

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WRITINGS OF ZION



Let me hold in abeyance for a bit the question of what I mean by *the writings* in order to think a little about the word *Zion*. And let me begin that discussion by citing a few texts (perhaps promiscuously) and saying a few things about each of them that will, together, constitute a little story about Zion.

Begin with Doctrine and Covenants 82:14: “Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness; . . . Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments.” For Zion, the beautiful and the holy are of a piece, so the way to holiness is the way of beauty: as we become beautiful, we also become holy, and vice versa. Indeed, the possible reversal of those—“as we become holy, we also become beautiful”—says a great deal about what *beauty* means.

In Exodus, the Lord tells Israel that the way of beauty is also that of language, of hearing: “If ye will hearken to my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a special treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6; translation revised). Being Zion, the holy nation of God, being a kingdom of priests and priestesses, means hearing the voice of God. And what do we hear in that voice? Latter-day revelation answers the question:

[We hear] 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. How beautiful upon the mountains are

the feet of those that bring glad tidings of good things, and that say unto Zion: Behold, thy God reigneth! As the dews of Carmel, so shall the knowledge of God descend upon them! (D&C 128:19)

If we truly hear the gospel, our hearing is hearkening, and the voice to which we hearken is a voice of gladness, mercy, truth, glad tidings for the living and the dead, a voice of great joy. We hear the announcement of the coming reign of God. To hear that voice is to have the knowledge of God descend on us. To hearken to the word is to know God, and to know him is to be given and to receive gladness, truth, and joy.

When we hearken to God and know him gladly, truthfully, joyfully, we live in a new creation. Through Isaiah he says: “I have put my words in thy mouth . . . that I may plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion: Behold, thou art my people” (Isaiah 51:16; 2 Nephi 8:16). Giving us his words to speak is the means by which God creates a new world, one other than the world which we call “the world.” His words are that by which he calls us to be his people, the people to inhabit that new world. But this new world is not something that we can merely await. We are commanded in several revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants: “Seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion” (D&C 6:6, 11:6, 12:6; cf. 14:6). Presumably, the work of interpretation, of understanding, is part of what bringing forth and establishing Zion requires.

Latter-day scripture also tells us in several places what Zion is when established. It is purity of heart: “Let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion—the pure in heart” (D&C 97:21). It is unity of heart and mind: “The Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18). It is, therefore, also the vision of God and the coming of his kingdom: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8; 3 Nephi 12:8). And: “Blessed are the poor who are pure in heart, whose hearts are broken, and whose spirits are contrite, for they shall see the kingdom of God coming in power

and great glory unto their deliverance” (D&C 56:18). Purity of heart means unity of heart and mind. It means having a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And it results in seeing God’s kingdom come in power and glory to deliver us from our poverty, both spiritual and physical—in this life.¹

That purity and unity of broken heart and contrite spirit, delivering us from our impoverishment, means the fulfillment of the covenants of the Father with our fathers and with us. That purity and unity and richness in covenant is the beauty of Zion:

Awake, and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion; and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever, that thou mayest no more be confounded, that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled. (Moroni 10:31; cf. Isaiah 52:1, 2 Nephi 8:24)

The story of Zion is the story of becoming beautiful.

Like any good Aristotelian story, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It begins with God speaking to us, moves to our hearing his words of gladness, truth, and joy, and ends in the new world of Zion, a world of unity, humility, and covenant as well as a world of power, glory, and deliverance. It ends with the holy reign of God in which all things are beautiful.

My thesis is that the revelatory writings of the church, especially, but not only the canonized scriptures, mean in such a way that they call us to join Zion, that they, in words of gladness, truth, and joy, call us to the beauty of unity and humility, of power, glory, and deliverance in the kingdom of God. They call us to covenant with God and each other. Of course their content is important. Without that content, they could not call us to repentance or to covenant. But what is most important is that they call to us.

1. See chapter 6 in this volume for a discussion of the coming of God’s kingdom in this life.

But how do they do so? Since Spinoza, the most common answer to how scripture means has been that it does so in the same way as any other book. Of course there are ways in which that must be true, however books mean. But scripture isn't just "another book." It is revelation. Scripture is a text in which God reveals himself to us, and not just any text does that. Like the law of Moses, scripture points our souls to Christ (Jacob 4:5), also something that other texts do not do. Therefore, we cannot read scripture or any other revealed text in quite the same way that we read another book, for to do so is to ignore the holiness that it reveals and calls for.

