

UNVEILING REVELATION AND A LANDMARK COMMENTARY SERIES

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The one major book of the New Testament on which John Calvin never wrote a commentary was the Book of Revelation.¹ Historians believe that he was unsure how to interpret it.² Many writers over the centuries who did pontificate dogmatically about the last book in the Bible might have done better to follow in Calvin's footsteps. Today, however, as is true with almost every book of the New Testament, there are a plethora of outstanding commentaries on John's Apocalypse, from the most scholarly of works to the most devotional.³ Robert Millet, to whom this Festschrift is dedicated, has himself a very short but clear exposition of Revelation.⁴ But now a landmark set of commentaries has begun to appear, the BYU New Testament Commentary Series. In what may be an unprecedented sequence of releasing volumes in a commentary series, the initial offering to appear is on the book of Revelation. Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes have coauthored the work, which was released first for Kindle in 2013 and presumably will be coming out in hard copy soon.⁵

If Draper and Rhodes's work is any indication of what the rest of the volumes in the collection will look like, this will be the most ambitious, detailed, and scholarly commentary series on a portion of the Bible ever

produced by Latter-day Saints. Perhaps even more noteworthy is the use of the full range of scholarly sources. A substantial majority of the items in the bibliography are non-Mormon; within the footnotes, close to half of the citations represent sources authored by non-Latter-day Saints. Of course, a work that utilizes a wide cross-section of previously published commentaries will inevitably draw on a full range of theological traditions, given the comparative paucity of formal Mormon commentaries on individual books of the Bible. Particularly encouraging to me, though, were the number of major evangelical commentaries consulted. Of the 2,249 footnotes in Draper and Rhodes's volume, 243 cited Greg Beale's massive *New International Greek Testament Commentary*,⁶ 220 referenced David Aune's three-volume *Word Biblical Commentary*,⁷ and 95 mentioned Robert Mounce's *New International Commentary on the New Testament*.⁸ The next most commonly cited non-Latter-day Saint commentators were individuals who are not distinctively evangelical, and the numbers dropped off considerably in frequency of appearance: R. H. Charles with 68 occurrences,⁹ George Caird with 48 references,¹⁰ and J. Massyngberde Ford with 45.¹¹

Undoubtedly to assuage Mormon readers who might fear that the result of this broad-ranging use of sources had compromised the Mormonism of the end product, the authors explain in their preface:

This study is not a compendium of statements about the book of Revelation nor is it a study of the last days. It is a complete examination of every verse in Revelation within its historical setting. Though a person may enjoy Shakespeare without any knowledge of Elizabethan England, both understanding and appreciation are greatly increased by background knowledge. The same holds for the whole of the New Testament, including Revelation. Therefore, we have studied the most important Jewish and Christian apocalypses and other historical, apocryphal and pseudepigraphical materials from the first and early second centuries AD. Also we have consulted and drawn from scholars both in and out of the LDS community. Of all our sources, however, none trump [*sic*] the information that has come from the Restoration. The inspiring words and insights from latter-day scripture and general authorities have anchored this volume in the

teachings of the Restoration. In all of this, our intent has been to bring John's writing into its fullest light.¹²

What they mean by this is that if non-Mormon authors present evidence from the historical or literary contexts, or from the meaning of the words or grammar of a certain passage in Revelation, which might call into question Latter-day Saint doctrine or statements from General Authorities, that material will not appear in the commentary except on very rare occasions.

This creates an interesting read for the non-Mormon scholar. Early on I recognized that every time the Joseph Smith Translation diverges significantly from the King James Version, Draper and Rhodes will tell us and will find a way to defend the JST. Almost every time Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or one of a host of other Church leaders made some well-known pronouncement about a certain verse or text in Revelation, their statements will be quoted as the definitive interpretation of that passage. So I was curious to see whether or not the commentary would hang together as a coherent whole at these junctures. Some of the time it does, and evangelical scholars who were given an excerpt from Draper and Rhodes without knowing who wrote it could easily imagine it was someone from their own community. For example, in explaining Revelation 10:6, the authors note that while the KJV renders *hoti chronos ouketi estai* as "that time shall be no longer," in context a more accurate translation (as in the BYU rendition) would be "that there will be no further delay."¹³ Almost all modern translations agree, though the JST merely followed the KJV. Or again, in illuminating the identity of the great whore in chapter 17, we read, "It is easy to see that Rome, like Babylon of old in all her glory and decadence, was an excellent symbol of the corrupt godless societies that had arisen and would arise over the years, more particularly during the last period of earth's history."¹⁴ Few evangelicals would disagree.

On other occasions, the informed non-Mormon scholar would recognize that the source of a certain piece of commentary was Mormon but also see how the believing Mormon could understand it to flow naturally from the text at hand. For example, in speaking of the Greek word *prōtotokos* in Revelation 1:5, usually translated "firstborn," Draper and Rhodes remark that the term "in its literal sense . . . was used to designate either the firstborn or the only son in a household," while "in a figurative sense,

it referred to one with rank and dignity. It also carried both messianic and royal nuances.”¹⁵ From the context and the Old Testament background, we can clearly see the regal use; from Doctrine and Covenants 93:21 we see the filial use. No logical contradiction is involved in affirming with our authors that both meanings are present in Revelation 1:5, though those who do not accept Joseph Smith’s writings as divine revelation would undoubtedly point out that nothing in Revelation itself or its historical background would ever suggest that “Jesus is the firstborn spirit child of Elohim.”¹⁶

In still other places, however, the quote from the Church leader does not merely supplement but seems to conflict with the meaning of the text arrived at through historical-grammatical methods of interpretation. As mentioned above, often the reader of Draper and Rhodes’s commentary would not know this unless they do some of their own exegetical homework or are familiar with non-Mormon scholarship. An excellent example of this is the treatment of the seven seals as seven millennia from the creation of the earth to the Lord’s Second Coming, a topic to which we will return shortly.

