

Introduction

Julie M. Smith

In what would become the standard explanation of how parables work, biblical scholar C. H. Dodd proclaimed that the parable “arrest[s] the hearer by its vividness of strangeness, and leave[s] the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”¹ What is true of parables is doubly, if not triply, true of the book of Revelation. Two millennia have apparently not been enough for a consensus to emerge regarding the interpretation of this enigmatic text. Why is that?

The book itself gives us two clues in its very first verse, where John describes the text and how it came to be. First, he calls it an *apokalypsis* (see Revelation 1:1). We recognize the English cognate *apocalypse* and think, perhaps, of big-budget disaster movies, but the Greek word has a different nuance: it means “uncovering.” The author thus describes his task in writing as one of uncovering truth for the reader, but what truths does he intend to uncover, and how are they to be uncovered?

These questions bring us to our second clue: as the Revelator describes the process by which the revelation was transmitted, he explains that it was “signified” by an angel (Revelation 1:1). From a Greek word meaning “to give a sign” (*sēmainō*), this word implies that the revelation was conveyed through signs or symbols. Putting this clue together with the other, we can say that the author will be uncovering truths by using symbols. This is no surprise. As even the most casual student of the book of Revelation knows, it is chock-full of symbols, many of which strike modern readers as more disturbing than inspiring (what are we to make of seven-headed beasts or death riding a horse?).

How do such symbols work? What do they symbolize? If we uncover them, what will we find? How can we know if we are interpreting a symbol correctly? Faced as much with these rich interpretive opportunities as with the attendant perplexing questions, it is no wonder that Revelation has inspired artists, stumped scholars, fueled cranks, and terrified children.

Into this wonderland tumbled six LDS scholars interested in gleaning meaning from the final two chapters of Revelation.² The unique format of the Mormon Theology Seminar gave us the space to engage this most mysterious of texts.³ This volume gathers the papers that resulted from our collaborative study. Each of these papers deserves a brief word of introduction here.

Kevin Barney opens the volume with “A Book or a Tree? A Textual Variant in Revelation 22:19,” in which he explains why the King James Version (KJV) rendering of the passage in question reads “book” where other translations have “tree” and then explores the interpretive implications of each reading. Barney’s paper provides important insights into the textual history of a passage central to Mormon theology.

My own contribution, “The Beginning and the End: Echoes of Genesis 1–3 in Revelation 21–22,” follows. In it, I examine what might be called the Bible’s bookends, its first and its concluding chapters, as the volume is presently organized. In particular, I explore how we might better understand these two texts by reading them in light of each other.

Next comes Brandie Siegfried’s “The Fruit of Eden’s Tree: The Bride, the Book, and the Water of Life in Revelation.” She considers how the KJV translation can enhance our appreciation for the text. It is common practice for biblical

scholars to get away from translations and turn to the text in its earliest languages as quickly as possible; Siegfried’s approach helps us see the KJV as a unique locus for fascinating insights.

In “Seeing Eye to Eye: Nephi’s and John’s Intertwining Visions of the Tree of Life,” Shon Hopkin discusses the complicated relationship between the vision of Nephi in 1 Nephi 11–14 and the vision of John in Revelation. A comparison of these two visionary experiences yields a fresh approach to both.

Eric Huntsman’s “The Unveiling of Christ. . .and of Angels: Apocalyptic Mediation in Revelation” explores how Revelation complicates the sharp lines often drawn between believers, angels, Christ, and God. His essay helps us better understand the role of intermediaries—as well as the divine and the human—in the book of Revelation and in the latter-day restoration.

Finally, Adam Miller concludes the discussion with “Overwritten, Written Elsewhere: Names, Books, and Souls in St. John’s Apocalypse.” Miller reflects on what the theme of writing in Revelation teaches us about the nature of the soul. Moreover, his analysis guides the reader to a better understanding of this enigmatic text.

It is our hope that these essays will open new lines of theological inquiry into the book of Revelation among Latter-day Saints. As the only book-length apocalypse in the standard works, as the final book in the New Testament, and as one of the few biblical texts referenced in the Book of Mormon, the book of Revelation holds a special place in the LDS canon. It demands more of its readers than most scriptural books, but it also offers them more. If we make some small contribution to expanding the circumference of Mormon thought concerning the book of Revelation, we will be greatly rewarded for our efforts.

These papers were originally presented at a conference, “Latter-day Saint Readings of Revelation 21–22,” held on September 25, 2009, at the University of Texas at Austin.⁴ We are grateful to the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at BYU, held by James Faulconer, for providing material support for that event. Our gratitude also extends to the Latter-day Saint Student Association at the University of Texas at Austin, without whose support the conference could not have happened.

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NOTES

1. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 16.

2. To ease the difficulty of jumping into a conversation that has been going on for nearly twenty centuries, Eric D. Huntsman—one of this project’s contributors—provided participants with a summary of the major ways the book of Revelation is being interpreted. This essay, titled “Interpretive Approaches to Revelation,” can be accessed online at <http://revsem.blogspot.com/2009/05/interpretive-approaches-to-revelation.html>.

3. More information about the Mormon Theology Seminar can be found at <http://mormontheologyseminar.org>. The full transcript of this seminar can be read online at <http://www.mormontheologyseminar.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Revelation-21-22-Complete-Seminar.pdf> (in pdf form) or <http://revsem.blogspot.com/> (in html form).

4. Podcasts of the original presentations are available for download at <http://www.mormontheologysseminar.org/category/podcasts/>.