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The Revelation of John the Apostle



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
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Richard D. Draper
and
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About the Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary Series

Welcome to the BYU New Testament Commentary, a project by a group of Latter-day Saint specialists offering to readers a careful, new look at the biblical records that witness the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the first generation of his church. The commentary series seeks to make the New Testament more accessible to Latter-day Saint general readers and scholars by employing much of current biblical scholarship while reflecting important LDS insights. At the same time, this effort may also be helpful to interested readers of other faiths who want to learn how a group of Latter-day Saint scholars understands the Bible. A fundamental article of faith for Latter-day Saints (Mormons) affirms the Bible “to be the word of God” while adding, understandably, that it needs to be “translated correctly” in order for it to be accurately comprehensible to modern language speakers.

These objectives have helped shape the purposes and parameters of this commentary series. Serious LDS readers of the Bible search the scriptures, looking for depth and breadth in passages whose meanings and mandates may ultimately be plain but not shallow. Such readers and interpreters are served by treatments that unite faith and research, reason and revelation, in prayerfully confronting profound and difficult issues that arise in the texts and affect one’s path of progression. The New Testament has served as an influential guide to western civilization for centuries. As such, its records have long been studied by lay people and scholars alike, resulting in a rich reservoir of information that illuminates the New Testament era culturally, historically, and linguistically. Selectively, the BYUNTC builds upon this vast body of knowledge, resting on the Greek texts of the New Testament and connecting helpful elements of linguistic, literary, historical, and cultural research and traditional scholarship together with LDS scriptures and doctrinal perspectives. The combination of all these features distinguishes the BYUNTC from other commentaries, which are readily

available elsewhere and which readers may also want to consult for more encyclopedic or specialized discussions.

The tone of the BYUNTC aims to be informative rather than hortatory, and suggestive rather than definitive in its interpretation. The opinions expressed in this series are the views of its contributors and should not necessarily be attributed to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Brigham Young University, where many of those involved here are headquartered; or anyone else, though these works have benefitted from input and guidance from a number of colleagues, advisors, editors, and peer reviewers.

Each volume in this series sets in two parallel columns the King James Version (KJV) and a new working translation of the New Testament. Calling this a new “rendition” clarifies that it does not seek to replace the authorized KJV adopted by the LDS Church as its official English text. Rather, it aims to enhance readers’ understanding conceptually and spiritually by rendering the Greek texts into modern English with LDS sensitivities in mind. Comparing and explaining the New Rendition in light of the KJV then serves as one important purpose for each volume’s notes, comments, analyses, and summaries. This effort responds in modest ways to the desire President J. Reuben Clark Jr. expressed in his diary in 1956 that someday “qualified scholars [would provide] . . . a translation of the New Testament that will give us an accurate translation that shall be pregnant with the great principles of the Restored Gospel.”

Depending on their personal skills and interests, the authors of these volumes approach their scholarly sources and LDS materials differently but always with careful exposition and engaging perspectives. In several ways, they employ various interpretive tools, including semantic considerations of Greek vocabulary; cultural, historical, critical, literary, and structural analyses; and intertextual comparisons with other biblical passages, the Book of Mormon, and other scriptural works including the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Observations are also proffered about the doctrinal and spiritual reception of New Testament teachings and practices in the broad LDS religious tradition.

The format also varies moderately from volume to volume regarding introductory materials and the style of commentary. Throughout, Greek and Hebrew terms appear in transliterated form in conformity with standards adopted by the Society of Biblical Literature. In some cases, a volume reproduces the Greek New Testament text based on the Greek text published by the Society of Biblical Literature (2010) or draws upon the twenty-eighth edition of the Nestle-Aland text in *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2012).

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THE SCENE OF PRAISE (4:9–11)

Greek Text

9 καὶ ὅταν δώσουσιν τὰ ζῶα δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ εὐχαριστίαν τῷ καθημένῳ ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, 10 πεσοῦνται οἱ εἴκοσι τέσσαρες πρεσβύτεροι ἐνώπιον τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων καὶ βαλοῦσιν τοὺς στεφάνους αὐτῶν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου λέγοντες, 11 Ἄξιός ἐστίν, ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν, λαβεῖν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν, ὅτι σὺ ἔκτισας τὰ πάντα καὶ διὰ τὸ θέλημα σου ἦσαν καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν. [SBLGNT]

King James Version

9 And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, 10 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

New Rendition

9 And whenever the animals give glory and honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever, and throw their crowns in front of the throne saying: 11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power, because you created all things, and by your will they came into existence and were created.”