In a few places, Draper and Rhodes themselves offer sufficient exegetical data to show the historical-grammatical interpretation of the text to be at odds with later Mormon commentary and give no indication how they hold the two approaches together. As an illustration, the Greek of Revelation 1:6 includes the words *tō theō kai patri autou*. Apart from any context, they could be translated “to God and his father,” as the KJV misleadingly renders them. In context, however, this interpretation is virtually impossible. Verse 5 has just mentioned Christ, who in verse 6 we learn is the one who loves us and who freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a “kingdom” and “priests.” Given the frequency with which John in his other writings refers to God as Jesus’ Father, and given that the standard *koinē* Greek way of expressing the concept of a possessive adjective governing two nouns was to use the genitive of the personal pronoun placed immediately after the second noun, the phrase would normally mean “to his [Jesus’] God and Father.”¹⁷ In fact, this is precisely how the BYU New Testament rendition translates it.¹⁸

We can state the matter even more strongly. Granville Sharp’s rule, formulated by the polymath by that name, also a fighter of the British slave

trade with his contemporary William Wilberforce, articulated a pattern for which he found no exceptions in Hellenistic Greek, and even today with sophisticated searchable databases of all extant ancient Greek, remarkably no exception has ever been found. When a single article governs a pair of nouns in an “x and y” construction (that is, “the x and y” rather than “the x and the y”), the two nouns are always closely linked together. But when those nouns are singular, personal and nonproper (including words like “God” and “Father”) they always refer to the identical person.¹⁹ In other words, “God” and “Father” in Revelation 1:6 simply cannot refer to two separate individuals, as if God had a Father. Grammatically, the sentence can only mean that the God of Jesus Christ is also his Father.

Draper and Rhodes observe that the JST also translated it this way, but that ten years after Joseph Smith completed his translation, he claimed to have received revelation that his understanding of the KJV was right because “John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a Father, [and] you may suppose he had a father also.”²⁰ Of course, if that is what the KJV meant in its Elizabethan English, then English-speaking Christians would have been teaching that doctrine widely in between 1611 and the Restoration, but they did not. The KJV translators took *tō theō kai patri autou* to mean “to God, even his [Jesus’] Father,”²¹ but rendered it awkwardly, so that Joseph Smith, as he increasingly departed from the more orthodox faith of his earlier years in Mormonism, later misinterpreted it as meaning that God himself had a Father. Or at least he posited a revelation that would trump the historical-grammatical meaning of the text.²² So it is mystifying to a non-Mormon how Draper and Rhodes can supply sufficient data for concluding that this passage does *not* teach “a plurality of Gods” but then go on to assert that it does indeed promulgate precisely that doctrine.²³ It is time for Latter-day Saints to invert the hermeneutical principle that the later Joseph Smith always trumps the earlier Joseph Smith even when he is demonstrably wrong, at least if words and grammar are allowed to mean what they normally mean. Often the earlier Smith should be allowed to trump the later Smith by a “back-to-our-oldest-roots” hermeneutic.²⁴ And if this approach isn’t *ever* permitted, then that means the JST is wrong in at least this one place, since Smith later changed his understanding. So why should Draper and Rhodes follow the JST so slavishly elsewhere in the commentary?

One early online reviewer of the commentary, David Tayman, who describes himself as “an active and believing Latter-day Saint who might be considered an informed nonscholar,” had almost the identical reaction to Draper and Rhodes’s attempt to wed large segments of non-Mormon scholarship together with past pronouncements by Latter-day Saint leaders and to allow the JST consistently to trump the original Bible. He writes:

At times, a selection of LDS traditions surrounding a passage are [*sic*] indeed presented, as they should be. But I noticed times when a passage of modern LDS scripture or modern doctrinal concept is expressed as interpretively authoritative or preferred, with a single authoritative interpretation of the selected quote being presented, and the discussion is then considered resolved. Even non-scriptural texts, such as ideas from the Lectures on Faith, curiously “trump” other concepts without much discussion.²⁵

After giving his own examples of this practice, he reaffirms that, “to be clear, I do not find the *existence* of connection and exploration of the uniquely Mormon concepts connected with the text to be incorrect, wrong, or even problematic.” He acknowledges that doing so can be “a very important part of helping Latter-day Saints find many roads of relevance and resonance to these texts, and exploring our rich history seeking to find meaning from them.” But he then adds that what frustrated him personally “was the way in by which, in *practice*, certain doctrinal ideas tended to ‘trump’ other options seemingly only by virtue of them being more in line with the author’s preferred school of conservative Mormon thought.”²⁶