However, if revealed writings do not mean as other writings do, then how *do* they mean?² For at least a couple of hundred years, many religious people have felt that the best response they could give to that question was, "They mean what they say literally, except when they obviously mean something more poetic," an explanation at which we may smile because of its circularity, but a common explanation nonetheless. It is common, I believe, because there is an important sense in which it is true. Nevertheless, that answer has created problems for thinking about the meaning of scripture. I believe that most of those problems stem from the fact that literalists as well as those whose work would undermine the literal historicity of scripture share an important assumption. They assume that "the most primitive meaning of a text is its only valid meaning"³ or, at least, its most important meaning. Notoriously those in the self-importantly named Jesus Seminar have spent hours combing the New Testament texts, parsing words and phrases and what we think we know of history trying to discover the primitive meaning of the New Testament, the authentic sayings of Jesus as opposed to those which were supposedly invented

2. I address the issue of how scripture means more fully in chapter 8. This is an overview of the argument I make there.

3. David C Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26–38, especially p. 27.

by admiring disciples.⁴ The biblical literalists disagree vehemently with the Jesus Seminar about what is primitive meaning and what is not. In spite of that, and it seems with neither of them having reflected on the fact, the two groups agree exactly with the insistence that the primitive meaning determines scripture's meaning.

That assumption is problematic, however, because, as the Book of Mormon demonstrates, a text is scriptural precisely because the primitivist assumption about meaning is not true. In 2 Nephi 11:2, Nephi says that he will liken the words of Isaiah to his people—even though he knows that Isaiah's words were not originally about the Lehites (see 1 Nephi 19:23; 2 Nephi 6:5, 11:8). The primitive meaning—what Isaiah's words meant for Israel when Isaiah first delivered them—is more or less irrelevant to the Lehites, but Nephi can liken the words of Isaiah to them nevertheless. Isaiah is scripturally meaningful to the people of Lehi, apart from its primitive meaning. The likening of scripture to people did not privilege its primitive meaning.

Second Nephi 6:5—"There are many things spoken by Isaiah which may be likened unto you, because ye are of the house of Israel"—might be taken to suggest that Isaiah could be likened to the Nephites because they and Israel share a common history and heritage or because the responsibilities and blessings of Israel are also theirs. However, as 2 Nephi 11:8 tells us, the words of Isaiah may be likened "unto *all* men." The interpretation of scripture that we see modeled in Nephi's reading of Isaiah is interpretation by likening, and scripture can be likened to all people.⁵

In Isaiah, the word *liken* and its cognates, such as *like*, usually translates some form of the Hebrew verb *dmh*, meaning "to share the

4. The participants in the Jesus Seminar recognize the challenge that their work presents to ordinary belief. Its founder, Robert Funk, said in his address to the first meeting of the Seminar, "We will be asking a question that borders the sacred, that even abuts blasphemy, for many in our society." Jesus Seminar home page: www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/jesus_seminar.html (accessed 9 March 2008).

5. I find it informative that Nephi explicitly avoids teaching his people the culture of the Jews. Evidently language, culture, and context are not always necessary for likening the scriptures. See 2 Nephi 25:2.

same attributes,” as in Isaiah 14:14.⁶ Using this verb, something that is like something else does not only look like that which it is like. Perhaps it does not at all look like what it is like. Indeed as Thorlief Boman reminds us, “In the historical and presumptively historical writings it is never reported how a person looked”⁷ nor are biblical writers particularly interested in giving a visual description of the things they see.⁸ The Isaiah sermon—which mocks the king of Babylon (sarcastically calling him “Lucifer,” “Morning Star”⁹) and his pretensions of being like God—shows us that the verb *liken* means “to *be* like something else.” Nephi is comparing a way of being that we find portrayed in Isaiah with the way of being of the Nephites, and not to compliment them.¹⁰

As Nephi suggests, the argument about the meaning of Isaiah for the Lehites is expandable: The scriptures as a whole are meaningful to *us* only because their primitive meaning is not determinative. Scripture is God’s revelation to us, now, as well as to its original hearers. Its meaning, therefore, must go beyond the particular ideas and settings

6. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, trans. John T. Willis, Geoffrey Bromiley, and David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), s.v. *למח*. Interestingly, the verb can also mean “to think” or “to plan,” as in Isaiah 10:7.

7. Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: Norton, 1954; rev. ed., 1960), 76.

8. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, 74–76.

9. Isaiah 14:12. The Hebrew word translated “Lucifer” in the King James translation is *hēlēl* (הֵלֵל), and means “shining one” but can imply boastfulness. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), s.v. הֵלֵל. The name *Lucifer* means “shining one,” but has Latin rather than Hebrew roots.

10. Of course we cannot be sure what the original word was that Joseph Smith translated *liken* in 1 and 2 Nephi, for though we know that Nephi was writing in reformed Egyptian (Mormon 9:32), we do not know whether that describes the characters he was using to write in Hebrew or the language in which he was writing. Nevertheless, since Nephi is an immigrant from Israel, the chances are that he and his people still speak some variant of Hebrew, particularly since he is reading and transmitting the work of Isaiah, and it is likely (though not necessary) that he wrote in the language that he spoke. With caution, we can assume that the underlying language was Hebrew. See Royal Skousen, “The Original Language of the Book of Mormon: Upstate New York Dialect, King James English, or Hebrew?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 28–38, especially p. 38.

of the original writer. However inspired he was, he did not—could not—see all the ways in which the scriptures can be likened to each of our lives in particular. He did not see all the meaning implicate in his writing. However, he did not need to. All he needed to do was record the defective way of being of Israel (as well the possibility of its being otherwise), for we could then understand our own being as a type and a shadow of what the Lord has revealed through Israel. Just as it was for the children of Lehi, to liken scripture to ourselves is to compare the way of being that it reveals with our own way of being.

As revelations of God's interaction with his people, the scriptures come to us as a call, a call to consider another way of being than that we currently inhabit, in other words, a call to repentance. By opening a new range of possible meanings, scripture outlines an alternative way of being-in-the-world, to use the philosophical language of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, a way of being-in-the-world in which God has revealed and continues to reveal himself, a way in which his self-revelation calls us to repentance.

If we think of scripture in that way, as a text in which God reveals himself and calls us to his kingdom and which, therefore, questions our mundane being-in-the-world, making it possible for us to see an alternative, the alternative made possible by Jesus Christ, then we can say at least this about interpretation: The meaning of a scriptural text is that meaning that leads us to godly life (though the relation between godly life and scriptural meaning is circular: scriptural meaning leads us to godly life, and godly life produces spiritual meaning as its fruit).¹¹

Does it follow that historical meaning is irrelevant, then, or that the interpreter has free reign to impute to the scriptural text whatever comes to mind? Neither. Historical meaning is important. It is important to ask questions like "How did those who wrote the texts understand their meaning?" It is important, first, because historical

11. Compare Henri de Lubac, "Spiritual Understanding," in *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Fowl, 3–25, especially p. 13.

meaning cannot be separated from scriptural meaning. The historicity of Jesus, the basic historicity of the scriptural accounts (leaving room for variations in understanding, for editing and transmission, etc.) is essential to the scriptural meaning of the Bible. The spiritual claim that the New Testament makes on us is in the announcement that Jesus the Messiah was born, suffered, died, and was resurrected. If these claims are not historical, then our hope is vain and Jesus was an exemplary moral teacher rather than the Savior of the world. Likewise, the historicity of the Book of Mormon is essential to its scriptural meaning. It does not mean the same spiritually if there were no Nephites or Lamanites. The types and shadows of scripture, the schema or patterns they offer us for reunderstanding our lives—for repenting—mean something very different (if they mean at all) if they are not manifest in history.

The historicity of scripture is also important because it can serve a spiritual function. Historical understanding of the scriptures can challenge us to question the overlay of interpretation that has accrued to the text and become “obvious,” a tradition of our fathers. For us, such unquestioned accruals become its scriptural meaning, and they make it difficult for us to be brought to repentance by what we read because the text no longer challenges us when we already know what it has to teach. When that happens, what we take to be scriptural meaning displaces the meaningfulness of scripture. By making us reconsider our traditional interpretations of the text, historical research can help the scriptures question our understanding of ourselves and the world, as well as the ways we comport ourselves in the world.¹² Historical research on scripture often forces us to recognize that the work of interpretation is to conform our ideas to scripture rather than to force scripture to conform to our ideas. Or, better, by helping us conform our ideas to scripture, historical research helps us conform

12. Some of the work of N. T. Wright is exceptional in this regard. See, for example, his *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

our souls to scripture. It is, therefore, a good place to begin scriptural interpretation. Nevertheless, historical meaning is secondary to scriptural meaning.