Translation Notes and Comments

4:9 *beasts give glory / animals give glory*: Chapter 4 concludes in a tremendous symphony of worship and praise to God. The Seer declares that the living creatures never cease to extol him (4:8) and then states, “Whenever the animals give glory and honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne . . . the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him” (Rendition 4:9–10). The idea is that all beings in heaven worship God continually. John uses the temporal adverb ὅταν (*hotan*), “when, whenever,” to introduce what he sees next.

4:10 *fall down . . . worship . . . throw*: Up to this point, John has used either the present or some form of the past tense for his verbs. Remarkably, in 4:9 and 10 he switches, placing four verbs in the future tense: δώσουσιν (*dōsousin*), “they will give”; πεσοῦνται (*pesountai*), “they will fall down”;

προσκυνήσουσιν (*prokynēsousin*), “they will worship”; and βαλοῦσιν (*balousin*), “they will throw.” The switch creates a difficult translation problem. Some scholars suggest that the verbs reflect a Semitic past tense and should be translated as such, specifically as imperfect verbs showing action begun in the past and continuing through the present.⁵⁰ Taking the text as it stands, however, it seems best to see in them John’s understanding that these events have not yet actually taken place. As noted above in the Analysis on 4:2, John is privileged to see as God sees, whose omniscience allows him to know what will be. As John sees these things, he is still well aware of his own time frame and knows much of what he sees are “things which must be hereafter” (4:1).

The act of falling and worshiping make up two steps in a single act that the Greeks described as προσκυνέω (*proskyneō*), to prostrate one’s self before a deity or king and kiss his feet or the hem of his garment, which showed the highest form of reverence and worship (see Ps. 72:11; Dan. 3:5, 6, 10, 11, 15; Matt. 2:11; 4:9; 18:26; Acts 10:25; 1 Cor. 14:25).

cast their crowns / throw their crowns: The elders also revered their Creator by casting their head garlands (στεφάνους, *stephanous*) at his feet.⁵¹ Since the garland represents, as noted earlier, military victory, their worshipful act acknowledges that they have overcome their enemies and won their victory through the power of God.

4:11 Thou art worthy / You are worthy: The adjective ἄξιος (*axios*), “worthy,” as used here, designates that which is fitting or proper. John is showing his reader that the glory, honor, and power the worshipers ascribe to God are wholly fitting because he is the creator and the sustainer of all things⁵² (see D&C 88:7–13).

O Lord / our Lord and God: The Greek text reads ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν (*ho kyrios kai ho theos hēmōn*), “our Lord and our God,” very likely reflecting the Christian reaction to the practice of the emperors Caligula and Domitian. Both claimed those titles.⁵³ Domitian went so far as to proclaim

50. Aune, *Revelation*, 276.

51. The act symbolized homage and subordination. Conquered rulers presented their crowns to their captors (see, for example, Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.29), or the conquerors took them (see 2 Sam. 1:10; 12:30; 1 Chr. 20:2).

52. Aune, *Revelation*, 309.

53. Though the idea of apotheosis was popular in the East, the Romans had no ceremony for the deification of a living person. From the time of the Triumvirs, however, the Senate created the *consecratio* for the purpose of deifying a leader postmortem. The first was Julius Caesar, who became *divus Iulius* at the behest of Augustus and the practice

that he was the equal of the gods.⁵⁴ The words of the elders proclaim the Christian position that God, and God alone, has claim to those titles.

glory and honour and power / the glory and the honor and the power: As our Rendition shows, the Greek text reads τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν (*tēn doxan kai tēn timēn kai tēn dynamin*), “the glory and the honor and the power.” The definite article before each attribute is important because it denotes and emphasizes that quality which is requisite with or due to God.⁵⁵ The attributes of honor and glory have already been paired in 4:9 with “thanksgiving” added. Here the elders replace it with “power,” thus emphasizing that attribute of God. The point of the song is that because God is worthy, he should have all the power as well.