One example where Draper and Rhodes offer an alternative interpretation to that of a General Authority might point the way to what they could have done much more often. In discussing the choice of the seven churches to which John had his writing delivered, they first note that Elder James Talmage “suggested that the seven congregations were the last bastions of faith, the great apostasy having engulfed all the other areas.”²⁷ But then they add, “John’s symbolic use of numbers, however, should not be overlooked. From early times the number seven connoted that which was full or complete and, therefore, could show that John’s message was universal, that is, for all branches of the Church, even those outside of

Asia Minor and those beyond.”²⁸ Draper and Rhodes’s option is far more likely than Talmage’s, given the very limited and very gradual departure of second-century Christianity from the various forms of the early church in the first century, to which the sizable majority of primary sources point. There never was one moment or even one century when everyone “turned the lights out,” turning them on again only to discover a radically different form of Christianity.²⁹ Draper and Rhodes recognize this, but they present Talmage’s view respectfully and do not directly challenge or contradict it, while nevertheless showing us a still more excellent way. One could hope that future volumes in the BYU New Testament Commentary series will acknowledge this kind of diversity of perspectives, even *within* Mormon thought, much more often.

It would be easy to spend this entire short essay focusing just on the key places in Draper and Rhodes’s commentary where I disagreed—not with their historical-grammatical exegesis, which rarely ever misleads, but where they rushed too quickly to cite some Latter-day Saint authority, especially outside of the standard works, whose perspective just doesn’t fit the culture or context of the Apostle John and his audiences in Asia Minor in the late first century. What I would prefer to do with the rest of this essay, however, is to highlight a cross-section of the many marvelous points of agreement between the commentary and non-Mormon scholarship, especially evangelical Christian scholarship.

I begin with Draper and Rhodes’s thorough introduction.³⁰ Like many conservative Protestants and Catholics, but against the rest of the guild, Draper and Rhodes argue that the case for authorship by the Apostle John is the strongest of the alternative proposals. John was exiled to the island of Patmos in the mid-90s under the emperor Domitian. While actual persecution at this time has sometimes been overestimated, it did exist, even if it wasn’t all from Rome or generated by imperial decree. With references to a “synagogue of Satan,” Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, in particular, show how deeply seated local Jewish hostility could become. Draper and Rhodes present the four main interpretive approaches to the Apocalypse—preterist, historicist, idealist and futurist—complete with each other, along with their various strengths and weaknesses. They distinguish between “dispensational futurism” and “modified futurism,”³¹ which correspond roughly to what is more

commonly called dispensational premillennialism and historic (or sometimes “classic”) premillennialism. It would appear that Joseph Smith was a historic premillennialist, arguably the most common viewpoint among second- through fourth-century Christians prior to Augustine’s *City of God*, which catapulted amillennialism into the prominence it would maintain for the next thousand years in Roman Catholicism.³² In other words, Smith looked for a literal future millennial reign of Christ on earth but did not exempt the Saints from living through the horrors of the tribulation that unfolds just before Jesus’ return.³³ Draper and Rhodes do not, however, discuss pre-, mid- and post-tribulationism *per se*. They do, however, opt for modified futurism with a touch of idealism—the view that the Apocalypse presents timeless behaviors of God throughout history with respect to both his people and his enemies, an approach I have defended myself.³⁴

In ways I similarly applaud, Draper and Rhodes go on to discuss the significance of Revelation embodying elements of three literary genres—apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle. They accurately survey the historical background of events at the end of the first century, even if they considerably exaggerate the amount of heresy and apostasy that was occurring.³⁵ Very helpfully, they highlight those verses and portions of Revelation that have been most stressed by key Church leaders, beginning with Joseph Smith, and nicely summarize their emphases.

I next turn to the commentary proper. At the beginning of each section of text into which our authors subdivide Revelation, they present the Greek text according to the 27th edition of the Nestlé-Aland Greek New Testament,³⁶ the official Latter-day Saint–approved King James Version in English, and a brand new translation that largely follows the best textual evidence (even when the KJV doesn’t) and that remains very formally equivalent in its translation theory but is up to date in its use of twenty-first-century English. Instead of calling it a translation, however, it is labeled the BYU New Testament rendition, even though it is very much a translation in all the ways that the JST is not! This portion of the commentary alone could be of great help to Latter-day Saints, especially those who may be wary of modern translations of the Bible outside the Church and nevertheless find the Elizabethan English of the KJV increasingly difficult to navigate. The commentary portion of the treatment of

each pericope is divided into two main sections, “Translation Notes and Comments” (the bulk of each section), which proceeds phrase-by-phrase through the text, and a much briefer “Analysis and Summary” that crystallizes the fundamental meaning of the passage and often reflects on the contemporary significance of its main ideas.

