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DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS AS LITERATURE

The literary quality of the Doctrine and Covenants can best be seen in its similarities to a near literary relation—that “noblest monument of English prose,” the King James Version of the BIBLE. Although a truly unique religious text, the Doctrine and Covenants contains more than 2,000 close parallels to biblical passages, and the literary manner of the book is similar to the Bible in subject matter. Like earlier scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants offers a rainbow of literary genres. The collection of revelations ranges from forms as transcendent as VISIONS (sections 3, 76, 110), angelic annunciations (sections 2, 13, 27), and PROPHECIES (sections 87, 121); through such ecclesiastical proclamations as PRAYERS (sections 109, 121), epistles (sections 127, 128), scriptural explanations (sections 74, 77, 86), COMMANDMENTS (section 19), and official declarations; to down-to-earth instructions (sections 130, 131) and minutes of meetings (section 102).

The literary kinship of the Doctrine and Covenants with the Bible is more apparent in tone than in style. The Doctrine and Covenants, for instance, is impressive for a simple, condensed straightforwardness that lends itself to statements remarkably rich in implication. The following two examples are from a single section: “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). “The glory of God is intelligence, or in other words, light and truth” (93:36). These lines are not set in contexts that illuminate them so much as they are parts of a sorites—conclusions without the use of thesis and antithesis.

Tonal richness sometimes expresses itself in vivid metaphor. A single section of the Doctrine and Covenants, for example, displays a sensitive sequence of images of water—progress like “rolling waters” that cannot “remain impure” (D&C 121:33), evil prospects that shall “melt away as the hoar frost melteth before the burning rays of the rising sun” (121:11), and DOCTRINE that will “distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven” (121:45).

As the most recent compilation of divine prophecy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Doctrine and Covenants provides the invaluable literary benefit of immediacy; divinity can be approached by modern readers through this book naturally and directly. It locates the reader not in the distant past of Ophir or Tarsus but in the recent history of such familiar landscapes as New York and Boston, where God reveals himself in close proximity. That closeness is apparent in his manner of address; he refers to recipients of his revelations a half dozen times in the book as “friends” (D&C 84:63; 84:77; 94:1; 98:1; 100:1; 104:1).

That is how the voice of the God of ABRAHAM and Isaac and of PETER and PAUL addresses readers in the Doctrine and Covenants—as friends. The most striking literary characteristic of the book is the directness of its access to God. When Joseph Smith cries out in a long and painful prayer of reproach, “O God, where art thou?” the Father’s response is as immediately comforting to present readers as it was to the Prophet: “My son, peace be unto thy soul” (D&C 121:1, 7). The Doctrine and Covenants speaks with biblical power to the immediate conditions of modern life. In the most difficult moments of current circumstance, the Doctrine and Covenants lifts readers’ eyes above mortal disappointments toward eternal hopes: “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (122:7).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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DOVE, SIGN OF THE

All four Gospel writers indicate that at the baptism of Jesus, JOHN THE BAPTIST saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus like a dove (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). The JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE, John 1:31–33, reads: “And John bare record, saying: When he was baptized of me, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I