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Title Swimming in Symbols

Author(s) Ben Spackman

Reference *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 329–36.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Lost Language of Symbolism: An Essential Guide for Recognizing and Interpreting Symbols of the Gospel* (2003), by Alonzo L. Gaskill.

Swimming in Symbols

Ben Spackman

Ben Spackman (MA, University of Chicago) is a graduate student in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago.

Anyone who has attempted to read the Isaiah chapters of the Book of Mormon, or the book of Revelation, can attest to the challenge of understanding the scriptures. Peter himself thought that Paul had written some things difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16). But Peter had the advantage of being Paul's contemporary, while we find that our distance from the text multiplies that challenge. The scriptures inhabit a foreign land and speak a foreign language.[1] Even the Doctrine and Covenants, the "nearest" book of scripture for English-speaking Saints, can prove problematic.[2]

1. At least two linguistic "layers" exist for members who rely solely upon the KJV for understanding the Bible, the first layer being the "original" Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic text, which is then translated into the second foreign "layer," premodern English. In this regard, members of non–English-speaking countries have an advantage in understanding the biblical text because the non-English Bible translations used by the church were translated more recently than 1611. Consulting a more recent translation eliminates the "layer" of archaic English. The best way around this linguistic barrier, as Joseph Smith realized, is to study Greek and Hebrew.

2. For example, during my mission, I was surprised to find a whole phrase inserted into my French scriptures at Doctrine and Covenants 121:43: "avant qu'il ne soit trop

Review of Alonzo L. Gaskill. *The Lost Language of Symbolism: An Essential Guide for Recognizing and Interpreting Symbols of the Gospel.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003. xvii + 476 pp., with bibliography and indexes. $27.95.

Serious students of the scriptures may appreciate a guide to accompany them on their voyage into the obscure jungles of the scriptures. Alonzo Gaskill, a PhD in biblical studies and formerly the LDS institute director at Stanford University, presents some of his research in *The Lost Language of Symbolism*.[3] Written for the Latter-day Saint nonscholar, the purpose of his book is twofold: to "(1) open the eyes of those who feel frustrated when reading scripture or attending the temple because of their lack of understanding and insight, and (2) help satisfy the cravings of those who are curious about the meanings of things symbolic" (p. xvi). Though I do not fit his target audience and have some criticisms, I find that Gaskill largely succeeds in opening the door to understanding common scriptural symbols.

Gaskill provides two excellent introductory chapters entitled "Why Symbols?" and "The Art of Interpreting Symbols." He then offers a typology of symbolism, each chapter dealing with a specific kind of symbolism, including body parts, clothing, colors, numbers, directions, people, names, animals, and types and symbols of Christ. These chapters resemble a dictionary that moves into interpretation and application. Endnotes are plentiful and often cite multiple sources—Catholic, Protestant, patristic, and Jewish, as well as Latter-day Saint scholars and General Authorities. Gaskill also provides a scripture index, a subject index, and a bibliography arranged into categories of ancient sources, articles, and books. These provide the reader with ample follow-up reading.

The introductory chapters constitute the most useful part of the book because the principles discussed can be universally applied to

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tard." I consulted a good English dictionary and discovered that "betimes" can indeed mean "before it is too late" as my French Doctrine and Covenants read. This phrase has been revised in the newer French edition of the scriptures to read "en temps opportun" or "at the opportune time."

3. Alonzo Gaskill holds a PhD in biblical studies from Trinity Theological Seminary in Newburgh, Indiana. His doctoral dissertation, entitled "'Touch Not the Unclean Thing': The Implications of Barnabian Kosher Typology for Biblical Exegesis," focused on the common practice in patristic, rabbinic, intertestamental, and New Testament literature of interpreting the Hebrew law of *kashrut* in a typological manner. In addition to his doctorate, he also holds an MA in theology from the University of Notre Dame. Personal communication from Alonzo Gaskill to author.

scripture study. Gaskill introduces the reader to his definitions (an important step), some technical terminology of symbolism, and rules of responsible interpretation. He also points out some common scriptural pitfalls, such as proof-texting[4] and eisegesis.[5]

I wish to focus here on Gaskill's "rules of responsible [scriptural] interpretation" (pp. 18–22) and "pitfalls to avoid" (pp. 22–25) for three reasons. First, parsimony. Second, they reveal Gaskill's methods and the means by which he has arrived at his interpretations in the rest of the book. In essence, he is "showing his work." Third, at least in theory I agree with Gaskill's hermeneutic. However, when it came to particular applications of those interpretive principles, I wondered how we could think so differently. I perceived tension between some of his principles and pitfalls and realized that most of my interpretive criticisms resulted from the difference between how we (he and I) resolve that tension. Gaskill might consider me too restrictive (e.g., giving too much emphasis to authorial intent), while I consider Gaskill a little too broad (e.g., reading into the text things that may not belong there).

