as "of the gospel" and the second *tou* is the definite article for *Christou*. However, the word *Christou* is still translated as "of Christ," even without the definite article *tou*. In the book, therefore, "of \the gospel of\ Christ" should be "of the gospel\ of Christ."

8. A number of minor points lend confusion. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2:15 (p. 12), "their \own\ " should be "\their own\," which is the translation of the variant reading *idios*. Many manuscripts simply have the definite article "the" (*tous*) instead of "their own." To avoid confusion, Welch could insert both readings (i.e., \the, their own\). In

slashes is the actual KJV reading, indicating that this KJV reading does not necessarily have good manuscript support. However, in some cases the word or phrase enclosed in back slashes is not the KJV reading, but is a variant reading from other manuscripts. This can lead to confusion. Readers must consult their KJV to know if the reading in question is actually in the KJV or not.

In those cases when the word or phrase in back slashes is a variant reading from other manuscripts and is not contained in the KJV, a further difficulty surfaces. Sometimes the variant reading is a *replacement* of the existing KJV reading,⁹ while in other cases the variant reading is an *addition* to the KJV reading.¹⁰ On occasion, it is difficult to tell if the variant reading is an addition or a replacement.¹¹ There are no special editorial symbols to let the reader know which is which. This does not make the book as convenient as it might have been.

Another difficulty arises when Welch provides more than one variant reading between back slashes.¹² Most of the time when this occurs, the first reading is the KJV reading. But other times the sec-

2 Corinthians 1:12 (p. 14), “\or holiness\,” the word *or* is not part of the variant reading (*hagiotēti*). In this case, Welch’s inconsistency is the cause of confusion because in Philippians 3:12 (p. 26) “\or had already been justified\,” the word *or* (*ē*) is indeed part of the variant reading. In 1 Corinthians 15:47 (p. 90), “\is the Lord\” should be “\the Lord\,” which is the translation of the variant reading *ho kurios*. The verb *is* (crossed-out in the book because the JST does not utilize it) is implied, not written, in the Greek and is not therefore part of the variant reading.

9. For example, “\you\” is a replacement for the previous word “us” (p. 6), “\or holiness\” is a replacement for the previous word “simplicity” (p. 14; see previous footnote concerning this variant), “\let us do\” is a replacement for the previous phrase “will we do” (p. 145).

10. The following variant readings are additions to the KJV reading: “\of Jesus Christ our Lord\” (p. 1), “\or had already been justified\” (p. 26), “\high\” (p. 51), “\being sterile\” (p. 60), “\through your good works\” (p. 134).

11. For example, see Romans 13:5 (p. 156): “ye must needs be subject \to distress or compulsion\” and 1 Peter 5:11 (p. 191): “To him be glory \power\ and dominion for ever and ever.” In actuality, both of these phrases have many additional variants besides the ones that Welch includes. Compare with Aland, *Greek New Testament*, 566 n. 2, and 803 nn. 5–6.

12. A comma usually separates the variant readings when more than one is included between back slashes (i.e., Hebrews 2:9 [p. 39]: “\by the grace of God, apart from God\”).

ond reading is the KJV reading.¹³ Again, this inconsistency is confusing. Readers must compare the book with their KJV to know which reading comes from the KJV. This diminishes the usefulness of this particular study aid.

I found another minor difficulty with some of the variant readings included in this book. Sometimes a particular word or phrase occurs twice in a KJV verse. In such instances of duplication, sometimes variant readings exist for one of the occurrences and not for the other occurrence. Occasionally, Welch has mistakenly placed a variant reading after the wrong occurrence.¹⁴ These editorial difficulties, although occurring several times, are relatively minor.

However, I do have a deeper concern about Welch's use of variant readings. As he states in the preface, variants were inserted without distinguishing between strong and weak manuscript readings (p. xviii). In my view, this procedure is not the best methodology. This book is primarily concerned with the actual words of the original authors—the apostles of the New Testament—and not some later scribe. All variant readings were not created equal. It seems to me that unless a case can be made that a particular variant reading is actually more likely to be authentic than the KJV reading, it probably should not be included in this book.

I was disappointed to find that one of the most famous textual variants of the New Testament was passed over in silence. First John 5:7b, the so-called "Johannine Comma," is the only place in the New

An exception to this is 1 Corinthians 10:28 (p. 119): "\for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.\" A reader who is not familiar with this particular passage might not know that the reading between the back slashes is in fact one variant, and not two different variants.

13. The KJV reading is the second reading in the following examples: "\beloved, sanctified\" (p. 4), "\Christ, God\" (p. 71), "\struggle, suffer reproach\" (p. 101), "\be, submit yourselves\" (p. 127).

14. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 7:14 (p. 123): the variant readings "\husband, brother\" should be placed with the second occurrence of "husband" and not the first. In 2 John 1:9 (p. 141), back slashes should be placed around the second occurrence of the phrase "of Christ" rather than the first. See also 1 John 5:20 (p. 182): the variant readings "\the true God, the true one\" should be placed next to the phrase "him that is true." There also seems to be a similar, but more complex, problem with 1 Peter 4:1 (p. 115): "suffered \in the flesh.\" Compare with Aland, *Greek New Testament*, 799 n. 1.

Testament that explicitly teaches something like the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity: "the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one." This phrase is not found in any Latin manuscripts before about the fourth century, and no Greek manuscripts before the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Welch has not placed back slashes around this phrase in his book, so the average reader will not even know that it is in question (see p. 40). I was surprised by this omission, especially in light of this verse's doctrinal significance to a Latter-day Saint audience.

I have one final note on the various insertions in this book. The concern to inform Latter-day Saints about Old Testament quotations, the JST, alternate translations, and important variant readings for the New Testament epistles is certainly laudable. The trick is finding the best way to present those features in a reader-friendly text. The handy bookmark that is provided with this book gives a chart of all the editorial symbols. This is a nice addition to the book and is very helpful, saving readers from having to memorize the editorial symbols or continually check the chart in the preface.

But I wonder if there might be a better way to present the text so it would be more reader-friendly. As it stands now, there are thousands of editorial changes and insertions in the text. In my view, a greater dose of selectivity for inclusion of changes coupled with the use of footnotes or marginal notes would make the scriptural text much easier to read. I realize that decisions about what to include are very subjective for any editor. But for this book I would prefer more selectivity than simply including a JST reading because it exists or a variant reading because "it is interesting" (p. xviii).

15. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 647–49. In the sixteenth century, Erasmus refused to include the "Johannine Comma" in his printed edition of the Greek New Testament because he could not find that phrase in any Greek manuscript. Shortly thereafter, a (brand new!) Greek manuscript was brought forth which contained the "Johannine Comma," and so Erasmus included it in his text. See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd and enl. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101.

This book brings together and builds on study aids included in other publications. For example, the current LDS edition of the Bible contains the KJV in the text, with many Old Testament references, JST excerpts, and alternate translations in the footnotes. Steven and Julie Hite have published the entire Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament with the affected KJV words and phrases crossed-out and the JST inserted in the text in bold.¹⁶ A study edition of a modern translation of the Bible (such as the New International Version or the New Revised Standard Version) contains a readable modern translation in the text, encloses Old Testament citations in quotation marks, and places Old Testament references, alternate translations, important variant readings, and helpful study notes in the footnotes. Both the LDS edition of the KJV and study editions of modern translations are easier to read than this book because of their greater selectivity and lack of disruptive editorial symbols in the scriptural text.¹⁷

Welch claims that this thematic approach has the following advantages. First, it “allows you as a reader to wrap your arms around the complete scope of these letters, grasping their meaning more comprehensively” (p. x). Second, “readers can discover the profound consistency of doctrine presented in these New Testament epistles” by studying them this way (p. x). Third, it “discloses and clarifies the particular meaning of each individual section” because “each block of text in these New Testament letters speaks more distinctly when it is relocated thematically in the divine plan and order” (p. x). Fourth, it “saves time” because it “allows you to go directly to the subjects that are most interesting to you” (p. x). Finally, it “encourages you to read the words of the actual letters” (p. xi).

16. Steven J. Hite and Julie M. Hite, comp., *The New Testament with the Joseph Smith Translation: Includes All Textual Changes Made by the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Four Gospels in Chronological Harmony and Parallel Columns*, 5th ed. (Orem, Utah: Veritas Group, 1998).

17. This book is also very pricey for its size. The LDS edition of the Bible and study editions of modern translations can each currently be purchased in paperback for less than the twenty-dollar price of this book.

There is no question that a topical arrangement is a useful study aid. But will students really gain more than they lose by taking passages out of their original context and rearranging them by topic rather than by studying each passage in context of that particular epistle as a whole and then making comparisons with other scriptural books? I think it is still an open question whether this thematic approach allows readers of the New Testament epistles to grasp their meaning *more* comprehensively or makes the passages speak *more* distinctly, as Welch asserts. However, I agree that this approach saves time if one is interested in a particular topic or theme from the New Testament epistles. Gathering together passages with similar themes can also show “consistency of doctrine,” inasmuch as the epistles sometimes address the same types of topics. In the end, this thematic approach is a unique way to study the New Testament epistles, which has merit specifically for those who desire a topical study of these documents.