

# REVELATION 1-5

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## **Revelation 1: Introduction to the Vision**

In Revelation, John finishes what Luke set out to do in Acts. In this history, Luke indicated that what motivated him to write his Gospel was his desire to preserve all that “Jesus began both to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). The key word here is *began*. The Gospel of Luke is the story of what Jesus began to do. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of what Jesus continued to do after His Resurrection as He worked through His servants via the Holy Spirit. Revelation continues that story through the end of time. It shows the active involvement of the Lord in the ongoing progress of His Church and its people. Thus, Revelation was not just for John and the Saints of the seven churches but is also for other Saints then and now. As we will see, the book speaks to our period even more than that of the seven churches.

In the first chapter, John gives the background to the series of visions the Lord gave him, noting that he followed the Savior’s direct command to “write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (Revelation 1:19). This command makes John’s work unique among all those who have seen visions of the end time. In all the others, the Lord commanded the recipient to seal up the work. John alone was commanded to publish what he saw.

The central theme of chapter 1, and a major theme of the whole book, is the revelation of Jesus Christ. The visions contained in the work reveal the Lord as the Great High Priest, Judge, Warrior, and Savior, as the omniscient and omnipotent ruler of the earth and its destiny. It also shows Him to be aware, immediate, and intimate. As with Acts, Revelation shows how the Lord works with and through His servants.

Its long view shows that He will continue to operate that way through the entire course of history until He moves directly onto the stage when He stands on Mount Zion with the 144,000.

John's book, however, shows the Lord working not only through the Holy Spirit but also through inspiration to the Church leaders whom He symbolically lovingly cups in His hands. The revelation of the Lord in chapter 1 also teaches us much about the nature of the One who heads the Church and drives history. Chapter 1, as the introduction to the visions, also explains the call of John and echoes that of Lehi, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> We find that it contains all the elements of the call narratives found in other scriptures. Of these there are nine elements: (1) a historical introduction that provides the setting of the vision; (2) the divine confrontation between the prophet and God or another holy being; (3) the prophet's reaction to the presence of God or to the Holy Being and the things he has heard; (4) the throne theophany, an experience in which the prophet sees the throne of God; (5) the receipt of a heavenly book; (6) a heavenly song in praise of God; (7) the receipt of the prophetic commission; (8) the prophet's objection or protest; and (9) the reassurance from God that the call is divine. Each of these elements is found in Revelation.

Though John gives no specific date when he received the vision, he does say that he was on the island of Patmos and it was the Lord's Day (1:9–10). Further, he was "in spirit." At that time he was confronted by the divine—namely, Jesus Himself (1:13–16). He reacted by fainting, only to be reassured that all was well (1:17). As the vision continued, John was taken to the throne room of God (4:1–2), viewed a heavenly book and received one of his own (5:1; 10:9–10), heard the heavens singing praise to God and the Lamb (6:9–13), and received his prophetic commission (1:11, 19; 10:11). That each element was in place would have given the revelation a familiar ring to John's audience and also put it on par with Old Testament scripture.

### ***1:1–3. Opening of the vision***

In the first three verses of Revelation, John emphasizes several important ideas. The first was the divine authority of the revelation. It was transmitted through Christ via an angel who signified its authenticity to John. The Savior knew that false reports were proliferating. Further, the devil was active in his seductive role. It was becoming ever more difficult to tell the true from the false. The Lord therefore assured John and his readers that the vision was pure by sending an angel who gave John a correct sign or token that verified both. By that means John could certify to his readers that the angel was a true messenger from God come to teach His word. The second was its revealed purpose: to benefit God's faithful servants by showing them what to do in the present crisis, a crisis that would bring the age to a close. Finally, the care John took to record the vision. He was the faithful witness who put down accurately what he saw. The book was thus an authentic prophecy. The changes made by Joseph Smith emphasize that one must not only read or hear the words but also "keep the things that are written therein." Only in understanding can proper obedience come, yet understanding is the challenge in dealing with the book.

### ***1:4–8. The Almighty***

Though the Seer was writing a letter of comfort and warning to the surviving remnants of the Church in his day, at least in Asia Minor, his use of the number seven suggests the message was meant to go much further geographically and temporally. From early times the number seven connoted that which was full or complete and, therefore, could show that John's message was universal: for all branches of the Church, even those outside of Asia Minor and beyond John's day. Thus, the seven churches become symbols of the Church of God anytime, anywhere, and the message is applicable wherever Saints face similar conditions.

