

“And It Came to Pass”: A Response to Adam Miller’s “Theoscatology”

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Describing what he called the “prosy detail of imaginary history” he found in the Book of Mormon, Mark Twain said the following of the formula that marks the narrative movement of the book: “‘And it came to pass’ was [the translator’s] pet. If he had left that out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet.”¹ Twain is, of course, hardly the only reader to have noted—and to have complained about—the ceaseless repetition of this formula in the text of the Book of Mormon. Some French editions, for instance, have replaced the formula with an asterisk, not quite making a pamphlet of the book, but shortening it substantially nonetheless.² “Scores” of the iterated formula were removed by the Community of Christ committee tasked with producing a reader-friendly Revised Authorized Version of the Book of Mormon.³ And Joseph Smith himself removed a number of instances of the formula from the book for the second edition in 1837, presumably in part because he had already begun to hear complaints (if not to make them himself!) regarding the frequency of the formula’s appearance.⁴

Frankly, readers of the Book of Mormon very quickly get tired of the phrase—“and it came to pass,” “and it came to pass,” “and it came to pass.” When we set out from Jerusalem with Nephi at the book’s beginning, we feel its pinch. By the time we’ve crossed a desert and an ocean and arrived in the New World, we can tell that it’s giving us blisters. When we later find ourselves trudging back and forth between the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla, or marching on the campaign trail with Captain Moroni, or standing precariously atop the wall with Samuel the Lamanite, the phrase has long since rubbed our flesh raw. Much as we might hope for healing from the visiting Christ of 3 Nephi, we never find release. Right through to the end of the Book of Mormon, we’re reading the refrain: “and it came to pass,” “and it came to pass,” “and it came to pass.”

But I find myself wondering, after reading Adam Miller’s reflections on “theoscatology,” whether the often-mentioned Mormon appreciation for the body shouldn’t make us pause reflectively at every “and it came to pass.” “We need bodies to become like God,” Miller says, “but bodies are organs of passing.” What’s packed into the Book of Mormon’s repetitive formula, this textual and narrative remainder that we’d prefer to elide or at least to replace with a contentless asterisk? What might we find if we were to read “and it came to pass” as *theological* formula?

The construction of the formula is important, I think. The only parallel construction to “it came to pass” of which I can think is “it came to be.” Note the difference, however. In “it came to be,” we have a certain formulaic dismantling of becoming, a certain cancellation of the dynamic and the mobile. The formula opens (“it came . . .”) with change and modulation, in fact with *becoming*, but it closes (“ . . . to be”) with an interruption of change and modulation, in fact with *being*. “It came to be”: static being, as a kind of telos, brings becoming to an end.

All transformation culminates in a certain *state*, a final *form*. It *came*, yes—but it came only in order to *be*.⁵

What, though, of “it came to pass”? Here the dynamic is succeeded not by the static but by the dynamic. Change and transformation culminate in change and transformation. It came—not *to be* but *to pass*. Might we say, “it came *in order* to pass”? Its purpose or its telos, if it can be said to have one, is to pass, to remain in the flux of becoming. There’s no shift from becoming to being, no end of history. There’s only coming and going, the approach of the open from the future and the passage of the closed into the past. There’s only, in other words, the persistent punctuation of what, in an earlier version of “Theoscatology,” Miller called “intra-thoracic time.”

But that's too simple, isn't it? What of the tension between the infinitive *to pass* and the conjugated *it came*? Might there be a kind of shift as becoming gives way to passing—a shift, though, not from becoming to being but from the actual to the potential? The formula speaks not of what is *coming* but of what *came*. The first part of the formula—"it came"—already freezes becoming, calcifies the impersonal *it*, stops the heart whose pulse marks the rhythm of time. In "it came" we have the full realization of the actual. But then the frozen, the calcified, the stopped, the fully realized, the actual—*this* passes from actuality to potentiality, from finitude (the closedness of what *has passed*: "it came") to the infinite (the neither-past-nor-present-*nor*-future status of what remains *infinitive*: "to pass"). In "it came to pass," perhaps we witness the determinate become indeterminate, the decided become undecidable. In *passing*, what *came* (what, indeed, came *to be*) reclaims potentiality (and therefore power?) by a Bartlebian "preferring not to,"⁶ by passing over its being and retrieving the becoming it would seem to have given up in the *past* tense of "it came," transforming "the past" (or "the passed") into "to pass."

