Some Things We Know about the BOOK OF REVELATION Because of JOSEPH SMITH

In addition, Joseph Smith taught that sometimes a beast is just a beast. He explained that when John said he saw beasts in heaven (see Revelation 4:6), what he actually saw were . . . beasts in heaven. The Prophet thus demonstrated that at least some of John’s descriptions of his visions are literal while others are figurative. He also explained a principle related to such figures:

“When God gives a vision of an image, or beast, or figure of any kind, He always holds Himself responsible to give a revelation or interpretation of the meaning thereof, otherwise we are not responsible or accountable for our belief in it. Don’t be afraid of being damned for not knowing the meaning of a vision or figure, if God has not given a revelation or interpretation of the subject.”

Knowing the interpretation of every detail of mysterious visions is not paramount in our study of the scriptures. The mysteries of the prophets’ figurative language are not the same as the mysteries of God, which are given to the person who “repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good works, and prayeth continually without ceasing” (Alma 26:22).

By demystifying the book of Revelation, the Prophet removed potential distractions from the weightier matters of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course, John’s vision gives us important information about the latter days: the Apostasy and Restoration, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, His triumph over the devil, His millennial reign, and the Resurrection and Final Judgment. These things can help us as we strive to find the truth and follow the Lord’s will. But if we get hung up on a particular interpretation of a figure described in this vision, we may neglect things that matter most.

As we study the book of Revelation and take advantage of the wonderful light shed on it through the Prophet Joseph Smith, we can see where we stand in the grand scope of the world’s history and of God’s dealings with His children. Knowing this, we can see the importance of our personal testimony of Jesus Christ and of participating fully in His work in the latter days. Then we can overcome the world and, with Christ, inherit all things from the Father (see Revelation 21:21, 27).

1. See, for instance, Revelation 2:1, footnote a, or Revelation 6:14, footnote a.
2. For instance, Joseph Smith’s rendering of Revelation 1:7 (in the Bible appendix) reads “For behold, he cometh in the clouds with ten thousands of his saints in the kingdom, clothed in the glory of his Father. And every eye shall see him; and they which pierced him, and all kinds of the earth shall wail because of him.” The words added by Joseph Smith (in italics) connect this verse with other scripture teachings about Christ’s Second Coming—for instance, Matthew 16:27 (“the glory of his Father”) and Jude 1:14 (“thousands of his saints”).
5. Of course, as Joseph Smith knew, the first five of the seven seals deal with past events, but these serve to highlight the theme of a purpose or an endpoint to human history, culminating in the events leading up to the Second Coming—well beyond John’s day.
6. In this particular example, the beasts themselves are literal, representing four individual beasts, while John’s description of them contains figurative elements (multiple eyes and wings) representing their abstract attributes rather than their appearance (see Revelation 4:6–8; D&C 77:4).
8. Joseph Smith apparently felt this was particularly true for missionaries. He said: “Oh, ye elders of Israel, hearken to my voice; and when you are sent into the world to preach, tell those things you are sent to tell, preach and cry aloud. Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel.” Declare the first principles, and let mysteries alone, lest ye be overthrown. Never meddle with the visions of beasts and subjects you do not understand” (History of the Church, 5:344).