

General Comments on John's Revelation

Keys to Understanding John's Revelation

John's Revelation, or Apocalypse, is considered one of the more, if not the most, difficult books of the New Testament. However, Joseph Smith said of it, "The book of Revelation is one of the plainest books God ever caused to be written" ([HofC, Vol. 5, Ch. 17](#), page 342). Why the gap in understanding?

First, the chronology skips around, so one must carefully determine when the events being described occurred or will occur. Second, many of the symbols used are derived from the OT Prophets. The reader of the present text must be familiar with the symbols from the preceding Hebrew Prophets, otherwise their meaning is not easily discerned.

Second, if one familiarizes themselves with the rhetoric and imagery of the Old Testament Prophets, John's Revelation becomes transparent.

Purpose

During Jesus' mortal ministry, his disciples wanted him to reestablish the kingdom of David at Jerusalem, fulfilling the various prophecies of the ancient Hebrew prophets about the Day of the Lord (cf. Joel 1-2, Zeph. 1-3, Zech. 14, Mal. 4). They fully expected him to call down fire and destruction from heaven to destroy the Romans and restore the Jews to political, economic and military power, with himself as their ruling king. Clearly, they were disappointed when he failed to do that. After Jesus' resurrection the disciples turned their focus to the spiritual kingdom of God instead of the physical kingdom of men, but their interest in the Day of the Lord persisted (cf., Acts 1:1-11, 1 Thes. 5:1-11, 2 Thes. 2, 2 Peter 3, also cp. D&C 130:14-17).

This is because there are many prophecies about the Lord literally destroying the wicked and vindicating the righteous that are left unfulfilled by Jesus' mortal ministry. How then will they be fulfilled? John's Revelation answers that question, by pulling the ancient prophecies into a single cohesive package.

The text of John's Revelation draws so heavily on the ancient Hebrew Prophets, any Jewish Rabbi would read it as an apologetic defense of why Jesus is the Messiah when he didn't accomplish all of these things. They would see this book as

attempt to explain away all of the Old Testament prophecies of what the Messiah is supposed to do on the earth, by putting them into a nebulous future time.

Additionally, the first three chapters show the resurrected Christ as fully engaged and interested in the contemporary ecclesia. He hasn't gone off to His heavenly temple of glory to rest on His laurels. The text presents the resurrected Lord as very much engaged with the ecclesia and all of His Creation until the end of all His work, cf. 1:8. The Lord is not an absentee landlord, He is paying attention, involved and hands on in their management.

Rhetorical Style

John's Revelation draws on a body of literature present in the Hebrew Bible in a fragmentary nature. The ancient Semites were familiar with the Canaanite myth of Baal and Asherah, Yam-Nahar, and their fathers Dagon and El. They were also familiar with the Enuma Elish, the Mesopotamian creation myth. Western culture is less familiar with that ancient literature, so we tend to miss the allusions and references.

The Genesis Creation account is the opposite of these competing creation myths. The Genesis account is very peaceful and orderly, where the Canaanite and Mesopotamian accounts are full of intrigue, chaos and conflict. In Revelation, we see more of the ancient pre-Genesis rhetorical style come into play as conflict is emphasized and the Lord vanquishes His enemies and casts them into a fiery pit. If you want insight into the rhetorical devices and imagery in this book, read up on these ancient [Canaanite](#) and [Mesopotamian myths](#), and see how they get used in the Hebrew Prophets.

There is no gray area in John's Apocalypse, it is all about Divine Judgement. Good wins, evil loses. The world is languishing in sin and is going to be punished, while the righteous rejoice in heaven.

John's writing style is eminently visual, and is meant to evoke the imagination with vivid descriptions. John's intent is to draw the reader into the vision as best he can. The imagery of chapters 2-3 present a heavenly temple with candlesticks, Temple menorahs, symbolically representing the seven churches in Asia, and a lot of other Temple symbols. The Lord stands among them, and moving between Himself, the candlesticks and the

various ecclesia themselves is the angel appointed to each body of believers. John presents two places, one heavenly and one earthly, that are interconnected both symbolically and in reality.

