The Voice of the Prophet

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Revelation is a vital and complex process, and nowhere is its vitality and complexity more evident than in the Doctrine and Covenants. The histories of the revelations within this powerful book of scripture, in connection with internal evidences, make clear that God has accomplished his communications with his modern prophets through a variety of media. For example, eight of the early revelations compiled in the Doctrine and Covenants were received by means of the Urim and Thummim. Sections 2, 13, and part of 27 were delivered by direct angelic messenger. Part of Section 130 was manifest by a physically audible voice. Sections 76, 110, and at least part of 107 are the results of heavenly visions. Section 85 was given by the "still small voice." Probably the bulk of the revelations recorded in this remarkable volume were revealed, as is stated in the superscription of Section 20, through the internal manifestations of "the spirit of prophecy and revelation."

Not only is revelation given in different ways, but it appears in different forms; some of the writings which have been canonized as scripture by inclusion within the Doctrine and Covenants are translations, others are prayers, others historical accounts, others organizational minutes, still others letters, and at least one, Section 134, is acknowledgedly the "opinion" of its author. According to its own pronouncement then, the Doctrine and Covenants is not, as some have supposed, a word for word reiteration of the exact language of God dictated in all cases audibly; it is, rather, a revelation of his will to his prophets through a variety of communicational media, in several different forms.

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God has obviously many ways of speaking to man, ranging in directness from the intense face to face conversations enjoyed by Moses to such quiet revelations as the ratification of a prophet's personal conclusions through the acquiescence of the Spirit. There is good reason for this variation in the intensity of revelations from God: sometimes it is necessary for the Lord to inspire his prophets to a greater degree than at other times. Surely it would require less intensity of Spirit, for example, to assure Joseph Smith in Section 96 that he was making the right decision in nominating Bishop Whitney to direct the practical workings of the United Order than it would to impress upon the Prophet the completely new theological concepts of Section 76, which, unlike the information revealed in the former section, the Lord could not expect the Prophet to attain through any amount of personal consideration of the problem.

This is not, by any means, to say that some revelations are more valid than others. Revelation is the word of the Lord, no matter in whose words it is couched, and its divine source is an indisputable validation of not only its accuracy but its value. Revelations in temporal matters, though they be as relatively unimpressive as simple confirmation of the Spirit upon the decision of the Prophet, are yet divine communications and as binding and valuable as a direct theophany. But it is beyond question that some revelations carry more far-reaching implications than others and that revelation is communicated by various means in answer to various needs, according to different divine intents, and, therefore, in varying intensities.

This variability of revelatory means and intensities is completely in keeping with the historical workings of God, for he has always respected the agency and cultivated the individuality of his prophets. Book of Mormon readers recognize the remarkably diverse styles retained in that work, just as biblical analysts acknowledge the variety of styles in the Bible, despite the levelizing phraseology of translators. The Lord does not treat his prophets like puppets. The very idea of revelation by any such controlled means as auto-writing, wherein divine power actually moves the hand on the pen, is repugnant to anyone who considers man a responsible agent. Even when a device as mechanical as the Urim and Thummim is used to communicate revelation, its workings apparently involve a degree of creation on the part of the prophet, and confirmation

rather than dictation by the Lord. Indeed, the Lord berates Oliver Cowdery for his overdependent use of that instrument:

> Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. . . . (Doctrine and Covenants 9:7-9.)

In consequence of God's respect for the agency of his prophets, there is necessarily much of the rhetorical style of the prophet in the words of the Lord—it is impossible for revelation to pass through the soul of a free agent without some of his personal style appearing in the written revelation. The Author of the Doctrine and Covenants makes clear that "these commandments" were given to his servants "in their weakness, after the manner of their language." (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24.)

In the light of this inviolateness of the Prophet's agency, the differing intensity of spiritual impact in various revelations, and the heterogeneous means by which revelation is given, one would expect, and indeed one finds, distinct differences among the literary styles of the various revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants. It is possible, for instance, to recognize whether Joseph Smith or the Lord is speaking, to trace evidences of the media by which a given revelation is delivered, and even at times to apprehend the relative intensity of the particular spiritual manifestation. When the Prophet records the direct words of the Lord, his style is different from the style in which he writes his own thoughts; when he has seen a vision, his rhetoric is distinguishable from that in which he sets down personal conclusions ratified by the Lord; when he is intensely inspired, he is more eloquent than when less moved by the Spirit.