Though sometimes we may appear to think otherwise, we also do not have free rein in interpreting scripture—scripture is of no private, no merely individual, interpretation (see 2 Peter 1:20)—because the interpretation of scripture requires unity. One form of that unity is the unity of the literal and the spiritual. Just as the body and the spirit are ultimately a unit rather than two things at war with one another, the literal and the spiritual are aspects of a unit. Neither exists without the other. Each influences the other; each limits the other. Together they prevent scriptural interpretation from proceeding willy-nilly. To use an extreme example to make a point, Moroni 10 cannot be interpreted to be a recipe for fondue because the words and grammar of that chapter as well as its history do not allow for such an interpretation. Nevertheless, though unity in interpretation is important, interpretation is also manifold because meaning is implicate in the writing of the text as much as it is explicit. It does not follow that the writing itself can be ignored. Interpretation must often be rethought because there are historical textual and editorial questions to sort out (Which is the best manuscript? What was the original form of that manuscript? etc.). It also does not follow that the answers to those historical questions will tell us how to understand scripture. Every good interpretation of scripture must give careful heed to the words of scripture, to the unity of the literal and the spiritual.¹³

A second and overarching unity of our revelatory writings is the unity of Zion: We live in covenant with one another because we live in covenant with God. Within that covenant, we have recognized some revelation as scripture, as “standard works,” works against which to measure ourselves, not only as individuals, but as a people. The choice of the Latter-day Saint canon has not always been an explicit choice. Sometimes, as in the case of the Bible, it has occurred through history

13. Chapter 8 in this volume is about that unity.

and tradition as well as by common consent. Presumably, however, these choices have come about under the influence of the Holy Ghost working in the church as a body.¹⁴ The standard works provide unity of interpretation by serving as a common source of understanding.

However, within the unity of Zion the standard works do not stand alone. Because we have an open canon, and as part of living in covenant relation with God and one another, we recognize priesthood authority as a second unity. Prophetic voices speak to us, continuing to call us to repentance, continuing to offer us an alternative way of being. Like the standard works, they provide limits on interpretation, the limits of our common life together in Zion.

A further element of the unity of Zion in scriptural interpretation is what, in Catholicism, is called “the tradition.” As we have standard works, we also have, even if not officially, what we could call standard interpretations, the interpretations we have in common. We share with one another understandings that provide limits within which scriptural meaning takes place. At the practical level, this unity is both necessary and most dangerous. The tension between our shared interpretations and the possibility that they are things overlaid on the text, things apart from their authentically scriptural meaning, is obvious. That is the tension in which much interpretation of scripture is situated, unable to distinguish easily between which traditional interpretations give us scriptural meaning and which hide that meaning,

14. I take it, however, that we differ from many others because, believing in an open canon and in continuing revelation, we understand that the Bible could have been otherwise. It could have included fewer or more books than it does. Its present shape is the product of social forces and decisions as well as the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. We also know that the Doctrine and Covenants could be otherwise, because we have seen it change over the life of the restored church. I assume that the Book of Mormon could have been otherwise, that its editors could have chosen to include some additional texts or to exclude something, though there are also indications that the Lord had a direct hand in selecting at least some of its texts. (See, for example, 1 Nephi 9:3 and Words of Mormon 1:9.) Thus, for Latter-day Saints, what makes something canonical is not only that it is inspired by the Holy Ghost, for there are many such revelations in addition to those canonized. Something is canonical because, from among the revelations, it has been agreed on by common consent to be a standard.

perhaps spoiling us “through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men” (Colossians 2:8).¹⁵