Also think about 5:5-6 where the angel introduces the Lion of Judah but we are presented with the Lamb who is slain. Both are the same character, with dramatically conflicting aspects.

The text is also legalistic and methodical, in the same manner of the book of Isaiah. It develops a case, presents witnesses and details, argues the case, and renders judgement. This is not a haphazard set of scattered visions. It is a clear and concise court case.

Historical versus Eschatological

When reading the text, it is difficult to know whether to read it as contemporaneous to the author, and therefore historical to ourselves, or is the text eschatological, referring to the end times, the last days?

The safest way to deal with the question is to take the simple and obvious, straightforward reading. When the Lord is speaking to the seven churches in Asia in ch. 2-3, that is historical. When the text quotes Old Testament passages dealing with the Day of the Lord, it is eschatological. Can historical text have modern spiritual value? Of course. But was John writing to us today when he was addressing the seven churches in Asia? No, he was writing to them. If we find ourselves in the same situation as them, then the advice given to them would apply to us, certainly. But, to take a clearly historical text and say it is primarily about something eschatological leads one to speculative error.

Whenever there is some obscure symbolism, go back to the Old Testament and look to the original source in context as to what it means. Some passages in the present text are clear quotations of the Hebrew prophets, where some are allusions to similar symbols.

Avoid Eschatological Speculation

Because of the obscure symbolism and difficult chronology, commentators over the years have developed interpretations that vary considerably and come to very different conclusions. Commentaries are often heavily influenced by the writer's time

period, and particular symbols used by John have become the point of intense speculation (e.g., the number of the beast). People have been interpreting the text to be contemporaneous for the past 2000 years, and the beast has been equated with numerous people using various means (curiously enough the false prophet and great whore don't get equated with literal people when the beast does).

While the text is blatantly eschatological, the track record for interpreting it has been poor (e.g., Hal Lindsey's Late Great Planet Earth, which sold 90 million copies before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was a major part of the Gog and Magog interpretation). It is safest to address the meaning of the text and not predict the future or tie characters to specific historical or contemporary events or people.

An important point along these lines is a comment Jesus made in Matt. 24. There Jesus gives numerous signs of the times and says, "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.... For there shall arise false christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if [it were] possible, they shall deceive the very elect" (Matt. 24:4-24). Jesus gives the signs to tell the people when the Second Advent is not occurring, not to reveal to them when it is occurring. As he states plainly, "that day and hour knoweth no [man], no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matt. 24:36). This suggests it is not a firm, fixed timeline, but a decision in the future to be made solely by His Father.

The purpose of the various signs and events is to protect the believers from those who would deceive them, not to establish a clear chronology which can only be discerned by an elect few. When commentators on Revelation attempt to establish a chronology leading up to the end, they are misusing the signs of the last days.

John's Revelation is not about fixed timelines. It is about events unfolding according to the Lord's will.

Chapter Summary

The text of the book can be outlined as follows:

Ch. 1: Opening address, vision of the Heavenly Temple

Ch. 2-3: Messages to the seven contemporary Churches in Asia

Ch. 4-18: Fulfilment of Messianic Justice in End Times

Ch. 4-5: Introduction of God the Father as Creator (ch. 4) and Jesus Christ as Redeemer (ch. 5), who is entitled to be Judge (ch. 6-18)

Ch. 6-18: Judgement on Wicked in End Times, 7 Seals, 7 Trumpets, 7 Bowls (vials) of Wrath

Ch. 7: Interlude 1, Salvation of God and the Lamb

Ch. 10: Interlude 2, The Prophetic Calling

Ch. 12: Interlude 3, The War in Heaven (pre-mortal)

Ch. 13: Interlude 4, The Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Earth torment the saints (mortality)

Ch. 14: Interlude 5, Vindication of the saints and destruction of the wicked at Judgement (post-mortal)

Ch. 19-22: Redemption of the Lord's Servants, and victory of the Lord over His adversaries

Comments on Revelation 1

1 THE Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified [it] by his angel unto his servant John: 2 who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. 3 Blessed [is] he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time [is] at hand.