thou hast created all things / you created all things: The scriptures make it clear that God’s creative acts are not the creation of things *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but rather the organization of eternally existing physical matter, spirit matter, and intelligence, all in accordance with eternally existing laws (see D&C 93:29, 33; 131:7–8; Abr. 3:18, 24). The Greek verb translated “create” (κτίζω, *ktizō*) means “to found, build, produce.”⁵⁶

for thy pleasure they are and were created / by your will they came into existence and were created: The last phrase of this verse is difficult to translate. It appears that John wrote καὶ διὰ τὸ θέλημα σου ἦσαν καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν (*kai dia to thelēma sou ēsan kai ektisthēsan*), literally, “and according to your will they were and were created.” The problem is how something can exist before it was created. To solve the problem, ancient scribes have created a number of variants.⁵⁷ For example, some scribes inserted an οὐκ (*ouk*), “not,” before ἦσαν (*ēsan*), “were,” thus allowing the text to read, “they were not and were created.” This reading gave force to the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, but it has very little manuscript support and can therefore be rejected as the original reading. One scholar, taking the words as they stand, argued, “This unusual phrase suggests that all things which are, existed first in the eternal will of God and through his will came into

continued thereafter. Before the end of the century, however, two emperors decided not to wait. Both Caligula and Domitian took upon themselves divine titles and forced their worship in the eastern provinces. See Philo, *Legat.* 353; Suet. *Cal.* 22.1, 2; Cassius Dio, *Rom. Hist.* 59.28.5.

54. See Pliny, *Pan.* 33.4; Cassius Dio, *Rom. Hist.* 67.4.7; 67.13.4.

55. Aune, *Revelation*, 273 n. 11.d-d.

56. LSJ, 1002–3.

57. Some scribes add οὐκ (*ouk*, “not”) before ἦσαν (*ēsan*, “were”), while others replace ἦσαν with εἰσίν (*eisin*, “are”).

actual being at his appointed time.”⁵⁸ The best way to understand John’s intent seems to be to take the *kai* as explanatory so that the last verb acts to specify the action of the first. In this way it would read, “they came into existence and were created,” as in our Rendition.

Analysis and Summary

This pericope focuses on praise, specifically that of the life-giving principle in God. The Revelator’s frequent reference to the color green has underscored this idea. It is because God is the creator of life, mortal and eternal, that he is worthy of all honor and glory.

But there is another dimension to this praise. Not only did God give life—“you created all things”—but “by your will” they have their being (4:11). He, at every moment, sustains all life. John saw streaming from the throne light—green light. It is this power “which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things” (D&C 88:13). Thus, he generates all life everywhere, even in the heavens. The doxology sung by the animals (4:8) ascribed to God might and power. The elders now add “glory” and “honor.” His worthiness springs from the fact that, according to his will, all things are and were created.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

Encouragement and hope flow out of chapter 4. It centers on the powers of God: his glory, majesty, and might. In symbolic terms, the Seer conveys to the mind of the reader a vision and understanding of God’s greatness. He stands at the center of heaven, surrounded by all creatures he has saved, including the faithful who rule with him in power and authority. Light and life proceed out of him. He is the essence of being and the principle of all existence—even eternal existence. The exalted ones recognize this and return to him praise and glory forever.

58. Mounce, *Revelation*, 140.

59. John’s words counter the dualistic false doctrine put forward by Cerinthus, John’s traditional nemesis in Asia, who taught that the world was the creation of an inferior being to God. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 3.33; 10.31.

This part of the revelation also emphasizes God's role as both creator and redeemer, an idea found throughout the Old Testament. It is because he has created all things that God has providence and claim on humankind. No matter the appearances to the contrary, even where Satan seems to dominate the scene, John never gives way to dualism. God and God alone created the world and continually overmasters it. John's witness to the Church was and is that this world will become fully God's once more in the glorious millennial era. John, therefore, asserts here and elsewhere in the revelation God's rule over nature and nations.⁶⁰

Even so, God is an unmoving, silent, enthroned, and eternal figure. It is true that glory and power flash and thunder from his presence and that he keeps ward and "watch over his people, but never directly [interferes] in their affairs till the judgment, when mankind appears before his throne for doom and recompense."⁶¹ Before that time, it is another who orchestrates history and brings to pass the Father's will. The next chapter discloses that immediate and powerful ruler of mortal time and history.

60. Moffatt, "Revelation," 382.

61. Moffatt, "Revelation," 377.

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