After the Apostle’s description of his initial vision in Revelation 1, the commentary which we have already cited several times, John pens the letters to the seven churches, which span all of chapters 2 through 3. Here Draper and Rhodes give excellent historical information about each of the seven cities in which the churches were located, often noting how the choice of metaphors used to describe the spiritual health of the congregations draws directly on details of local history and current events. Particularly important is the recognition that the water supply for Laodicea came either from the cold, clear mountain springs near Colossae or the therapeutic hot spring at Hierapolis. By the time the aqueducts reached Laodicea, however, the water was tepid and hard to drink. Little wonder Christ threatens to spew the lukewarm churches, like their city’s water, out of his mouth (see Revelation 3:16). Maybe the Latter-day Saints have not been afflicted with the teaching popular in other Christian circles that “hot” is good and “cold” is bad when Christ declares he wishes the Laodiceans were either hot or cold, as if staunchly resisting the gospel were somehow better than being right on the threshold of making a clear-cut stand for Christ! But Draper and Rhodes recognize that this cannot be, in light of the context in which both cold and hot water are considered good.³⁷

Chapters 4 and 5 are nicely summarized by our authors with this introduction: “The throne room theophany provided the seven churches with the reason why they should put their trust in the Eternal God. The rest of the vision gives additional support for that trust. It reveals the power, majesty, and omnipotence of God and the Lamb and also discloses their work as they prepared for the salvation of the faithful.”³⁸

When we come to chapter 6, Draper and Rhodes apparently have no choice but to adopt the interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 77:7 that each seal represents a thousand years of world history. Had Joseph Smith heard of the historicist approach of interpreting the seven churches as seven periods of church history and decided to try out the same approach on

the seven seals?³⁹ Of course, conquest,⁴⁰ warfare, famine, and death are common enough in any era of world history, so one can make the interpretation work—very broadly and vaguely and by ignoring all the other events that occurred in each era. But what in the context of the Apocalypse or of the end of the first century would ever lead to equating a *seal* with a thousand years, much less requiring the otherwise unbroken chronological progression of events (except for chapter 12) to be ruptured, returning instead to the beginning of world history, a history which we now also know long predated 4000 BC? Texts like Doctrine and Covenants 77, even though they appear in the standard works, are those that reinforce the non-Mormon conviction that we have merely one man’s opinion here, not divine revelation.⁴¹

Joseph Smith’s take on the seven seals, nevertheless, is superior to most of the other Christian schemas in that he recognizes that the seals represent what must be removed before one can read the scroll of God’s final judgments against humanity. Thus they do not constitute something that happens only right before Christ’s return or which occurred only in the first century. Instead, they refer to preparatory events that are not unique to the period of intensified horrors which John calls the “great tribulation” (7:14).⁴² They closely resemble the features of life in this fallen world that Jesus taught in his Olivet Discourse would characterize the forty-year period between his death and the destruction of temple in AD 70 (see Matthew 24:1–14), as the preterist stresses. Yet, as the idealist interpreter observes, they have been repeated throughout church history many times over. Finally, as the futurist suspects, they may well characterize the generation before Christ’s Second Coming as well.⁴³

Interpretations of the relationships among the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments have historically divided into three main camps. The most straightforward is the strictly chronological, in which all twenty-one judgments follow one another in strict sequence, though not necessarily with identical intervals in between them. This approach fails to account for why the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet appear to bring us to the very threshold of the end, after which the cosmos as we know it cannot continue. And yet it does. A second main view, therefore, is the recapitulative perspective, by which each series of seven judgments covers the same chronological ground but from different vantage points. The sixth of each series then *does* bring

us very close to the end of human history as we know it. But this view doesn't adequately explain the intensification from one-fourth of the earth affected during the seal judgments, to one-third during the trumpet judgments, to the entire world during the bowls (or "vials of God's wrath" as the KJV memorably rendered it). The third approach is sometimes called the telescopic view. Here the seventh seal when looked at closely turns out to *contain* the seven trumpets. It is not a separate judgment itself; indeed, when this seal is opened, all that happens is silence in heaven for a half an hour. So too the seventh trumpet, when scrutinized carefully, is seen to *contain* the seven bowls, because while there are storms and earthquakes after it is sounded, they occur in heaven and not on earth. They create what led Eugene Peterson to entitle his incisive little commentary on the Apocalypse *Reversed Thunder*.⁴⁴ This approach preserves the strengths of the other two while remedying their weaknesses.⁴⁵ While Draper and Rhodes don't discuss this debate explicitly, it appears their commentary would mesh with this third, telescopic approach, which I also think fits John's visions best.

Ever since Hal Lindsey's *Late, Great Planet Earth*⁴⁶ became the best-selling book of "nonfiction" (a somewhat dubious label) in the entire decade of the 1970s, countless individuals around the world have imagined that literal, prolonged, and excruciating human warfare will bring world history to its climax just before Jesus comes back. Of course, Lindsey hardly invented this notion; he merely popularized it on an unprecedented scale, which the sixteen novels in the Left Behind series of the 1990s and 2000s elaborated further.⁴⁷ Revelation 9:1–12 has always featured prominently in these kinds of interpretations; since the invention of modern flying machines many people have imagined them to be armed helicopters.⁴⁸ D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner observe that "some have wondered if John could be describing fighter aircraft, tanks, flame throwers, missiles, and so forth."⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the purely historical or preterist perspective notes the Parthian hordes that threatened Rome in the first century with their long-haired riders swinging maces behind them as they rode on armored horses.⁵⁰ Draper and Rhodes, though, rightly highlight the demonic origin of these creatures and speak of "hell-inspired pandemonium"⁵¹ and elaborate:

The images expose the overall horror of the beasts and their powerfully destructive force. To limit them to helicopters or tanks weakens the message and the warning. Their description serves to emphasize the demonic nature that drives them and the broad power to torment they possess. Besides, there is nothing human associated with them.⁵²