4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace [be] unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; 5 And from Jesus Christ, [who is] the faithful witness, [and] the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, 6 And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him [be] glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they [also] which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.

8 I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

v1-8 These verses serve as an introduction to the apocalypse, or revelation, or unveiling, of the vision given to John the Beloved. John, a faithful witness of Jesus Christ (v. 2) relates a vision he has seen of the ultimate fulfilment of the Lord's work (v. 1), and recommends it to the believers who will pay attention (v. 3).

John's primary audience is the several contemporary churches in Asia, to whom he sends a message of comfort from God the Father, the Holy Spirit (v. 4), and Jesus Christ, the redeeming Son (v. 5-6), who will come again (v. 7).

John then adds the Lord's testimony concerning Himself. The Lord states he is the beginning and the end, and that he was and is the Lord in the past, present, and future. (V. 7).

There are substantial differences between the KJV and the Inspired Version/Joseph Smith Translation (IV/JST), as follows:

KJV

1 The Revelation

of Jesus Christ,

IV/JST

1 The Revelation
of John, a servant of God,
which was given unto him
of Jesus Christ,

which God gave unto him,
to shew unto his servants
things which must shortly
come to pass;
and he sent and signified it
by his angel
unto his servant John:
2 Who bare record
of the word of God,
and of the testimony
of Jesus Christ,
and of all things
that he saw.
3 Blessed is he that readeth,
and they that hear

the words of this prophecy,
and keep those things
which are written therein:
for the time

is at hand.

4 JOHN to the seven

churches which are in Asia:
Grace be unto you, and peace,
from him which is,
and which was,
and which is to come;
and from the seven Spirits
which are before his throne;

5 And from Jesus Christ,
who is the faithful witness,
and the first begotten
of the dead,

to show unto his servants
things which must shortly
come to pass,
that he sent and signified
by his angel
unto his servant John,
2 Who bore record
of the word of God,
and of the testimony
of Jesus Christ,
and of all things
that he saw.
3 Blessed are they who read,
and they who hear
and understand
the words of this prophecy,
and keep those things
which are written therein,
for the time
of the coming of the Lord
draweth nigh.
4 Now this is the testimony of
John to the seven
servants who are over
the seven churches in Asia.
Grace unto you, and peace
from him who is,
and who was,
and who is to come;
who hath sent forth his angel
from before his throne,
to testify unto those
who are the seven servants
over the seven churches.
5 Therefore, I, John,
the faithful witness,
bear record of the things
which were delivered me
of the angel,
and from Jesus Christ
the first begotten of the dead,

and the prince
of the kings of the earth.
Unto him that loved us,

and washed us from our sins
in his own blood,
6 And hath made us
kings and priests unto God
and his Father;
to him be glory and dominion
for ever and ever. Amen.

7 Behold,
he cometh with clouds;

and every eye shall see him,
and they also
which pierced him: and
all kindreds of the earth
shall wail because of him.
Even so, Amen.

8 I am Alpha and Omega,
the beginning and the ending,
saith the Lord, which is,
and which was,
and which is to come,
the Almighty.

and the Prince
of the kings of the earth.
6 And unto him who loved us,
be glory;

who washed us from our sins
in his own blood,
and hath made us
kings and priests unto God,
his Father.

To him be glory and dominion,
for ever and ever. Amen.

7 For behold,
he cometh in the clouds
with ten thousands of his saints
in the kingdom,
clothed with the glory
of his Father.

And every eye shall see him;
and they
who pierced him, and
all kindreds of the earth
shall wail because of him.
Even so, Amen.