Given that tension, a member of the church may argue against our common interpretations. However, the fact that we live together, that we are covenant with one another and with God, that when it comes to scriptural meaning, our individual understanding is not primary—this means we cannot argue against common interpretations heedlessly. We need not accept everything that is commonly believed. Far from it. However, if someone does not, the burden of proof falls on that person. That burden need not be heavy. Indeed, it can be light, and carrying it can lead to the beautiful and holy. Good interpretation of our writings and beliefs is perhaps most often done by someone who accepts that burden of proof, showing us how our common interpretations have fallen short or how they can be renewed. That kind of scripture interpretation is most likely to open our understanding and allow us to liken the scriptures and our beliefs to ourselves freshly. However, we cannot interpret scripture in Zion without living in that tension between the need to renew our interpretations and the requirement that we recognize the legitimacy of what we share. To leave that tension, either to insist on the legitimacy of my private interpretations or on the absolute authority of common interpretations, with little or no regard for the other side of the tension, is to give up the desire to establish Zion. It is to fail the beauty of Zion.

Thus, scriptural meaning occurs in covenant relation. Our situatedness in that covenant and the way-of-being that it opens, the life of covenant obligation to God and our fellows, presumably determines the likening that can occur in interpretation. To interpret scripture in the covenant is to be called to be in Zion, called on by God and others who speak words of gladness, truth, and joy, and who demand that we accommodate ourselves and our interpretations to the canon, to

15. I understand most, if not all, references to “the philosophies of men” in LDS discourse to refer to what we might otherwise call “common sense,” to the traditions of understanding that seem obvious to the world and that we often take up because we too take them to be obvious.

authority, and to the traditions of the Saints, not in some inflexible way, but by taking up the cause of Zion and seeking to establish and bring it forth in interpretation. It is to be called to the interpretation of a Christian life, as well as in the explicit interpretations of scriptural texts.

It would be inaccurate to say that I encounter God in the writings of his revelations. I encounter him in prayer and ordinance, and especially in my reception of the Holy Ghost. It would be inaccurate to say that I encounter the other person in writings, for I encounter others in my family, in the church, and in society. However, I can recollect—re-collect—my covenant relation with God and others through scripture.¹⁶ The distance between myself and the primitive meaning of a text and the work to understand which that distance imposes on me is one way in which the obligation created in my relation to what is other than myself is manifest. The distance between my life as it is and the life to which I am called imposes a similar work and is, therefore, evidence of a similar obligation. Those distances are a matter of otherness: the Other speaking to me in scripture (the standard works), the otherness of authority (both God and those who represent him), the obligation to respond to and renew the testimonies of other persons (common consent).¹⁷ Within the covenant, I have an obligation to make the concretized said of the scriptures into something that continues to say,¹⁸ both for myself and for others, a saying that is enacted not only in my ideas and beliefs, but particularly in my life. Responding to the call of scripture, I must en-act the cause of Zion.

16. In the language of contemporary philosophy, I encounter the obligation to the Other. The work of Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps most obviously in play here, but as my earlier remark suggested, the work of Gadamer, Ricoeur and, particularly, Jean-Luc Marion has been at least as important for my reflection on these issues. And, of course, given their reliance on the work of Heidegger, that is always also in the background. For more on recollection, see chapter 1 in this volume.

17. Of course, it is not determined only by these. It is determined, foremost, in personal relations of love, both with the Divine and with other people.

18. This distinction between the saying and the said is something that I take from Levinas. Roughly defined, the said is the content of a speaking and the saying is the significance of the act of speaking. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). See, for example, pages 30 and 62.

Because we have continuing revelation, within mortality there can be no end to the work of interpretation that enacts the establishment of Zion. There can also be no end to that work because we live together in an organic rather than a static whole. And there can be no end because we have not yet come to an end: as temporal, living beings, we are not always the same, unchanging from moment to moment; we live in that we continue to come to be, in that we continue to renew our life. We hopefully await the Apocalypse, the final revelation of the Son of God, his reign. Awaiting it, we must continue to renew our hope and expectation of that revelation, for ourselves and for others, by continuing to read, interpret, and reread. The medieval scribe's¹⁹ motto—*lege, lege, lege, labore, ora, et relege*; “read, read, read, work, pray, and reread”—must also be ours. In that unending rereading, reinterpretation, and renewal, we find ourselves always partaking of what is new and everlasting (see D&C 132) rather than “ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Reading scripture we find ourselves called to and participating in Zion, called to holiness and beauty.

19. I use the word *scriptorian* with its common meaning, “one who copies scripture,” rather than with its LDS meaning, “one who knows the scriptures well.”