Chapter 9:20–21 explains why God permits such horrors; even at this late hour he is giving humanity every chance to repent. That so many people do not is astonishing. In Draper and Rhodes's words, "That they can come through the brutalization of the first and second woes with not a shred of turning from their ways reveals an unimaginable depth of hardheadedness, a hardheadedness built on demonic deception."⁵³ I fully agree and wonder if this doesn't temper the otherwise highly optimistic Latter-day Saint spirit about how few people are so intransigent that they will remain in hell for all eternity. Consider also the evidence of 20:7–10. That unbelievers could live through a millennium of unparalleled goodness directly attributable to the reign of Christ and the goodness of his people and then rebel the moment that Satan is released to deceive the nations (20:7–9) reinforces my conviction. With C. S. Lewis, I affirm that the "doors of hell" may be "locked on the inside,"⁵⁴ but let us never underestimate how many may for eternity prefer to be the master of their own destinies, however sordid, rather than bow the knee to any other person or power. It is tragic, but it rings true to history's experience with the human condition.

The vision of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 is regularly described as the hardest chapter of the apocalypse to interpret.⁵⁵ But Draper and Rhodes echo many premillennial interpreters when they see the events occurring in Jerusalem ("the great city . . . where also their Lord was crucified"—verse 8) rather than Rome, and when they understand the survivors of Jerusalem's earthquake being terrified and giving glory to the God of heaven in verse 13 as referring to actual repentance and the conversion of many in Israel or among Jewish people more generally.⁵⁶ Draper and Rhodes likewise echo most commentators of all theological stripes in seeing the dragon and two beasts of chapters 12 and 13 as a parody of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ Against the somewhat more popular understanding of the mysterious number 666 as gematria (Hebrew numerology) for the name NRWN

QSR (Nero Caesar), they agree with the second-most-common scholarly explanation of the number (as do I) that explains it as the triple imperfection of the Satanic trinity trying to mimic the true Godhead (which would yield 777—the number of completion or perfection in Jewish thought) but always falling just short.⁵⁸

With Richard Bauckham's influential study of the theology of Revelation,⁵⁹ Draper and Rhodes take the harvest of the earth and the winepress of God's wrath to refer to the harvest of believers and the judgment of unbelievers, respectively. Again, I tend to concur, even if the majority of scholars take both as parallel metaphors for judgment. We have already mentioned briefly the seven bowl judgments and the nature of the great whore of Babylon, which account for most of chapters 15–17. That brings us to Revelation 18, in which the materialistic nature of the whore is highlighted. In other words, not only is the great, evil end-times empire politically powerful and religiously blasphemous, persecuting the true devotees of Jesus, it is also economically wealthy.⁶⁰ Draper and Rhodes provide an important corrective to the typical non-Mormon interpretation that sees this empire fulfilled in forces largely outside the professing church of Jesus Christ, such as totalitarian regimes, the most unethical of the multinational corporations and, at times, even the unbridled militarism of the American empire.⁶¹ False Christianity can also readily, if even unwittingly, side with the beast, empowered by the false prophet and serving the dragon. On the other hand, Draper and Rhodes do not adequately acknowledge the allusions to Rome that regularly permeate every part of the Apocalypse, making the most dangerous threat to the Church at the end of the first century *not* the false teachers and apostates from within but persecution and hostility from without.⁶²

With Revelation 19, the stage is set for Christ's return and the marriage feast of the Lamb, where he is "wedded" to all of his followers of all time. At this juncture, Draper and Rhodes helpfully clarify a number of the comments they have made and a plethora of quotations of Church leaders they have utilized regarding the role of good works in a person's salvation. Quoting Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, they explain:

In the strictest sense, no one can work out his own salvation. No person can create himself, resurrect himself, ransom himself from

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sin, or cleanse his own heart from the taints of the world. These are the actions of a God, of an infinite being. We can seek and ask and petition and supplicate. We can apply his blood, take his name, accept his enabling power, and acquire his nature, but we cannot save ourselves. The Saints of God seek above all things for the sanctifying powers of the Spirit in their lives. Through this process they have their beings changed, and by means of that Spirit they are motivated to righteous works, the works of God. In that sense, Christ has begun to live in them (see Gal. 2:20). Thus Paul implored: “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” And now note the Apostle’s words: “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13).⁶³

This quotation could just as easily have been placed in the context of the great white throne judgment of Revelation 20.

Had the seven seals not been defined as seven millennia, there would have been no need for Draper and Rhodes (or any other Latter-day Saint) to defend the rather strained idea of the Millennium beginning before the return of Christ so that it could include the tribulation that the seventh seal introduces.⁶⁴ There is no reason to see the events at the beginning of Revelation 20 occurring at any earlier point than after the return of Christ with which chapter 19 ends.⁶⁵ Indeed, this may be one of the most unfortunate places where the medieval church inserted a chapter break in the entire Bible. Revelation 19:20–21 narrates the capture and demise of two-thirds of the unholy trinity—the beast and the false prophet. One’s curiosity is naturally piqued as to what will happen to the third member, the dragon—Satan himself. And the first four verses of chapter 20 answer that question at once. He is bound and thrown into the abyss, which is locked for a thousand years. All these punishments happen at the same time, so that the Millennium begins after Jesus has returned to earth, vanquished his enemies, and confined Satan to prevent him from doing his dirty work on earth as he had previously done, in particular during the tribulation depicted by the seven trumpets and seven bowls immediately preceding Christ’s *parousia*.⁶⁶