8 For he saith,
I am Alpha and Omega,
the beginning and the ending,
the Lord, who is,
and who was,
and who is to come,
the Almighty.

The IV/JST emends the text so it reads more clearly. The material added in the IV/JST can be found elsewhere within John's Revelation, so there is no novel content in the emendation.

v1 John has the ultimate end, the subject of v. 7 and ch. 19, in mind when speaking of the unveiling or revealing of Christ to all people. He briefly informs the reader of the ultimate fulfilment of Jesus' ministry, and indicates it will result in the Lord being revealed in power to the entire world, and honored even by those who in the world rejected Him.

John's revelation is that referenced by Nephi (1 Ne. 14:25-27). While Nephi wrote concerning Lehi's descendants in the New

World, John writes about Jacob's descendants in the Old World and the ultimate fate of the world. Nephi's writing is more parochial, where John's is universal.

v4 John's testimony, or witness, of Jesus Christ to the seven churches in Asia. "Asia" being the region surrounding Pergamon, Troas, Ephesus, and Miletus, what is contemporarily considered Western Turkey. The seven churches are listed in v. 11.

There were more than seven major groups of Christians at that time (e.g., Phrygia, Pamphylia, Galatia, Pontus, Cappadocia), Adam Clarke, in his commentary (ca. 1810-1826), suggests the seven were selected because of the divine attributes of the number, and because these churches were those closest to him geographically, and would be more so under his care than those which are more remote. The IV/JST on v. 4-5 suggests this is the case as it makes it clear John is addressing the seven servants over those seven churches, presumably persons whom we would see as acting in the capacity of our contemporary Bishops.

"John to the seven churches", an opening statement similar to those used various OT Prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah) wherein the author identifies himself and then his target audience.

v5-8 John's revelation is mainly concerned with the ultimate fulfilment of Jesus' work, so his description and discussion focuses primarily on Jesus.

v5 "the first begotten of the dead", i.e., the first one resurrected, cp. Col. 1:18.

v6 "kings and priests unto God", cp. 2:26-27, 3:5, 3:22, 21:7, Eph 2:4-6, 1 Pet. 2:5-9.

v8 An authority statement. John's intent is to show the Lord is still alive and still active, so he includes a new quotation which he has had directly from the Lord himself. John's testimony is Jesus Christ is the risen Lord, so he includes a comment from the risen Lord.

The statement that He is the "Alpha and Omega" means he is the beginning and the end (cp. 21:6) as alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and omega is the last. The underlying idea is a Semitic one called a "merism". Merisms are

statements of complete inclusivity, such as "heavens and earth". There isn't anything that isn't either heavens or earth in the Creation, so the statement "heavens and earth" is all inclusive. So it is with "Alpha and Omega". Jesus is the beginning and the end, in that he is the initiation and the fulfilment, the Creator and Redeemer, none preceded him and none will follow him, cp. Isa. 41:4, Isa. 44:6, Isa. 48:12.

That the Lord would say he is, he was, and who is to come is again a Semitism suggestive of independence and persistence. The Lord exists independent of what we think or how we feel about him, and he has always existed and will continue to exist in this manner. Being killed in the flesh does not extinguish the Lord's spirit or diminish His capacity.

9 I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, 11 Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, what thou seest, write in a book, and send [it] unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. 12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; 13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks [one] like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. 14 His head and [his] hairs [were] white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes [were] as a flame of fire; 15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. 16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance [was] as the sun shineth in his strength.

