

Introduction

The Book of Revelation has long been the source of much mystery, speculation, fantastic interpretations, and the source of near suffocating fervor that the world will be destroyed in five minutes (I just hope that I can finish this article before that happens!). Though the Book of Revelation can cause confusion due to bizarre images, strange symbols, and unfamiliar sights we can take courage that with some simple interpretive keys the words, symbols, and messages of this text can be meaningful for our lives now. Joseph Smith has encouraged us with the words, “The Book of Revelation is one of the plainest books God ever caused to be written.” (*History of the Church*, 5:342.) Sometimes I joke that the only time I have ever questioned the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith is his statement concerning the Book of Revelation. Well seriously now, if we exercise our faith and go to work reading, thinking, and praying about the text we will discover as Joseph Smith declared that the Book of Revelation is indeed quite plain. Again, this takes faith and work.

With this in mind we will take the following approaches in our study today. First, we will briefly review some interpretive methods used over the centuries to understand Revelation. Next we will turn to Nephi for interpretive guidance. Finally, we will discuss the broader themes evident in chapters 5-6 & 19-22 as John saw them.

Interpretive Approaches

What I am going to share here are some of the interpretive approaches that people have used in the past 2000 years to understand the Book of Revelation. ((Adapted from John M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979.)) I am not necessarily advocating the use of these interpretive approaches but rather I offer them to help us to see the wide range of differing voices and perspectives on the same text. After looking at these approaches we will turn to Nephi to how his knowledge can help us to interpret Revelation.

Chiliasm Interpretation

This term derives from the Greek word for the number 1000, or millennium. The word millennium derives from two Latin words which together mean “1000 years” (*mil* =1000, *annum* =year). Using this approach some ancient writers and commentators read the Book of Revelation as speaking about the events leading up to and constituting the Millennium.

Allegorical Interpretation

Other interpreters have looked at the Book of Revelation from an allegorical standpoint. They believe that everything in the text is to be read as symbolizing other things and that the book is not to be read literally.

Recapitulation Interpretation

This interpretive method believes that “that [the Book of Revelation] is not a strictly consecutive [or chronological] account of a sequence of events, but a description which repeats the same facts in different forms, such as the seven seals, trumpets and bowls.” ((Court, p. 5.))

Historical Application Interpretation

Many Medieval commentators believed that the Book of Revelation could be read to understand stages of world history or church history. Using such methods interpreters over hundreds of years interpreted themselves as living in the final stage of world history. Each generation believed that the final stage of Revelation referred to their own day and that they were living in the last days.

Eschatological Interpretations

The term *eschaton* is a Greek word meaning “end, last, final” and so the term *eschatological* means, “the things of the last days, the end times.” This approach usually has reference to a great confusion and disorder, both in nature and society, that immediately proceeds the passing away of one age and the inauguration of a new age of peace and

justice. This interpretive method is similar to the *chiliastic* we saw above, however it focuses more on the events of the last days, the confusion, persecutions, injustices, wickedness, etc. which is then overturned by the righteous acts of God, placing everything into order again.

Contemporary Historical Interpretations

This method was invented with the rise of modern Biblical scholarship (starting in the 17th century). This approach seeks to interpret the Book of Revelation through the events contemporary with its ancient author. Scholars have studied the society and history of the time of the author to inform their reading and understanding of Revelation (i.e. the Greco-Roman and Jewish social environments in which John lived). This is like taking the Gettysburg address and not just reading it as a beautiful prayer, but seeking to understand the historical circumstance from which it emerged (i.e. the American Civil War).

Literary Analysis Interpretation

This approach believes that we can best understand a text by knowing the type of text it is. For example, one would not read a business report as a fairy tale. Thinking of it in another way, if I know that the story I am about to read is a fairy tale I already know certain things about such stories, and thus I have certain expectations from the text, like a plot, suspense and a happy ending. In a similar fashion scholars have sifted through the enormous amount of ancient literature available to us to find other writings that are similar to the Book of Revelation. In so doing they have hoped to find clues and insights as to how to read the book. The Book of Daniel is an example of literature that relates in literary form to the Book of Revelation, i.e. a prophet sees a vision, is guided by an angel who explains and interprets the vision, etc. For many years scholars have increased our understanding of both Daniel and Revelation by reading them as similar texts.

Comparative Studies Interpretation

This approach, which borrows from the methods “contemporary historical interpretation” and “literary analysis interpretation” seeks to understand how the symbols, ideas and imagery used by an author may have been used or understood in the larger society within which the author resided. For example, if I use a red light to symbolize “caution, danger” someone could study the larger society around me and discover that my use of a red light is not unique, but rather is well known and understood throughout the society. However, if I used a red light to symbolize a cool glass of water on a hot day that might suggest that I have used a common symbol in a new and inventive, if not a strange, way.

Nephi’s Interpretation

Now I am not going to suggest that there is only one way to read, interpret, and find meaning in the scriptures. I do believe, however, that some methods are better than others. For example, interpretive methods found throughout other passages of our canon or the methods used by authorized Church leaders can offer us rewarding and meaningful insights into these texts. Nephi is a good example.

Let us take a moment to become familiar with what interpretive keys Nephi’s record offers us for understanding the Book of Revelation. Like John the Revelator, Nephi received a powerful vision of many events in world history. These are recorded in 1 Nephi 11 and concluded in 1 Nephi 14. At the end of Nephi’s visionary account the Lord showed him John the Revelator and explained:

“And behold, the things which this apostle of the Lamb shall write are many things which thou hast seen; and behold, the remainder shalt thou see. But the things which thou shalt see hereafter thou shalt not write; for the Lord God hath ordained the apostle of the lamb of God that he should write them.” (1 Nephi 14:24-25)

Herein the Lord explicitly forbade Nephi from recording everything he saw, yet promising that a record would be

made by John the Apostle who would see the same things. What are those things that John was to record?