It is meaningful to trace these stylistic nuances within the Doctrine and Covenants, because they provide vital external evidence of the validity of the book. Literary styles are as unique and individually characteristic as fingerprints; it is almost as easy to forge a revelation—and we should learn from William E. M'Lellins' experience the difficulty of that—as it is to consistently forge a style not one's own. One would

logically expect God to speak differently than Joseph Smith; one would expect Joseph Smith, moreover, to speak differently under intense influence of the Spirit than under less profound spiritual motivation; and one might even expect that revelations communicated through the Urim and Thummim would differ noticeably in style from those conveyed by, for example, heavenly messenger. The fact that these expectations are confirmed by critical analysis of the stylistic variations within the Doctrine and Covenants is an objective testament to the consistency and reliability of the book.

The most obvious stylistic variation in the Doctrine and Covenants is the marked shift in manner, apparent to even the most casual reader, between the first six verses and the final forty verses of Section 121. It should be kept in mind that this powerful revelation consists of two distinct structural divisions—the brief but fervent introductory prayer in which the Prophet Joseph Smith pleads for the intercession of the Lord against the enemies of the saints, and the balance of the section comprising the Savior's moving revelation of comfort and theological insight in answer to the Prophet's plea. Thus we have in Section 121 an ideal situation for comparing Joseph Smith's natural style with the rhetorical mode of the Lord.

The differentiation between the two segments of the section is not, of course, as clear-cut as this. Joseph Smith's prayer obviously manifests the imprint of inspiration. Doubtless his introductory prayer is, like the inspired prayers of Sections 65 and 109, in itself a form of revelation. Indeed, the crescendo of intensity in language, complexity in syntax, and lyricism in technique suggests a definite increase in spiritual influence throughout the prayer; it is as though, from his simple opening question to his final rhapsodic plea, the Prophet were being filled increasingly with the Spirit. It is not certain, moreover, that the final division of the section is the verbatim word of the Lord; it may well have been colored by the Prophet's style in transcription, or may even be the Prophet's verbalization of conceptual impressions from the Lord. Despite these possible complications, it is obvious that the final segment of the section represents, if not the direct words of the Lord in contrast with the earlier words of Joseph Smith, at least a more direct spiritual manifestation than the introduction.

The intriguing thing about the section from a literary point of view is that it is stylistically obvious when Joseph Smith

ceases speaking and the Lord begins. This is true despite the extremely high quality of both styles; literary technique in each of the segments of the section is characterized by dictional acuity, syntactical soundness, and that careful embodiment of conceptual nuances within rhetorical structure which characterizes the finest literary style. And the two rhetorical approaches have more in common than their high quality. Both are relatively simple in diction, the initial style containing sixty-eight percent monosyllables and the other seventy-three percent; both are rich in inverted syntax, both are colored by Hebraic parallelism; and both are vibrant with lyrical concentration, repetition, concreteness, and spiritual intensity. Indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of each of the styles is the aptness with which they convey their intense spiritual fervor. One would expect such stylistic similarity, of course, emanating from the pervasive influence of the identical Spirit which motivated both utterances.

Though both styles are admirable, the literary technique of the second division is, as one might expect from its authorship, markedly more supple and effective than that of the first. Several distinct differences in the mechanical features of style contribute to the superiority of the latter part of the section. This second style, for one thing, is more subtle, capable of greater variation. Sentences within the last forty verses of the section average twenty percent longer than those in the initial verses.

An even more marked indication of the sophistication of literary technique in this latter part of the section is the heterogeneity of sentence size. Sentences in the introductory prayer range in length from five words to seventy-three words. Insofar as flexibility of sentence length is one of the hallmarks of competent literary style, this broad spectrum of sentence size is an indication of a remarkably fine control of language. But sentence lengths in the second style are even more impressive; they extend from six words to 149 words—over twice the capacity for flexibility as that demonstrated in the introductory verses of the section.

A further evidence of stylistic superiority in the second phase of the revelation is the relationship between dependent and independent clauses. In the first six verses of the section there are sixteen independent and only three dependent clauses —a minimum of subordination. In the passage of equal letter-

age immediately subsequent to the introductory prayer, however, there are ten independent clauses and no less than nine dependent clauses. This almost equal ratio of dependent to independent clauses represents a high degree of subordination, and hence a highly competent style.

