
The Revelation of St. John

D&C 77

While translating the Bible, the meaning of the figurative and symbolic writings of the Revelation of St. John was revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. In this case, *figurative* is defined as a statement or phrase not intended to be understood literally, and *symbolism* is defined as a literary device in which the writer uses one thing to represent something more abstract.

If we can understand the figurative and symbolic in the Revelation of St. John, we can increase our knowledge of the Lord and his great eternal plan. For example, the question is posed: “What is the sea of glass spoken of by John, 4th chapter, and 6th verse of the Revelation?” (D&C 77:1). “When the earth was sanctified and became like a sea of glass,” said the Prophet Joseph, “it would be one great urim and thummim, and the Saints could look in it and see as they are seen.”¹ President Brigham Young added, “This earth will become a celestial body—be like a sea of glass, or like a urim and thummim; and when you wish to know anything, you can look in this earth and see all the eternities of God. We shall make our homes here, and go on our missions as we do now.”² Brigham Young saw the earth as not “an opaque body as it now is, but it will be like the stars of the firmament, full of light and glory: it will be a body of light. John compared it, in its celestialized state, to a sea of glass.”³

To the question of “what are we to understand by the four beasts, spoken in the same verse?” (D&C 77:2), the Prophet Joseph said, “Whenever God gives a vision of an image, or beast, or figure of any kind, He always holds Himself responsible to give a revelation

¹ History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], 1472. Joseph Smith Papers.

² Brigham Young, “Joys of Eternity,” *Journal of Discourses*, 8:200.

³ Brigham Young, “Want of Governing Capacities among Men,” *Journal of Discourses*, 7:163.

or interpretation of the meaning thereof, otherwise we are not responsible or accountable for our belief in it.”⁴

To the question of “what are we to understand by the book which John saw, which was sealed on the back with seven seals?” (D&C 77:6; Revelation 5:1), the answer is that St. John saw seven parchments, the number seven suggesting completeness. Each parchment was separately bound with seals to represent seven periods of the earth. As the parchment began to unroll, a seal was broken. As it continued to unroll, other seals were broken until all the works of the Lord and his Great Plan of Salvation were revealed. This means that the history of the world will be made known in its completeness, starting at the beginning and moving to the end by opening the seals one at a time.

Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, in his April 1975 general conference address, spoke of symbolism in the gospel. He told the story of a Protestant minister who attended a temple open house in Arizona and had a question regarding a symbol—

Said he: “I’ve been all through this building, this temple which carries on its face the name of Jesus Christ, but nowhere have I seen any representation of the cross, the symbol of Christianity. I have noted your buildings elsewhere and likewise find an absence of the cross. Why is this when you say you believe in Jesus Christ?”

I responded: “I do not wish to give offense to any of my Christian brethren who use the cross on the steeples of their cathedrals and at the altars of their chapels, who wear it on their vestments, and imprint it on their books and other literature. But for us, the cross is the symbol of the dying Christ, while our message is a declaration of the living Christ.”

He then asked: “If you do not use the cross, what is the symbol of your religion?”

I replied that the lives of our people must become the only meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, the symbol of our worship.⁵

⁴ History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], 1523. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁵ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Symbol of Christ,” *General Conference*, April 1975.