17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: 18 I [am] he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. 19 write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; 20 The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.

v9-20 John's vision, which he had while at Patmos, is introduced. John was exiled on the isle of Patmos as a result

of his testimony of Christ (v. 9). While there, on the Sabbath, he was in the Spirit and had a vision. In the vision he hears behind himself (v. 10) a voice saying he is to document the vision and send it to the various churches (v. 11). John turns towards the voice and sees seven golden lamp stands (v. 12) and One standing in the middle of them who looks like Jesus Christ (v. 13), except that His appearance is exalted and He spoke with extraordinary power (v. 14-16). Upon seeing the Lord, John collapses, but the Lord extends His hand to him, presumably lifting him up, and tells him not to fear (v. 17) because he is the exalted Jesus who has all power over death and destruction (v. 18). The Lord commissions John to write the things he will show him in vision (v. 19), and begins explaining the symbols of the vision to him (v. 20).

v9 "the isle that is called Patmos", one of the Sporades islands in the Aegean Sea, west of Greece. The island is small, only some 30 miles in circumference, and barren. John was apparently banished here by the Romans, probably under Nero, for his missionary zeal, to keep him out of the way, but not turn him into a martyr.

v10 "in the Spirit", clearly making reference to a divine revelation, cp. Ezek. 37:1.

"on the Lord's day", the Christian Sabbath, Sunday, cf. Matt. 28:1, 1 Cor. 16:2.

"behind me", why the voice came from behind is unclear, but given John's reaction to turning and seeing the exalted Lord in v. 17, it seems likely the appearance originating behind him gave him opportunity to take in the verbal introduction and command prior to being overwhelmed by the sight of the Lord.

Some commentators speculate the vision started behind himself as being symbolic and suggestive of his vision being of the future, or him being placed ahead in vision of the point of revelation. This might be the case, but it would be a novelty as there is no comparative symbolism among the OT Prophets.

"a great voice, as of a trumpet", John draws on the language of Exod. 19:16-19. That God of Israel which spoke to Moses is the same speaking with John.

v12 "candlesticks", these are equated with the churches in v.

20. The symbolism is probably derived from Matt. 5:15, and possibly Exod. 25:31-32 as well.

v13 "like unto the Son of Man", this glorified being superficially looked like the Jesus whom John knew in mortality, but was altogether transformed, hence John's reaction and subsequent collapse in v. 17.

"paps", i.e., chest.

v14-15 The various symbols here are derived from those used by OT Prophets to describe heavenly beings, cp. Ezek. 1:4-7, Ezek. 43:2.

v16 "in his right hand seven stars", in v. 20 these stars are identified as the seven angels assigned to each of the churches, and the IV/JST on v. 20 changes "angels" to "servants", so the seven stars are the seven servants overseeing their respective churches.

"sharp two-edged sword", symbolic for the authoritative word of God, cp. 2:16, Isa. 49:2, Eph. 6:17, Hebr. 4:12. While Jesus was meek and humble in mortality, He is now an exalted being who speaks with great power and His words are judgement.

v17 "I fell at his feet as dead", an Old Testament concept emphasizing the weakness and corruption of man in contrast to the power of the Lord, cp. Isa. 6:5, Ezek. 1:28, Dan. 8:17.

Being overpowered by spiritual things is seen in this dispensation as well, cf. Smith's being exhausted by the interview with Moroni (JS-H 1:48), and Rigdon's exhaustion from the vision of D&C 76 (Juvenile Instructor, May 1892, p. 304).

"he laid his right hand upon me", a symbol of divine support and imminent revelation, cp. Ezek. 1:3, Ezek. 3:14.

v18 "the keys of hell and death", i.e., power of physical and spiritual death, cp. 6:8, 20:13-14, also cp. 2 Ne. 9:10-12, 2 Ne. 28:23, D&C 138:23.

v20 "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches", the IV/JST emends the "angels" to "servants". The Greek term "angelos" literally translates to the English "messenger" and is applied to mortals as well as non-mortals. Smith's intention

here is probably to clarify between mortal messengers and the heavenly angels which are prominent in the subsequent chapters. The mortal servants here would be the servant "Bishops" referred to in v. 4-5 of the IV/JST.

This emendation in the IV/JST occurs throughout the next chapter as well.

Copyright © 2023 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.