Another distinction between the two styles of Section 121 is the more facile use of verbs in the second. This latter style contains almost ten percent more verbs than the initial style. Verbs, of course, are the workhorses of the language. Prose with a high verb content tends to be more forceful, more vigorous, and more clear than prose which is anemic in verbs. Not only is the style of the second segment of the section richer in verbs; it contains almost twice as many verbals, proportionately, as the first style. These verbals, such as the "burning" and "rising" of verse 11, invigorate and vitalize even the non-verb elements of the second division of the section.

A further differentiation in verb usage distinguishes the rhetorical pattern of the literary voice of Joseph Smith from that of the Lord. In the Lord's reply to the Prophet, there is frequent utilization of the emphatic "do." "Do" used in this manner is a formal intensifier, unessential to the basic meaning and grammatical structure of the sentence; the Lord could have said "Thy friends stand by thee," rather than "Thy friends do stand by thee," and meant exactly the same thing; the difference is entirely one of emphasis. This distinctive nuance of style evident in verses 9, 10, and 11 is entirely absent from Joseph Smith's comments in the beginning verses of the section. Although this usage is admittedly a minor point, the very subtlety of the distinction magnifies its significance. It is an integral element within the distinctive style of the second division of Section 121, yet it is not easily noticed, let alone conceived beforehand in a deliberate attempt to defraud.

A similarly subtle stylistic distinction between the two divisions arises from the frequent use in the second style of the "of" genitive, wherein a possessive noun, commonly preceding the substantive it describes and marked with the apostrophal sign of the genitive, serves instead as the object in a prepositional phrase introduced by "of." In the thirty-seventh verse, for example, we find "the authority of that man," rather than the more usual "that man's authority." This construction, almost nonexistent in the introduction of the section, is widespread in its latter division. Indeed, it is so common that a triple

usage of it may be seen in this single clause from the thirty-first verse: "the days of the dispensation of the fulness of times."

The superiority of the style of the Lord, then, as embodied in the final forty verses of Section 121, is particularly evident in the greater variability of sentence length and pattern, the more careful subordination of idea, and in general, the transcendent capacity for embodying the nuances of meaning in the form of the rhetoric. Hence, the style of the latter division of the section, notwithstanding the competence of Joseph Smith's rhetoric as evidenced in his introductory prayer, is preeminent not only in its complexity, but in its resultant capacity for suppleness, clarity, and profundity.

A less obvious, but perhaps more significant, instance of stylistic variation within the Doctrine and Covenants appears in Section 128. This revelation, recorded in epistolary form, contains in its beginning verses perhaps the nearest thing that can be found within the Doctrine and Covenants to the uninspired style of Joseph Smith. The Prophet is here evidently reporting in his own words, unmoved at the moment to any extensive degree by the Spirit, conclusions which have previously been divinely ratified by relatively nonspectacular spiritual manifestation; the absence of intense present spiritual motivation is evident in the style of the opening verses of the section. Throughout the revelation, however, there is a gradual acceleration of rhetorical complexity and intensity, culminating in the lyrical rhapsody of verse twenty-three. This increasing sophistication of style may well reflect a corresponding influx of the Spirit into the mind and heart of the Prophet. Thus it is highly probable, though we, of course, cannot be certain in the absence of pertinent information from the Prophet himself, that Section 128 comprises from its apparently relatively uninspired introduction to its highly inspired conclusion, a crystallization of the range of his rhetorical style.

Joseph Smith begins the letter in this matter-of-fact, almost mundane style:

> As I stated to you in my letter before I left my place, that I would write to you from time to time and give you information in relation to many subjects, I now resume the subject of the baptism for the dead, as that subject seems to occupy my mind, and press itself upon my feelings the strongest, since

> I have been pursued by my enemies. (Doctrine and Covenants 128:1.)