Gaskill's Rules of Responsible Interpretation and Pitfalls to Avoid

"*Rightly determine which elements of the verse under consideration are meant to be interpreted as symbols*" (p. 19).[6] How does one determine whether something is literal or figurative and therefore what its significance might be? Gaskill suggests that when a passage makes no literal or actual sense, we should consider symbolic meaning. However, what makes no sense to later readers coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have made good sense to the original audience. For example, Jeremiah 1:11–12 reads, "Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I

4. Proof-texting consists of taking a single passage out of context and giving it an interpretation sometimes inconsistent with its context. This technique is rampant both inside and outside the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

5. Eisegesis is reading meaning *into* the text, instead of drawing meaning *out* of it. This necessitates close attention to context.

6. Since I am taking Gaskill's rules out of order, I will set them off by italics. My commentary follows each rule.

said, I see a rod [or branch] of an almond tree. Then said the Lord unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it." An Israelite would probably have understood, because Hebrew *šāqēd,* the "almond tree" and *šōqēd,* "watching over" are nearly homophonous.

If the author deliberately employs such a device, something easily understood by a contemporary, then it is not symbolic per se, but culturally encoded. Gaskill addresses this: "*Study the meaning and origin of the idioms employed*" (p. 20). Such things are decoded by knowledge of the language and culture of the time period.

"*Look beyond the symbol*" (p. 19). That is, be aware of both its denotations and connotations, the "actual literal meaning" vs. "what our minds associate with the symbol, the images, ideas, and values the symbol stirs in us."

"*Consider what the scriptures or modern prophets teach regarding the symbol*" (p. 19). Sometimes the scriptures themselves offer an interpretation, as with the angel in Nephi's dream (1 Nephi 11–14).[7]

"*Let the nature of the symbol help clarify its meaning*" (p. 20). Gaskill offers the moon as an example. "The moon merely reflects the light of the sun. Thus when John speaks of a celestial woman (the Church) with the moon under her feet (see Revelation 12:1), it should be clear that the moon symbolizes a weak or greatly diminished portion of light. Much like the moon, nonrevealed religions reflect watered-down versions of the fulness, in this case the fulness of gospel truths" (p. 20).

"*Watch for a consistency in use of particular symbols*" (p. 20). Gaskill suggests that we can learn about what a symbol means by looking at each occurrence, but he rightly cautions that the same symbol can have different meanings depending on the context. He reiterates

7. Note, however, that some of his dream is culturally encoded. Nephi quickly makes the connection between the tree of life and Mary the mother of Jesus, probably based on the common Canaanite-Israelite association of trees, life, and mothers. "The representation, by a tree, of a divine consort bearing a divine child—to us a rather unexpected juxtaposition—was intelligible to Nephi because . . . such symbolism was familiar to him." Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson,* ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 219. A shorter version of this paper is available in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25.

similar caveats several times throughout—that the same object can be figurative or literal, but if figurative, it may not consistently represent the same thing.[8] A serpent would be one example. The serpent in Genesis 3 traditionally represents Lucifer, while according to Helaman 8:14–15, the serpent of Numbers 21 represents Jesus.[9]

"*Balance the interpretation of symbols with an overall knowledge of gospel teachings*" (p. 21). "*Keep in mind that symbols do not reveal new doctrines*" (p. 25). "*Avoid reading into a scriptural symbol or passage something that the Lord or his prophet did not intend*" (p. 22). "*Be cautious not to limit a symbol*" (p. 24). I treat these four together because they are related. Symbols can have multiple meanings, and one meaning does not preclude another. However, reading between the lines, Gaskill also seems to suggest that a symbol can lend itself to whatever meaning we can appropriately read into it, unless that reading is contrary to prophetic interpretation or gospel sense. On the other hand, the range of interpretation within the boundaries of orthodoxy is quite broad. We are free to offer alternative interpretations as long as we are not dogmatic about them.[10]

"*Use the footnotes, chapter headings, dictionary, and other study aids provided in the standard works of the Church*" (p. 21). These useful aids have been added to the scriptural text with no claim of inspiration and can at times mislead the reader.[11] On the other hand, I have

8. "Pressing to find symbolic meaning in every aspect of the life of a typological figure is to strain the type beyond its limits and to miss its true value and meaning" (p. 171). "Obviously, not every reference to an outer garment or robe should be construed as being laden with symbolic overtones of power or priesthood. Wicked or righteous, priesthood holder or not, few in antiquity did not wear such robes" (p. 72). "Whereas a direction in one passage may be laden with symbolic meaning and suggestions of authorial intent, in another passage that same direction may well be meant quite literally" (p. 150).

