

Introduction

Nephi provides one of the most remarkable visionary experiences recorded in scripture. In the short sweep of four chapters he unveils patterns of the plan of salvation woven into the threads of world history. In the process he also elucidates four vital gospel themes which appear throughout scripture and in the words of living-day prophets. A careful study of Nephi's grand vision of 1 Nephi 11-14 will prepare us to understand the patterns of the plan of salvation and the gospel as they are manifested in history and throughout the scriptures.

We will explore this vision today using three perspectives. The first two perspectives are "apocalyptic literature" and "salvation history." The last perspective involves four key themes present in Nephi's vision, which are also found repeatedly throughout the Book of Mormon. When we understand these four key themes we have made significant inroads to understanding patterns and themes throughout the Book of Mormon, other scripture, and history. In preparation to carefully investigate Nephi's vision let us study each of the three perspectives introduced here: apocalyptic literature, salvation history, and the four gospel themes.

Perspective 1—Apocalyptic Literature

One way to enhance our understanding of 1 Nephi 11-14 is to read it from a literary perspective, that is, to see the literary features and structure around which these passages are built. Literary features guide us in interpreting a text. No one who reads the phrase, "Once upon a time," would think that they were reading a business report or a thank-you card.

Literary features come in many forms. Some are epistolary, such as the Pauline letters which have formulaic greetings and salutations marking the introduction and conclusion of the epistle. Other literary features are hortatory (e.g., exhortation, counsel, commandment) in style, often couched in command forms such as the famous President Kimball dictum, "Do it!" The Book of James in the New Testament is a lucid example of hortatory style; over half the book is written in command form. Most of us are familiar with the literary style of chiasmus that generously adorns the structure of the Book of Mormon text. Another literary style that is relatively unknown is that of "apocalyptic." We are familiar with the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. Both these books are written in the literary genre of "apocalyptic." So too is 1 Nephi 11-14. Recognizing the literary genre of "apocalyptic" is one way to help us generate meaning from this Book of Mormon text. ((For more connections between Apocalyptic literature and Book of Mormon texts see Mark Thomas, "*Lehi's Dream: An American Apocalypse*," a paper presented at the Fourth Annual Symposium of The Association for Mormon Letters, BYU, Provo, Utah, October 13, 1979.)) The most salient features of apocalyptic literature are noted below.

- A prophetic figure (such as Daniel, John, or Nephi, etc.)
- Visions or revelation
 - disclosed by an angel or heavenly being
 - occurs on a high mountain or on a heavenly journey
- Divine interpretations
 - of history
 - often in a chronological, salvation history format, where the events of history are interpreted as leading up to the triumph of God over evil when a new era of peace is inaugurated
 - of symbols
 - sometimes bizarre and strange such as in the Book of Revelation
 - animal imagery
 - Lamb = Christ
 - Dragon/Snake = Satan
- Prophecy or predictions of the future
 - Beginning with the time of prophet and progressing into the future until the end of one era and the inauguration of a new era
 - Particular focus on end times, or the times in history when an era of oppression ends and a new era of peace prevails

Likely as you read this outline you recognized that the literary style 1 Nephi 11-14 shares these apocalyptic features. That is good to recognize this. To be able to see the scriptures from multiple perspectives enlarges our understanding.

Perspective 2—Salvation History

There are many ways to understand history. If this was not the case, history departments across the world would quickly close down. Among the many tools available for understanding history ((In the original Greek the word “history” refers to a thorough inquiry and examination for the purpose of learning.)) there is one that is highly appropriate for our study of the Book of Mormon, an approach much neglected by the rest of the world. It is the approach of “salvation history,” that is to say, reading history from the perspective that there is a plan of salvation for the inhabitants of this world and that the events here can best be understood and interpreted with that perspective. This “salvation history” or “plan of salvation” perspective is particularly helpful for understanding the Book of Mormon, both on a macro and micro level. When we are buried in the stories and details of Book of Mormon events we can always step back and place things in their broader “plan of salvation” perspective. This approach will help us navigate one of the most remarkable revelations ever recorded: 1 Nephi 11-14. Incidentally, the four key themes detailed below are components of the perspective “salvation history.”

Perspective 3—Themes in Nephi's Vision and the Book of Mormon

One of the reasons why Nephi's vision is so valuable to read and understand is because it traces four major groups of doctrinal themes, which are successively repeated throughout the pages of the Book of Mormon and in the words of modern-day prophets. ((These four themes are adapted from the suggestions of Rulon Eames, “First Book of Nephi” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 146.))

Theme 1 includes the topics of the birth, ministry, and atonement of Jesus Christ, which is the focus of 1 Nephi 11.

Theme 2 features the divisions, pride, and strife among the families of the earth which occur because of humanity's fallen condition, successive apostasies, and the persecution of the righteous. 1 Nephi 12 focuses mainly on this theme.