Stylistically, this is a far cry from the powerful rhetoric of Section 121. It is, for one thing, much less concentrated; the same message, in Section 121, would have been expressed in half the words—the first two clauses, the redundant "now," and the repetitive "subject," would all no doubt have been omitted in the earlier revelation. This lack of concentration is particularly significant in the light of Joseph Smith's usual preeminence under the influence of the Spirit in this aspect of style. In such a statement, for example, as "there is no such thing as immaterial matter," (Doctrine and Covenants 131:7) the Prophet compresses into eight words heights of scientific knowledge that have taken man six thousand years to discover and volumes to describe, and profound depths of doctrinal insight which theologians have yet to plumb; and this type of concentrated statement is typical of the bulk of his revelatory style.

This verse is not only less concentrated than the prose of Joseph Smith examined heretofore but is tainted in its technique by a strained rigidity, a self-conscious formality entirely absent in Section 121. Much of the reason for this rhetorical heaviness is the overbalance of dependent clauses, a ratio of four to one in this verse, which lends itself to an obscure, indirect, and plodding literary technique. In comparison with the Prophet's usual style, the manner of the introductory verses of Section 128 is decidedly prosaic.

Verse 18 of the same section, while still less than Joseph Smith's stylistic best, is more spontaneous and effective in its rhetorical technique than verse 1:

> I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands. It is sufficient to know, in this case, that the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children, upon some subject or other—and behold what is that subject? It is the baptism for the dead. For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. Neither can they nor we be made perfect without those who have died in the gospel also; for it is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times, which dispensation is now beginning to usher in, that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and

> keys and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time.

Although its beginning may be somewhat verbose—the first sentence could possibly have been omitted without damage to the meaning, and the first "welding" may be slightly redundant—it is markedly more concentrated than the first verse of the section. Moreover, its style is far freer; there is here much more evidence of the fluency and cadence of syntax which characterizes Joseph Smith's style at its best. Toward the end of this eighteenth verse, there even appears a tendency toward Hebrew parallelism in grammatical structure; this stylistically admirably convention is the essence of Hebrew poetry and the glory Hebrew prose. In a word, the style of verse 18 is decidedly superior to that of verse 1.

Immediately subsequent to verse 18, there is an even more striking improvement in the literary style of the section; Joseph Smith demonstrates in the final verses of the revelation his full rhetorical powers. Indeed, much of this final segment of Section 128 is not only remarkable prose but sheer poetry. Notice, for example, how facilely verse 23 adapts itself to poetic form:

> Let the mountains shout for joy,
> And all ye valleys cry aloud;
> And all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King!
>
> And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness.
> Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord;
> And ye solid rocks weep for joy!
>
> And let the sun, moon, and the morning stars sing together,
> And let all the sons of God shout for joy!
> And let the eternal creations declare his name forever and ever!

The poem, it will be observed, resolves itself into triadic form on the basis of both synonymity of content and parallelism of grammatical structure so that three sets of independent clauses form the three stanzas of the work, the internal pattern reflecting the total form. Careful cadences and subtle syntactic rhythms embue the passage with the richness of poetic flavor as does the pervasively metaphorical nature of the verse. The passage is, moreover, highly lyrical; it could be set to music. It even contains in lines one, six, and eight a unifying lyric refrain. The purpose of this formal concern throughout the

verse, of course, is to emphasize the content, to convey its inherent spiritual fervor, and to increase the impact of the passage upon the reader. The success of the style is obvious.

Thus there can be seen from verse 1 through verse 18 to its climax in verse 23 a gradual accelerando and crescendo of stylistic acuity and rhetorical impact. The first verses in the section are matter-of-fact and stylistically unimpressive. The middle verses are more vibrant. The concluding passage of the revelation is exultant, exhilarated, and profound—a masterpiece of stylistic craftsmanship. The most superficial reading of Section 128 will identify the increasing spiritual intensity, as evidenced in the style, throughout the revelation. It is as if Joseph Smith started the letter on his own, recalling information revealed in the past, and concluded the revelation under the complete influence of the Spirit. Such instances of the transcendent superiority of the literary style of the Prophet under divine influence of the Spirit may well be the reason that Joseph and Sidney were commanded to record the awesome vision of Section 76 while they were "yet in the Spirit." (Doctrine and Covenants 76:113.)

