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Understanding the Book of Revelation Jay A. Parry and Donald W. Parry; *The Book of Revelation: Plain, Pure, and Simple* Mick Smith

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JAY A. PARRY and DONALD W. PARRY. *Understanding the Book of Revelation*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998. viii; 358 pp. Appendixes, bibliography, indexes. \$19.95.

MICK SMITH, *The Book of Revelation: Plain, Pure, and Simple*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998. xiv; 306 pp. Bibliography, index. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Robert L. Maxwell, Special Collections and Ancient Languages Cataloger, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

A need exists for good, LDS-oriented commentaries on the scriptures, especially biblical texts, and these two volumes begin to meet that need. Revelation is a glorious book but is frequently obscure and difficult for many to understand. These commentaries should encourage greater interest in the book of Revelation among Church members and lead them to ponder this important text in ways they may not have previously considered.

The authors of *Understanding the Book of Revelation* are brothers Jay and Donald Parry. Jay has published widely and chaired a general Church curriculum writing committee; Donald teaches Hebrew at BYU and is deeply involved in the international Dead Sea Scrolls project. Mick Smith, author of *The Book of Revelation: Plain, Pure, and Simple*, is currently director of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Religion.

Being commentaries, both books are similarly structured. Each chapter in the Parrys' useful book corresponds to a chapter in Revelation and is divided into sections. Each section begins with a general commentary on the text discussed, is followed by the text itself, and concludes with a verse-by-verse commentary on the text. The printed text of Revelation is for the most part the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), with occasional interpolations by the Parrys. Brackets or ellipses indicate changes from the King James Version (KJV), each of which is explained in a footnote.

Smith's organization is slightly different. He begins each section with the KJV text, offers a verse-by-verse commentary, and concludes with what he calls an "applicability" section and a summary. This structure makes a bit more sense than the Parrys', whose general commentary is sometimes difficult to follow because it precedes the scriptural text.

Since LDS commentaries on Revelation are limited, the two books inevitably quote the same sources. Chief among these are *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Bruce R. McConkie's *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, and Richard Draper's *Opening the Seven Seals*. The Parrys are better than Smith at ferreting out these sources, however, and where Smith cites a single passage from an authority to clarify a verse, the Parrys may

cite the same passage plus several more. Of course, more is not always better, but often the additional passages give added insight. For example, when Smith cites McConkie's *DNTC* 3:528–29 for an explanation of “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven” (Rev. 14:6, Smith 154–55), he leaves the reader with the impression that Elder McConkie believed the “angel” referred uniquely to Moroni; the Parrys, reading further, however, note that Elder McConkie suggested later in his commentary (3:528–29) that the angel was symbolic of other angels as well (Parrys, 184).

This duplication of LDS sources is not surprising. More surprising, considering the host of non-LDS sources, is the extensive duplication of these sources as well. Both books rely extensively on Robert Mounce's *Book of Revelation*¹ and Marvin Vincent's *Word Studies in the New Testament*, both published by the Evangelical publishing house of Eerdmans.² The Parrys' use of non-LDS criticism is somewhat more extensive than Smith's, although neither book demonstrates broad knowledge of these sources. This is, of course, not expected given an LDS audience, but a greater awareness of non-LDS biblical scholarship might be useful in an LDS commentary on the Bible, if only as a counterpoint against which to show LDS doctrine and in order to raise the awareness of LDS readers of the probable beliefs of their non-LDS acquaintances. For example, in the Anchor Bible,³ J. Massyngberde Ford posits that Revelation was written not by the Apostle John, but by John the Baptist, his disciples, and others. The Parrys raise the authorship issue in their book's first sentence: “The book of Revelation was written by John the beloved apostle” (1), but nowhere do they hint that this is not obvious outside the LDS world (nor are they explicit that LDS revelation is quite clear on the point [1 Ne. 14:24–27]). This is odd since they cite Ford occasionally and are thus probably aware of the Anchor Bible stand. Smith ignores the question altogether.

A commentary on any text must serve two functions: first, it should establish what the text says; second, it should explain what it means. Both books are well aware of these two functions and offer generous explanations of textual meaning. But they stop short of establishing what the text actually says. Both go to great lengths to note JST changes, but they ignore the basic meaning of the text itself by writing as if John had written his text in English. This can cause problems, as in the Parry's frequent precise counts of English words in the text, which usually do not accurately reflect the numbers in John's Greek text. For instance, they note that the word “as” appears fifty-six times in Revelation (21)—the figure is actually eighty-three—but John uses several Greek words (*hos*, *homoios*, *hosoi/hoson*, *hosper*, *hote*, *hosakis*, *hotan*, *hoios*), all sometimes translated “as” in the KJV; further, the KJV translators also rendered some of these words in other ways, including “like.” Thus, the number fifty-six (or for that matter,

eighty-three) does not correctly inform readers of John's usage and oversimplifies a complex situation. For similar reasons, the list of names and titles of deity found in Revelation, with corresponding frequencies, is also problematic (315). This sort of word counting, if it is to be at all meaningful, should be based on the original text. Smith makes occasional attempts to delve into the original language, but since he does not appear to be familiar with Greek, he cites the Greek dictionary in *Strong's Concordance*, often in error. For example, he cites *Strong's* to explain the term *lychnos*, but the word in the text of 1:12 is *lychnia*, not *lychnos* (7); there is no Greek word *uiov*—the correct transliteration is *huion* (120). Rather than going even as far as Smith in attempting to work with the original language, the Parrys tend to “shop around” in various English translations until they hit upon one they like. For example, on Revelation 4:11: “Many versions read ‘by thy will’ in place of [the KJV] ‘for thy pleasure’; the Jerusalem Bible, for example, reads, ‘It was only by your will that everything was made and exists.’” (64). Would it not be simpler (and more convincing) to say that the original of 4:11 (*dia tou thelema sou*) means “by or through thy will”? A somewhat different problem occurs when the Parrys point out at 8:13 that some (English) versions read “eagle” rather than “angel” (112) but fail to note that this stems from a variant in the earliest Greek manuscripts. The authors of both books excuse themselves in their prefaces, saying that they do not intend the work to be scholarly, but awareness of the original text is necessary, even in an LDS commentary. The lack of such an awareness reveals a need for a commentary on Revelation by a faithful LDS scholar fully conversant with John's language (Greek), who will use LDS revelatory sources to interpret the scriptures, as the Parrys and Smith do admirably.

Despite these technical shortcomings, these two books successfully achieve their purpose, which is to draw our attention to important LDS interpretation of various passages in Revelation and to invite us to think through the text for personal insights. By so doing, these books fill an important niche, particularly as the Church revisits the New Testament every four years as a part of the Sunday School curriculum.

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1. Robert H. Mounce, *Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977).
 2. Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (1887; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).
 3. J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, vol. 38 in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 3.