“Behold, he [John] shall see and write the remainder of these things; yea, and also many things which have been. And he shall also write concerning the end of the world.” (1 Nephi 14:18-22, 27)

1 Nephi 14 also preserves for us crucial information about the composition of the Book of Revelation:

“Wherefore, the things which he shall write are just and true; and behold they are written in the book which thou beheld proceeding out of the mouth of the Jew; and at the time they proceeded out of the mouth of the Jew, or, at the time the book proceeded out of the mouth of the Jew, the things which were written were plain and pure, and most precious and easy to the understanding of all men.” (1 Nephi 14:23)

This passage of scripture may be the reason that Joseph Smith said, “The Book of Revelation is one of the plainest books God ever caused to be written.” In his defense, it may be that at the time when John wrote the Book of Revelation it was plain and easy to understand but that over the years the text was modified so that the plain sense was compromised. In summary, we learn through Nephi that John the Revelator saw many things concerning the history of the world and the end of the world, that John was commissioned to write about the things of the last days, and that when John completed his writing it was plain and easy to understand.

Reading Revelation

Now that I have discussed several approaches for reading Revelation let me share how I read it (again this is but one approach out of many for making meaning out of the text). When I read Revelation I think in several broad themes to help me understand the “drama” that is occurring: (1) Satan attacks the work of God and the saints of God, (2) the suffering righteous endure through faith until the end, (3) the Lord comes triumphant to the destruction of the forces of evil and to the justification and sanctification of the saints, (4) and then there is final peace and joy of the righteous with God in the New Jerusalem on earth. Let us now look at the text of Revelation chapters 5-6 & 19-22.

Revelation 5-6

Noticeably we have started our discussion today in the middle of John’s revelation/vision. It is as though we have walked into a theater performance twenty minutes after opening. So let us get ourselves up to speed with what is occurring. John is witnessing a vision of heaven, partially accompanied by an angelic guide (like in Nephi’s grand vision). In chapter 4 John had seen and begun to describe his vision of the heavenly realms and God’s throne. Here in chapter 5 he sees a book in the right hand of God that was bound and sealed with seven rings; no one could open it. Each seal represented things pertaining to a set of 1000 years (see D&C 77:6). Sensing that the book contains great knowledge, John weeps that its contents are inaccessible. However, one of the twenty-four elders comforts John, telling him that Jesus Christ has the power to open the book. The twenty-four elders then sing out joyous praise to Him who opens the book, to the One who has power over each of the seals (each of the 1000 year periods) and all that are in them. Then joining the chorus are myriads of God’s creations worshipping the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Next, in chapter 6, John witnesses Christ opening each seal, the first through the sixth. John sees the history of each 1000 year time period represented by different beasts. The sixth is marked by convulsions in the cosmos and reelings on the earth.

The stage is now ready for the opening of the seventh seals and for the *eschaton* (the end times, the last days). But we will not be reviewing here the many things that occur in the seventh seal—the plagues, destruction, wickedness, unleashing of Satan’s power, the suffering and persecution of God’s righteous saints, the restoration and preaching

of the Gospel message, and the eventual destruction of Babylon and her wickedness—all of which are detailed in Revelation 7-18. ((For a condensed version of the things of the seventh seal simply turn on the TV during prime time and get your fill.)) These twelve chapters I read as fulfilling the first two broad themes I mentioned just above, i.e.: (1) Satan attacks the work of God and the saints of God, (2) the suffering righteous endure through faith until the end.

Revelation 19-20

These two chapters fulfill the third broad theme: (3) the Lord comes triumphant to the destruction of the forces of evil and to the justification and sanctification of the saints. When we arrive on the scene again in these chapters we find the blessed righteous signing praises to the Lord. In chapter 19 the great invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb goes forth. Only the righteous who have endured the crosses of the world, who have had faith in the Lamb of God, are invited to feast at table of their King and Groom. Consider, we are weekly invited to the table/altar of the Great King in remembrance of His loving sacrifice. May this be but a weekly practice and preparation for that holy meal we desire to partake with Him when He returns?

At this point in the vision John witnesses the glorious manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ, arrayed in His kingly robes descending from heaven to the marriage supper He has prepared. The wicked are then destroyed. Next, in chapter 20 the adversary is chained down to hell while on the other hand the righteous dead are raised out of the pit of death unto resurrection and they receive that most coveted promise “on such the second death [spiritual death] hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:6). John then sees that at the end of the thousand years Satan will be loosed for short season, some of the nations will be deceived and gathered again to battle against the people of God. But ultimately God triumphs and all of the resurrected dead stand before the Lord to be judged of their thoughts, words, and deeds according to those things recorded in the book of life.

Revelation 21-22 and Conclusion

The final two chapters of the Book I read under the fourth broad theme I mentioned above: (4) final peace and joy of the righteous with God in the New Jerusalem on earth. At the end of the Millennium, after Satan has been ultimately disposed and the wicked justly judged, John sees the holy city of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven. The righteous children of God are comforted from all that has hurt them and the promise of eternal life is secured:

“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.” (Revelation 21:6-7)

John’s final vistas of the vision include a description of the New Jerusalem, a city that is built of the most precious elements, where darkness is never found, and righteousness forever abounds. John also learns that the tree of life is at the center of the city for all the saved to freely partake; God himself will forever be in their midst before their faces.

What greater blessings of untold joy and harmony could any child of God ever desire? John closes his vision with the admonition and testimony that what he has seen is true, that the Lord Jesus Christ comes quickly, and that those who hearken to the words of his prophecy will find themselves inheriting the joys the eternal city of the new Jerusalem, worlds without end. Amen.