9. See Andrew C. Skinner, "Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 42–55.

10. Gaskill recognizes this in practice. For example, he offers interpretive suggestions explicitly differing from President Joseph Fielding Smith and Elder Bruce R. McConkie (p. 276).

11. For example, the heading to Alma 11 reads in part, "Nephite coinage set forth." It is extremely unlikely that the text describes actual coinage, as opposed to weight measures. The scriptural text itself does not read "coins" or anything similar.

found that many still "do not make use of the means the Lord has provided for us" in studying the scriptures (Alma 60:21).

"*Be attentive to linguistic issues*" (p. 21). In other words, the King James (or Authorized) Version is not always a reliable guide to what the underlying Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic means. The 1981 Latter-day Saint version of the KJV tried to minimize this effect by including in the footnotes alternate translations of archaic or difficult words. Another way to get at the underlying meaning is to consult other translations.[12] Or, as with Joseph Smith, one can remove the middleman by studying ancient languages. Joseph recorded, "my soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to persue the study of languages untill I shall become master of them."[13]

"*Don't get too caught up in determining authorial awareness*" (pp. 21–22). That is, sometimes a prophet wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit without being aware of the full import of his words. Certainly, an author's intent is not the final authority of what a text "means." I think it is important to recognize, as Gaskill does elsewhere, that a difference exists between what an author intended (generally revealed by context, language, and the historical-critical method), personal meaning (or reader response), and personal application. Indeed, Gaskill draws on 1 Nephi 19:23 and argues that personal application "is vital because the absence of application entirely misses the point of why divinely inspired texts have been preserved. The role of scripture to instruct and inspire presupposes our need to, as Nephi said, 'liken all scriptures unto us that it might be for our profit and learning'" (p. 18).

Gaskill seems at times to blur the line between a symbol's meaning and its potential applications, between the interpretive and the

12. I find the New International Version Study Bible and the New Revised Standard Version helpful, though for understanding why the translator made a given word choice, the New English Translation is incomparable (available at no cost online at www.bible.org, it offers over sixty thousand translator notes on the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament, as well as beautiful satellite Bible maps; accessed 15 November 2004).

13. Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 161, misspellings retained.

hortatory or homiletic. In reading, I sometimes felt I gained insight into a passage and other times felt that Gaskill was violating the rules that he himself had set forth, seeing things that weren't in the text, or playing fast and loose with a symbol's potential meaning in order to make a point.

In his defense, I should note that Gaskill frequently offers more than one reading for a given text. Sometimes he anticipates my objections. For example, he presents several symbolic readings of Jesus's swaddling clothes in Luke 2. But if all newborns were wrapped in swaddling clothes, why is it symbolic with Jesus? Gaskill responds that I would not be "alone in the assumption that 'swaddling clothes' were the common covering of most newborns of the era. However, the acclaimed biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmyer questions this. He queries, if swaddling clothes were so common, why is this a sign to the shepherds who would seek out the child?" (p. 347 n. 87). This is a good point. However, the swaddling clothes alone do not constitute the sign. The shepherds would find the child both wrapped in swaddling clothes *and* laid in a manger. The likelihood of both of those items happening randomly is small. A toddler could conceivably climb into a feeding trough, but a child wrapped tightly (as a newborn would be) could only be placed there deliberately. What mother would place her newborn into the equivalent of a barnyard feeding trough? This is one place where Gaskill (and, admittedly, Fitzmyer) see meaning that I do not.

"*Avoid extremes*" (p. 23). Of course, while some may enthusiastically read meaning into everything, others may refuse to ascribe meaning to anything unless they can find backing from the prophets.

Conclusion

Most of my concerns with this book arise because Gaskill sees things one way and I another. However, these concerns do not lessen the book's value. Gaskill applies the methodologies he advocates and takes a mature and nuanced approach to the scriptures throughout. He consults other translations, original languages, and text-critical tools. He cites sources and avoids proof-texting. He offers analysis of

and alternatives to the JST.[14] For the most part, he refrains from attributing "modern meanings to ancient symbols" (p. 23). The depth and breadth of research, as well as the general skill in presenting a difficult and nuanced subject, are frequently impressive. *The Lost Language of Symbolism* stands head and shoulders above many Latter-day Saint books on the scriptures and should be read as an example of how to study and interpret them.

14. Latter-day Saints may assume that the JST represents pure textual restoration. However, historical evidence of the translation process seems to call for a more nuanced view. See Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski, "The Process of Inspired Translation: Two Passages Translated Twice in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible," *BYU Studies* 42/2 (2003): 35–64. Robert L. Millet argues that the JST represents inspired prophetic commentary, harmonization of doctrinal concepts, and "a restoration of content material, ideas and events and sayings once recorded by the biblical authors but since deleted from the collection." See Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A Historical Overview," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1985), 43. Cf. Robert J. Matthews, *"A Plainer Translation": Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1975).