Theme 3 speaks of divine messengers (such as Christ or an angel) visiting the inhabitants of the earth to share the gospel message. This gospel preaching leads to the preparation for and fulfillment of successive restorations of the gospel. These restorations culminate in the final and last restoration of the fullness of times, which is presently occurring in our day. This theme prevails in 1 Nephi 13.

Theme 4 describes the cataclysmic events at the turning of an era, God's victory over the forces of evil, the salvation of the righteous, and the ushering in of a new age of peace and righteousness. Patterns of this theme dominate 1 Nephi 14.

The three perspectives described above, including the four major gospel themes, will be tied together in this lesson to inform our overall understanding of 1 Nephi 12-14. So my approach will be to show these ideas playing out in the text, while offering commentary on various verses of Nephi's vision.

I pause on one final note before we delve into Nephi's vision. I wish to review the powerful yet simple approach Nephi employed to receive this stunning revelation. In Nephi's own words he explains,

For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen [in a vision], and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot. 1 Nephi 11:1

This verse presents us with key principles for receiving revelation.

- **I desired** to know
- **I believed** that the Lord was able to make known unto me
- **I pondered**

As we study the scriptures let us faithfully follow Nephi's example.

Wickedness and Apostasy—1 Nephi 12

1 Nephi 12:1-3

In these verses Nephi sees much of the history of his descendants and the descendants of his brothers Laman and Lemuel between his day and the coming of Christ. Unfortunately, it was marked with contention, strife, and wickedness. These verses are representative of theme two listed above.

1 Nephi 12:4-5

These two verses are marked with the cataclysmic events indicative of a change from one era to the next when the wicked are wiped away and the righteous are granted a time of peace. Specifically in these verses, Nephi sees the destruction that would take place on the Promised Land among his people at the death of Jesus Christ (see 3 Nephi 8). These patterns are representative of theme four.

1 Nephi 12:6-12

Nephi sees terrible destructions and calamities but all of this is preparatory for the advent of Christ on the earth among his own people. The gospel message was once again spread abroad through disciples chosen of Christ (see 3 Nephi 11, 19). An age of wickedness and apostasy passed away, marked by a restoration and a new age of peace and righteousness, indicative of themes three and four (see also 4 Nephi). We learn in these verses that at the final judgment the twelve disciples chosen by Christ on the American continent will be judges over the people of Nephi. Furthermore, these disciples have been purged of all staining sin through faith, repentance, and the power of the atonement. The use of the word "Lamb" in this chapter (a sacrificial symbol of purity, innocence, and meekness) refers to Jesus Christ just as it does in the apocalyptic Book of Revelation.

1 Nephi 12:13-23

The final verses of these chapters are representative again of theme two (pride, disunity, apostasy, and wickedness). It is a common pattern in history that after a people have been long blessed with prosperity, peace, and righteousness they eventually turn to pride and wickedness. After hundreds of years of righteous peace inaugurated by the visit of Christ, Nephi saw that future generations of his descendants would fall into this wickedness and apostasy (see Mormon 1-6). The angel explains this portion of history as a time of darkness and abomination.

We also receive in these verses divine interpretation concerning Lehi's dream and how this describes the history of Lehi's descendants (vv. 16-18). The mists of darkness are the temptations of the devil, the river is representative of hell, and the large and spacious building is representative of pride, the same type of pride that brought the mighty Nephite nation down low into the dust of death.

Restoration Preparation—1 Nephi 13

1 Nephi 13:1-11

The opening eleven verses of chapter 13 continue the same ideas of theme two. The angelic informant shows Nephi the history of the world after the time of Christ. Many nations and kingdoms arise, often warring against each other, most walking in the ways of apostasy. Representative of this apostasy was the formation of a great and

abominable church that promoted pride, promiscuity, and wickedness, symbolized in this vision by silks, scarlet, gold, and harlots (vv. 6-9). Moving forward to 1 Nephi 14:10, the angel explains more clearly how to identify this church (lest we seek to label any one denomination as “the Great and Abominable Church”):

Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth. (1 Nephi 14:10)

This abominable church warred against and persecuted the saints and, as Nephi learned later in chapter 13, corrupted the precious word of God.

1 Nephi 13:12-19

At this point in his vision Nephi has seen over two thousands of years of world history (roughly from 600 BC – 1500 AD). The angel now focuses Nephi's attention on one man among the Gentiles ((he term “Gentile” in its original Hebrew context means “nations” hence “foreigner, stranger, other.” It does not necessarily mean “non-Jew.” Thus Nephi uses this meaning of the term to refer to Christopher Columbus as a foreigner, a non-Nephite and non-Lamanite.)) who was wrought upon by the Holy Spirit to cross the waters from the Old World to the New World: Christopher Columbus. How fitting that his name is Christopher, for the Latin root means “bearer of Christ.” The history of salvation as seen in Nephi's vision now highlights the role that Gentiles would and do play in the restoration of the gospel and the gathering in of the scattered tribes of Israel to Zion. These verses highlight the discovering and colonization of the Americas, the Revolutionary war, and the establishment of the United States of America.