Draper and Rhodes, following the BYU New Testament rendition, do, nevertheless, recognize what the NIV and several other modern translations do not—that it is not just martyrs who are raised to life during the Millennium but all of God’s people.⁶⁷ The *kai* before the *hoitines* in the middle of verse 4 could be appositional, renaming the same group of individuals. But it is far more likely to be merely continuative, broadening the group from those who were beheaded for their faith to everyone who never received the mark of the beast or worshipped its image.⁶⁸ Draper and Rhodes, again following the BYU New Testament rendition, similarly recognize that the aorist tenses at the end of verse 4 are most likely ingressive—the believers began to live and reign with Christ or, to quote the rendition, “they were brought to life and ruled with Christ a thousand years.”⁶⁹ This is no flashback to Christ’s first coming as in classic amillennialism, making the Millennium coterminous with all of church history. Neither is it the final glorious period of the Christianizing of the planet *prior* to Jesus’ Second Coming, as in postmillennialism. It is a discrete period between Christ’s return and the new heavens and new earth, to which chapters 21–22 turn.

Fortunately, there is less disagreement among commentators of all theological stripes about the final two chapters of Revelation than there is over many other portions of the book. The eternal state will be more glorious than any of us dare ever imagine. And it will be earthier than much of the history of Christianity has envisioned, because the earth as well as the heavens are re-created. Especially because of verse 24, which teaches that the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into the new earth, Draper and Rhodes recognize that “the old earth is not so much annihilated as reconstituted to become a new celestial orb.”⁷⁰ What our authors might have added is that here is another mandate to care for our earth, as well as our material universe more generally, because at least some of it will be redeemed.⁷¹

Almost all branches of Christianity have read between the lines of John’s prophecy about the new heavens and new earth because Revelation 21–22 leaves so many unanswered questions. Draper and Rhodes, often following previous Latter-day Saint teaching, are no exception, as they go well beyond the biblical text in talking about eternal service and becoming gods. But no umbrage can be taken to their summarizing statement: John

“has placed all history in its cosmic setting and shown its movement to the end of time. But even grander than the historical review stands his powerful and pure testimony of his King and his God, whose power, judgment, and love he has shown none can escape.”⁷² They do overly narrow the application of John’s warnings at the end of the book, based on 22:19, reasoning that a warning that one’s share of the tree of life will be taken away from a person who adds or subtracts from the book could only apply to those who once had such a share. But John could just as easily mean the share that a person *could* have had. Especially since he has just mentioned all the wicked who remain outside the new heavens and the new earth—“dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters” (22:15)—it is unlikely that he is thinking only of those within the church who have tampered with his prophecy.⁷³

Our authors close the commentary proper by rightly observing that the warning at the end of Revelation refers only to the words of that book itself and not to the whole Bible. Thus it cannot be used to challenge the Mormon conviction that “plain and precious truths” have been removed from Bible that Joseph Smith restored.⁷⁴ But it is disingenuous to cite Bart Ehrman’s two books on textual criticism for support,⁷⁵ because all Ehrman discusses are the textual variants in ancient copies of biblical books that actually exist. He offers not a shred of evidence that the specific kinds of corruption postulated by Smith ever happened.⁷⁶ Fortunately, the commentary proper is not the end of Draper and Rhodes’s book. A brief epilogue summarizes and applies John’s Apocalypse and ends with an extended passage that well merits recitation:

In sum, the central message of Revelation is that God, the Almighty, is governing this world. Admittedly, Satan, his followers, those mortals he is able to corrupt, and those who corrupt themselves have and are making a hell of it when they can. But God ever limits their time and effectiveness within the bounds of agency. In the end, he and his Saints will win this battle with a decisive victory. Therefore, it behooves all of us to repent and help him move the work forward.

The point is that none can stop the Lord (see D&C 3:1–3). As his righteous children see this, they react in a magnificent hymn of praise to his power, majesty, and mercy. In the words of the heavenly

choir: “Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? For thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.” (Revelation 15:3–4)⁷⁷

Adela Yarbro Collins has offered the pithiest summary of the Apocalypse I have ever heard: “Jesus wins!”⁷⁸ But Draper and Rhodes offer the necessary unpacking of this summary in language that both captures John’s message accurately and highlight humanity’s appropriate response of worship.

What should a reviewer say in conclusion? Tayman’s perspectives from inside the Latter-day Saint movement almost exactly match mine from outside. If the purpose of this commentary series “is simply to present a substantial contribution to moving forward Mormons’ familiarity with important (and most unheard in Mormon circles) aspects of the history, traditions, arguments, and usage and language of the book of Revelation, then its value is great, and is to be recommended.” If, as some both inside and outside the Latter-day Saint world have hoped, one of the purposes is “that this volume might serve as a contribution to the outside world of Biblical Scholarship, to be engaged with and to further widen discussion of the concepts within,” then “the devotional and seeming uncritical way certain modern doctrinal interpretations ‘trump’ and give the appearance of discrediting some available historical and otherwise convincing views, will not be conducive to this volume making any significant impact in outside scholastic circles.”