What is it "to pass," then? A first question. And a question, I fear, that's made relatively little sense as I've tried to develop it here. But let me complicate it further, nonetheless. What of the impersonal *it*? If it's difficult enough even to know what it means to speak, infinitively, of passing ("What is it 'to pass'?"), it's more difficult still to guess at what it means for *it* to pass, or for *it* to have come. What lies behind the *it* of "it came to pass"—or of "it came to be," for that matter? Why is *it* singular? Why is *it* neuter? Why is *it* indeterminate? More baffling, perhaps: Why is *it* there *at all*? Why not speak rather of what exactly it is that comes, that passes, that is? Why is it only *it* that "comes to pass"?

There's likely little to be decided immediately about *it*, so let me also leave it to one side in order to complicate things further in a second way—in a way that might be less confusing. Notice that I have simplified the Book of Mormon's formulation in much of this brief discussion—giving attention not to "*and* it came to pass" but simply to "it came to pass." What of the *and* that, far more often than not, introduces "it came to pass"? What of the conjunctive or connective function of the formula, its concatenating function? This is perhaps particularly important, since it's the *and* of "and it came to pass" that largely prescribes the frequency of its repetition in Book of Mormon narrative. (Indeed, we might well wonder whether it's the "it came to pass" or merely the *and* that drives us mad as readers of the Book of Mormon.)

Hiding behind the word *and* is a logical function, an operator that marks the status of statements whose connectedness serves as a condition of their collective truth. Things are a little more complicated than just that, since logical conjunction is actually a simplification of a more complex operation (to be specific: the negation of a positively conditioned negation).⁷ For the moment, however, it suffices to say that *and* weaves into a kind of totality of causative and conditioning relations all of what language might correctly say about the world—the world of becoming as much as of the world of being.⁸ What we have in "and it came to pass" is the continuing concatenation of statements about how history might be potentialized, might be given *to pass*.

It is thus in a double sense that we find in "and it came to pass" something like the *remainder* of the Book of Mormon. It's the book's remainder in that it's what we fantasize about flushing away, but it's also the book's remainder in that it's what marks the Book of Mormon's consistent attempt to repotentialize what might too easily become mere actuality. It's what, if we pay attention to its talk of passing, may alert us to how the book not only *reports* but also *questions* or even *contests* history. It's for that reason that, even and perhaps especially in reading the Book of Mormon, we need to shift our attention, as Miller says, from "high drama" to "low comedy," giving our attention to the excessive and overdetermined narrative the Book of Mormon weaves.

A final thought: Here, as elsewhere, I've tried to read Adam Miller as a Book of Mormon theologian—as a thinker of the tensions and stresses at work in the text that launched the history through which we are all passing, through which we'll *always* be passing.⁹ Perhaps it's only wishful thinking on my part that finds me bringing Miller's thinking back to the Book of Mormon, a too-invested plea that he read less of Bruno Latour and David Foster Wallace and more of the brother of Jared and Alma the Elder. I think not, though. The more time I spend in conversation with Miller, the more I find the image Walter Benjamin took from Edgar Allen Poe to describe his own thought to be appropriate for making sense of Miller's work.¹⁰ His readers and listeners experience him as an elaborately dressed Turk, playing a game of chess he always seems to be winning. But I've peeked under the table on which the chessboard sits, and I've seen that the Turk they see is only a massive puppet, entirely controlled by a little hunchback dwarf crouched beneath the table. It stays out of sight, for the most part, but it's what makes every successful move. And its name is the Book of Mormon.

NOTES

1. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Signet, 1980), 103.

2. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

3.

See Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development* (Independence, MO: Reorganized 62.

4.

See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part 1: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1-2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 207.

5.

We find something much the same in constructions that replace the impersonal *it* with the personal pronoun: "I can

6. See Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 243–71.

7. See Gottlob Frege, "Begriffsschrift, a Formula Language, Modeled upon That of Arithmetic, for Pure Thought," in *From Frege to Gödel: A Source Book in Mathematical Logic, 1879–1931*, ed. Jean van Heijenoort (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19.

8.

See Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages," in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, 2nd ed., ed 1983), 187–88.

9.

See Joseph M. Spencer, "Notes on Novelty," *SquareTwo* 6/1 (Spring 2013), <http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleMillerSyri>

10. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253; and Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter* 138–45.