1 Nephi 13:20-29

In these verses the angel explains to Nephi the history and transmission of the Biblical record. It is called a book that proceeds forth from the mouth of a Jew (vs. 24), not literally meaning that one Jew wrote the entire Bible, but rather those who composed the Biblical texts are to be identified as members of the house of Israel and Judah. The angel explains that the Bible had originally been full of pure doctrine and truth, but that over the years as it was transmitted corruptions were introduced to the point that many of the plain and precious truths were smudged with misunderstanding or were deleted altogether. Because of these textual imperfections, many of the Gentiles had erroneous beliefs, ideas, and lifestyles, leaving them under the influence of the adversary. Verses 26-30 are examples of the pattern of apostasy found in theme two.

1 Nephi 13:30-42

These final verses of the chapter again focus on theme three. Nephi sees that even though God had raised up the Gentiles to prepare the way for the restoration of all things, he did not grant them power to completely destroy other covenant people (i.e. the descendants of the Lamanites who still lived throughout the Americas). In explaining the history of salvation, the angel declares to Nephi that God will do his work to save the ancient covenant people, as well as the stumbling and blind Gentiles, who were blinded because of Biblical imperfections. God's promise was to bring forth the precious parts of the gospel after the Gentiles had persecuted and hunted the ancient covenant people.

As the vision continues Nephi sees that many books of scripture, proclaiming the pure doctrine of Christ, come forward in the latter-days as companions to the book which proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew (the Bible). By means of these records, truth will be established, error dissolved, and doctrines clarified. Nephi learns that the central message of these scriptures is “that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved” (1 Nephi 13:40). A promise yet to be fulfilled is that Christ will manifest himself to all people in the latter-days, both Jew and Gentile alike.

Righteous Triumphant—1 Nephi 14

We have noted that the three chapters of this vision progressively focus on apostasy, restoration, and the eventual establishment of God's kingdom of righteousness on the earth. Chapter 14 speaks almost exclusively in terms of theme four: God's victory over the forces of evil, salvation of the righteous, and the ushering in of a new age of peace and righteousness.

1 Nephi 14:1-2

The theme of restoration and gospel preaching to the Gentiles continues through verse two of this chapter. God promises Nephi that at some point in history the Gentiles will have their stumbling block removed (i.e. the false ideas, prejudices, and erroneous life-styles). When the truth is offered to them and when they gladly receive it, they will be numbered among the house of Israel. They will no longer be called strangers and foreigners, but children of the King. This is our day, the day of the Gentiles, when the fullness of the truth is being promulgated. We have the opportunity to put aside our fears and false beliefs in order to accept with full humility the saving truths of pure love.

1 Nephi 14:3-10

Beginning in verse three we see the mighty acts of God at work to destroy the forces and structures of evil in preparation for his kingdom to spread across the earth; the wicked will be ensnared by their own devices. Nevertheless, those who choose darkness over light, who refuse to heed the warning voice and see the light of accumulating revelation of truth, will be grouped with the great and abominable church, whose founder is the devil himself, and whose members are comprised of all those who refused the loving charity of their God and Father.

1 Nephi 14:11-17

As the vision of the last-days pass before Nephi's view, he witnesses that both the Church of God and the abominable church spread throughout the earth, but because of the craft of the devil, the saints of God are but a minority population. Wrath and war from God will be poured out upon the wicked, the righteous will be armed with the strength of God, and it is at this moment that the promises and covenants of the ages will be fulfilled. Nephi witnesses that God will do his marvelous work among the children of men. And this is our day.

1 Nephi 14:18-30

Nephi concludes his revelatory vision with a description of John the Apostle who was commissioned by the Lord to write many things concerning the Last days and the end of the world. Nephi too saw these things but was forbidden from recording them. Instead he ends his account standing as a second witness to the things his father saw in a dream and reaffirming the veracity of his own recorded visionary experience.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the apocalyptic vision of Nephi presented in 1 Nephi 11-14 contains the principal parts of the restored gospel. In chapter 11 the atoning mission of Jesus Christ is set forth. Chapter 12 details the historically repeated cycle of apostasy and wickedness. Then in chapter 13 we see one grand example of how the Lord prepares the earth to receive the truth, focusing specifically on the events that lead to the restoration in the last days and the dispensation of the fullness of times. And chapter 14 concludes with the desire of the ages, namely the Lord's second coming, the ushering in of millennial peace when wickedness and oppression are terminated and the righteous are saved into the everlasting rest of the Lord. These are some of the most important themes and doctrines of the gospel. We find them throughout the Book of Mormon, other scriptures, and in the testimonies of living-day prophets. That we can access these truths by means of this marvelous yet compact vision is a wonder indeed.