In either case, Tayman concludes:

As a combination educational and devotional tool for the wider LDS Community, however, I see this project’s development as an important contribution, and one that should be applauded by those who wish to see, at the very least, a wider understanding of at least some of the concepts and problems expressed by the wider Biblical community that otherwise may have no other way of being “safely” expressed from within. While the answers and issues may not be addressed or resolved how all might ideally like them to be, the fact that issues *are being expressed and acknowledged from a substantial work by a Church-run institution* is in and of itself, at least for me, a major gain.⁷⁹

With this I heartily concur. And with twenty-six more books of the New Testament to go, the series has every opportunity to improve even on whatever deficiencies may attach to this initial volume.

The key hermeneutical issue to be decided and hopefully to be discussed in these subsequent volumes is the relationship between General Authorities' statements, even canonical ones, and the historical-grammatical meaning of the text of the New Testament. Will commentators continue to employ all of the standard tools of interpretation that are used with any other work of ancient literature and human communication unless an authority says something seemingly at odds with that interpretation? Will the authority normally trump the text's plain meaning in those instances? Do Latter-day Saint commentators have the freedom to state their preference for the plain meaning? If not, why not and what are the implications of such a restriction? If they have the freedom to do so but prefer a modern dictum over the ancient historical-grammatical meaning, what are the implications of such a preference? If they continue to demonstrate salutary historical-grammatical interpretive skills except where such a dictum exists and then try to hold the two forms of interpretation together in ways others find contradictory, how can they defend such a hermeneutic? This is not just asking for more explicit clarification that modern prophets carry more authority than ancient scripture but rather for explanation of how they can *ever* rely on mere historical-grammatical interpretation if the possibility of later, potentially contradictory revelation remains that would carry greater authority. Why not simply say we have no idea what the text means unless we have an authoritative interpretation on which to rely? Or do those interpretations themselves reflect patterns that could be extended to other texts? These and related questions will hopefully be addressed as the series emerges.⁸⁰

NOTES

1. He also never wrote commentaries on the one-chapter letters of 2 John and 3 John.
2. James M. Hamilton Jr., "Why Didn't Calvin Preach Revelation?," *For His Renown*, June 11, 2013, <http://jimhamilton.info/2013/06/11/why-didnt-calvin-preach-revelation/>.

3. In addition to those that appear in the notes below, see especially Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006); Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005); Brian K. Blount, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).
4. Robert L. Millet, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011).
5. Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2013). A PDF file of the prepublication manuscript disclosed at least one important reason for the delay of the traditional book form—all Hebrew words and phrases were originally typeset as if they read from left to right, creating gibberish for anyone who can read or even pronounce snippets of the language. The Hebrew was thus simply removed from the Kindle edition and will hopefully be reinserted, this time correctly, in the forthcoming hard copy.
6. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).
7. David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1997; Nashville: Nelson, 1998).
8. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).
9. R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920).
10. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
11. J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).
12. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 12.
13. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 241.
14. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 415. Indeed, David E. Aune (*Revelation 17–22* [Nashville: Nelson, 1998], 920–22) reproduces a sketch of the late first-century coin depicting the goddess Roma as a warrior, sitting on seven hills with her foot dipped in the Tiber River—all possible background imagery for this reference.
15. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 67.
16. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 67.

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17. If Greek writers or speakers wanted the pronoun unambiguously to modify only the second noun, they would place it *before* that noun. In this instance, the word order would need to be *tō theō kai autou patri*.
18. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 68.
19. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 241. For this construction in Revelation 1:6 as an example, see p. 244. For a comprehensive treatment of Granville Sharp the man and his grammatical discoveries, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Granville Sharp's Canon and Its Kin: Semantics and Significance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).
20. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 68.
21. This is either the “adjunctive” use of *kai* to mean “even” or “also” or the “epexegetical” use, meaning “that is to say.” On these and related uses, see F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 227–29.
22. I am not in a position to know whether Joseph Smith’s “revelation” caused him to “misread” the text or whether his “misreading” led to his “revelation.”
23. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 68.
24. For Joseph Smith’s pilgrimage from creating little more than a sectarian offshoot of Alexander Campbell’s larger Restoration project to ever growing heterodoxy, see esp. George B. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Changing Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932).
25. David Tayman, “First Impressions: BYU New Testament Commentary Series, ‘The Revelation of John the Apostle,’” *Worlds without End: A Mormon Studies Roundtable*, July 9, 2013, <http://www.withoutend.org/impressions-byu-testament-commentary-series-the-revelation-john-apostle/>.
26. Tayman, “First Impressions.”
27. Draper and Rhodes are summarizing in their own words material from James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 44–45.
28. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 65.
29. Borrowing and modifying the famous metaphor used by Hugh Nibley, *When the Lights Went Out: Three Studies in Ancient Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970).
30. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 14–56. Cf. Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 509–60.

31. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 20–21.
32. See further Donald Fairbairn, “Contemporary Millennial/Tribulation Debates: Whose Side Was the Early Church On?” in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology*, ed. Sung Wook Chung and Craig L. Blomberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 105–31.
33. Cf. esp. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
34. Craig L. Blomberg, “The Posttribulationism of the New Testament: Leaving *Left Behind* Behind,” in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, 61–87.
35. For a more accurate, and balanced, presentation, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 119–60.
36. Presumably the 28th edition wasn’t yet available when the first round of galley proofs was created. Now that the appearance of the hard copy has been delayed, this portion of the commentary could be updated. Whether it is or not remains to be seen.
37. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 123–24. Cf. M. J. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green, “The Laodicean Lukewarmness,” *Expository Times* 69 (1957–58): 176–78; and Stanley E. Porter, “Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water (Revelation 3:15–18),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987): 143–49.
38. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 132.
39. See, e.g., William M. Branham, *An Exposition of the Seven Church Ages* (Jeffersonville, IN: Voice of God Recordings, 1965).
40. Like a few commentators before him, Smith took the conquest, however, to refer to the advance of the gospel. In a context in which all the other seals are negative judgments, though, it is better to follow the majority who see this as the negative force of militarism and political conquest by force. See, e.g., Allen Kerkeslager, “Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev 6:2,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 116–21.
41. But to make the chronology work even vaguely and generally, Draper and Rhodes turn one of the millennia into more than 1,800 years (the fifth seal spanning the time from the birth of Christ to the Restoration), which hardly fits 1,000 years, even taken as a round number. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 171. Millet (*Making Sense of the Book of Revelation*, 25–27) is more consistent in taking each seal as a thousand years, but he does not explain how 4000 BC can be the beginning of “temporal existence,” nor what we are to infer as the longer time continues after AD 2000 (the end of the sixth seal).

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42. “These plagues are only preliminary in nature. They announce the coming eschaton or final events, but are not a part of it. Their severity, as bad as it is, is but a gentle prelude to what is coming when the inhabitants of the earth face the full wrath of God.” Millet, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation*, 180.
43. See especially Osborne (*Revelation*, 21–22), who stresses that even the futurist should acknowledge a measure of truth in each of the other three main positions.
44. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). George E. Ladd, in *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 164, explains that the lightning, thunder, earthquake, and hail “are conventional ways of expressing majesty and power attending the manifestation of the divine presence.”
45. For further details, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 56–58. For helpful schematics to illustrate all three approaches, see H. Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 146.
46. Hal Lindsey, *Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970).
47. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1995–2007).
48. Cf. Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming: A Prophetic Odyssey* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1973), 138–39.
49. D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *New Testament Apostles Testify of Christ: A Guide for Acts through Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 331.
50. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 122.
51. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 220.
52. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 224. Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 539, citing *b. Shabbat* 88a and *b. Pesahim* 112b in the Babylonian Talmud that speak of huge armies of destroying angels sent to wreak spiritual rather than physical havoc.
53. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 231.
54. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), 115.
55. Most would agree, however, with Rob Dalrymple in *Revelation and the Two Witnesses: The Implications for Understanding John’s Depiction of the People of God and His Hortatory Intent* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 47, that four major themes of the chapter are that the people of God are divinely protected, called as witnesses, persecuted, yet ultimately vindicated.

56. Likewise, on both these points, Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 159–60. Osborne (*Revelation*, 433) strikes perhaps a good balance with his description of this picture as “an amalgamation of Jerusalem and Rome into one unholy capital city of the Antichrist.”
57. While Draper does not use the term “trinity,” except with reference to the evil parody, Eric D. Huntsman and Cecilia M. Peek (“Imperial Cult and the Beasts of Revelation,” in *The Life and Teachings of the New Testament Apostles: From the Day of Pentecost through the Apocalypse*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010], 248) rightly insist that “if one considers the beasts of Revelation together with the satanic dragon, the text presents a trinity of beasts surely meant to be a perversion of the godly trinity.”
58. Cf. especially G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 219–21. So also Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 126; Millet, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation*, 43.
59. For considerable detail, see Richard Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 238–337.
60. Cf. esp. J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).
61. See, e.g., many of the essays in David Rhoads, ed., *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).
62. On which, see especially Wes Howard-Brooks and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).
63. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 457, citing Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millett, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book: 1991), 3:258.
64. Contrast Millet, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation*, 54.
65. As often argued by amillennialists and postmillennialists, who postulate a flashback, as at the beginning of chapter 12.
66. See especially Keener, *Revelation*, 464–65.
67. The 2011 NIV at least added a footnote expressing the alternative translation. The text itself renders the relevant section of verse 4 as “And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.” But the footnote adds that the end of

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- the first sentence and beginning of the second could be rendered as “God; I also saw those who. . . .” The latter is more literal.
68. “Because John envisions the whole church needing to resist the world system, he can portray the church as a martyr church, though his wording can allow for others who have withstood the beast but were not specifically martyred.” Keener, *Revelation*, 467.
 69. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 477.
 70. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 493.
 71. See, e.g., David Mathewson, “The Destiny of the Nations in Revelation 21:1–22:5: A Reconsideration,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002): 121–42.
 72. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 530.
 73. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1153. Cf. J. William Fuller, “‘I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life’ (Revelation 3:5),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1984): 297–306.
 74. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 536.
 75. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 536n90.
 76. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).
 77. Draper and Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, 541.
 78. During a question-and-answer time in a seminar at the national meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature at least twenty-five years ago. I have no further recollection of the specific setting.
 79. All three quotations from Tayman, “First Impressions.”
 80. One thinks of at least partly analogous debates on the use of the Old Testament in the New. A huge literature has examined the variety of methods the New Testament uses in citing and applying the Old Testament. Is the full range of apostolic exegesis, in turn, reproducible? Interpreters are split down the middle but at least the discussions are out in the open and the implications of the various approaches widely analyzed.