Due to necessary limitations of space, it is possible in this paper only to list rather than to scrutinize further examples. Several instances of the apparent effect of the Spirit on the language of revelation within the Doctrine and Covenants, however, deserve at least mention. It should be pointed out, for instance, that those sections revealed through the Urim and Thummin—Sections 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, 15, 16, and 17—demonstrate a stiff, almost mechanical rhetorical technique. Moreover, these sections seem to be organized according to a mutually distinctive formula; indeed, not only are there many repetitions of direct passages among the revelations, but sections 14, 15, and 16 are almost verbatim reiterations of the same textual material in virtually the same language. There is indication in the cautiousness and repetitiveness of style within these early revelations that the Prophet's revelatory ability grew from a gradual learning process in the art of receiving revelation rather than an immediate and complete endowment; the general literary quality of the revelations tends to improve throughout the Doctrine and Covenants.

Section 13, which was delivered by an angelic messenger, is logically enough couched in the language one would expect from an ambassador of so important a kingdom. The obvious

care with which the revelation is worded, as well as its aura of stiffly archaic formality, is reminiscent of the language of protocol. John had here, obviously, a vital message to convey, and judging from its formality, apparently felt it necessary to deliver it word for word.

Another intriguing stylistic phenomenon in the Doctrine and Covenants is Section 85, wherein after the intercession of the "still small voice" in verse 6, the style changes from simple journalistic reporting to one of eloquent and magnificent poetic prophesying. Section 130, with its miscellaneous items of information, is reminiscent in its concentration and its clarity of encyclopedic style. And, of course, the minutes in Section 102, along with Oliver Cowdery's opinions in Section 134, provide an interesting stylistic touchstone by which to evaluate the revelatory sections.

Section 76, that grandly eloquent record of the vision of postmortality vouchsafed to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, is without question the epitome of stylistic accomplishment in the Doctrine and Covenants. It is preeminent among the revelations both in its stylistic majesty and in its sustained spiritual fervor. This is, of course, entirely in keeping with the sublimity and profundity of its subject matter. That it was recorded while the authors were "yet in the spirit" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:113) is evident in every line. In the words of the Prophet himself:

> That document is a transcript from the records of the eternal world. The sublimity of the ideas; the purity of the language; the scope for action . . . are so much beyond the narrow-mindedness of men, that every honest man is constrained to exclaim: "It came from God."

In the final analysis, literary form, which is the matter we have been discussing, is at its best nothing other than the most appropriate and effective embodiment of idea. We are continually reminded by the evidence in the Doctrine and Covenants that when God has something of extreme importance to say, as he obviously often does in these revelations, he is correspondingly careful as to how he encourages his prophet to say it. I am suggesting, in other words, that there is not only in life and literature but in revelation, a high correspondence between the true and the beautiful; truth is apprehended by the honest as a thing of orderliness, of loveliness, of esthetic,

emotional, intellectual, and, most significantly, spiritual appeal. It might not even be stretching the point to say that motivation from the spirit of truth makes men eloquent, and that the fervor of this eloquence, though it is often mimicked, cannot be imitated. Furthermore, it may well be that the apprehension of this spiritual eloquence—which, it should not be forgotten, may be present in the prayer of an inspired child as surely as it is in the classic rhetoric of a Talmage—is one aspect of the recognition of truth.

This does not by any means imply that all stylistically eminent literature is scripture, but it does mean that authentic scripture is profound literature and that we ought to recognize it as such. At least two benefits accrue to those who do. For one thing, they enjoy reading the word of the Lord more than those who fail to appreciate its transcendent literary quality. And in the second place, this pure appreciation of revelation in and of itself is highly likely to motivate them to that frequent revisitation of holy writ which is essential to its comprehension, its assimilation, and active living of its precepts. Anyone who has read the Doctrine and Covenants in the Spirit in which it was given has enjoyed that same spiritual thrill Martin Harris must have felt when he read: "Behold, canst thou read this without rejoicing and lifting up thy heart for gladness?" (Doctrine and Covenants 19:39.)

An eminent poet, expressing his feelings toward scripture, significantly intertwines theological content and literary impact:

> O how love I thy law!
> It is my meditation all the day.
>
> I have more understanding than all my teachers:
> For thy testimonies are my meditation.
> I understand more than the ancients,
> Because I keep thy precepts.
>
> How sweet are thy words unto my taste!
> Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
> Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,
> And a light unto my path.
>
> Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever:
> For they are the rejoicing of my heart.
>
> (Psalms 119:97-100, 103, 105, 111.)

To David and me, where scripture is concerned, to love it is to learn it is to live it.