

General Comments on John's Revelation

Keys to Understanding John's Revelation

John's Revelation is considered one of the more, if not the most, difficult books of the NT. However, 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).

John uses two methods of obscuring his message. First, he chronologically mixes up the text, so that one must very carefully determine when the events he describes have or will occur. Clues are provided, but are oftentimes difficult to discern. Second, he uses symbols derived from the OT Prophets. The reader of this text must be at least familiar with these symbols from the preceding OT Prophets, otherwise their meaning cannot be discerned.

If one is familiar with the OT Prophets, and they can unravel the chronological spaghetti, John's Revelation becomes quite transparent.

Purpose

During Jesus' mortal ministry, the disciples expected Jesus to reestablish the kingdom of David at Jerusalem, fulfilling the various prophecies of the ancient Hebrew prophets. They fully expected him to call down fire and destruction from heaven to destroy the Romans and restore the Jews to political power, with himself as their ruling king. Naturally, they were disappointed, until after his resurrection they then focused on the spiritual kingdom of God instead of the physical kingdom of men.

However, that leaves a great many old Hebrew prophecies about the Lord literally destroying the wicked and vindicating the righteous unfulfilled. How then will they be fulfilled? John's Revelation answers that question, thus pulling those ancient prophecies out and typing them up into a single cohesive package.

The text of John's Revelation is so heavily dependent upon the OT Prophets, any devout Jewish rabbi would read it as an apologetic defense of why Jesus really is the Messiah of the OT.

Additionally, the first three chapters show the resurrected Christ as fully engaged and interested in the ecclesia. He hasn't simply 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 involved and hands on.

Rhetorical Style

John's Revelation draws on a body of literature that is present in the Bible in only a fragmentary nature. The ancient Semites would have been familiar with the Canaanite myth of Baal and Asherah, Yam-Nahar, and their fathers Dagon and El. Western culture is not really familiar with those ancient creation myths, and as such, can miss the allusions and references.

The Genesis Creation account is the opposite of the Baal creation myth. The Genesis account is very peaceful and orderly, where the Canaanite account is full of intrigue, chaos and conflict. In Revelation, we see more of the ancient Canaanite rhetorical style come into play as conflict is emphasized and the Lord vanquishes His enemies and casts them into a fiery pit. There is no gray area here, its is all about Divine Judgement.

If you want insight into the rhetorical devices and imagery in this book, read up on these ancient Canaanite myths, and see where they get used in the OT Prophets.

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 (Why don't the false prophet and the great whore of Babylon get equated with literal people too?).

While the text at times is blatantly eschatological, the track record for interpreting it as such has been poor. As such is the case, it is safest to address the meaning of the text and not try to predict the future or tie the characters to specific 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).

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 clear chronology leading up to the end, they are misusing the signs of the last days.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1: Opening address, vision of the Heavenly Temple

Chapters 2-3: Messages to the Seven Churches

Chapters 4-5: Introduction of the Father (ch. 4) and Son (ch. 5)

Chapters 6-18: Judgement upon the Wicked

Chapter 7: Interlude 1, Salvation of God and the Lamb

Chapter 10: Interlude 2, The Prophetic Calling

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

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

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

Chapters 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,
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:

IV/JST

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

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.

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.

<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
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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 moreso 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.

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 "angles" 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 OT 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 immortals. 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.

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