Further, since the number seven was tied to both the cosmic and divine, its use points to God as the source of the message and calls the reader to have trust and faith in His word as recorded by John. Revelation 1:6 focuses on the result of the Resurrection and supremacy of the Lord: He is able to make His followers kings and queens and priests and priestesses unto God. The seven servants mentioned twice in Revelation had achieved these ranks and attendant blessings (JST, 1:4, 20). They were not the only ones. "John said he was a King," Joseph Smith reported.<sup>2</sup> The kingdom to which the Seer and the others belonged was to endure forever and those who became members therein were, therefore, eternal heirs of glory. The reason was that these offices are an everlasting possession bestowed by the sealing power and authority of the high priesthood.

The first spoken words of the Lord to John give his titles "Alpha and Omega," "the First and the Last," "the one who is and who was and who is to come," and "the Almighty." That the Lord used these titles for Himself suggests they are the aspects of His authority that He wanted the reader to know; even though the world may appear godforsaken, the Lord is in control of all things. He is, indeed, the Almighty.

### ***1:9–18. The vision of the Son of Man***

John uses a number of metaphors—trumps, rushing water, thunder—to communicate to his readers the power of the voice he heard. Here he concentrates on the shofar, or ram's horn trumpet that Israel heard blasting from the heights during the theophany at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16; 20:18). One must not picture a musical instrument but something used to give orders in battle or to announce a royal message. Thus, the voice was a herald summoning John to battle or preparing him for a notice from the King.

The voice commanded him to write upon a scroll (translated "book" in the KJV) what he was about to see and hear and to send it to the seven churches. This prophecy, composed of several separate visions, constitutes the book of Revelation. The description of the priesthood robe is combined with the symbol of royal office: the golden girdle or clasp worn just under the armpits. Thus, John presents the Savior as both high priest and king, offices associated with the temple and the fullness of priesthood. The description of Christ's appearance is similar to Joseph Smith's description of the resurrected Christ when He appeared in the Kirtland temple: "His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah" (Doctrine and Covenants 110:3–4). Though the two visions use

parallel images, one should not overlook the symbolic nuances in John's description. The color white, often associated with purity, was also the color that celebrated victory.

The resplendent figure of the Lord stood with the lampstands—symbolizing the churches—surrounding Him (see Revelation 1:20). Lampstands do not create the light but make it available to others. The Church is to carry the light of Christ to the world. Christ admonished, “Hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up” (3 Nephi 18:24).

However, Church members were to do more than merely reflect the light. The Lord stated unequivocally, “I give unto you to be the light of this people. . . . Therefore let your light so shine before this people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (3 Nephi 12:14, 16). Thus, the Saints were to be a lens through whose lives people would be brought to see God. Additionally, the word *lampstand* was properly a menorah and thus alluded to the temple menorah, which represented the presence of the Holy Spirit illuminating one's journey to God as well as being a symbolic representation of the tree of life.

John's imagery of a sword constantly issuing from the Lord's mouth is a powerful symbol. This shows that the Lord's word continually goes from His mouth to His people. Revelation is ongoing. He ever directs His Church; He stands among His Saints as their King and High Priest, knowing every facet of their lives and struggles, giving counsel through their leaders and direction to all. The leaders are in His right hand, where He can sustain and direct them. Thus, the Church can find security in following them.

John's words also reveal the extent of the Lord's ministry. It did not stop with His death, nor is it only for the living. In the afterlife, it encompasses both the righteous and the wicked. For the righteous, the Lord uses His keys, which frees them from death and brings them to exaltation. For the wicked (with the exception of the sons of perdition), He exercises the keys, which frees them from hell and brings them eternal salvation.

### ***1:19–20. John's final commission***

Revelation 1 closes with a reiteration of the commandment for John to write, identifying the immediate audience for whom he was to write. The Lord's final words, however, expand John's assignment and give him the outline of the remainder of the book. He must write “the things you have seen, both which are and which are going to happen afterwards” (verse 19). What he has seen is the vision of the Son of Man that he recorded in the preceding verses. The things “which are” deal with the condition of the seven churches that acts as the impetus of the warning John is to write (chapters 2–3). The things that “are going to happen” comprise most of the rest of the book and bring its message from the former to the latter days.

### ***Conclusion***

The chapter as a whole celebrates another aspect of the almightiness of the exalted Christ: His victory over death and hell. More importantly, it showcases His power, especially that expressed in His fully won victory over all His enemies. It concludes with images emphasizing His closeness to his Church and its

leaders. God gave this revelation during the darkest period of His Church’s history. The members desperately needed to know that their Lord had overcome the world and that through Him, as hard as the current conditions seemed, they would overcome as well.

## **Revelation 2–3: The Messages to the Seven Churches**

Revelation 2 and 3 contain the Lord’s messages to each of seven churches located in the Roman province of Asia. The message to the specific churches the Lord addressed was actually for all because the same general problems were faced by all. Thus, each letter tells the readers to hear “what the Spirit is saying to the churches”—all the churches. In spite of the success of missionary work in the region, trouble brewed. Over time, the area had become a hotbed of heresy.

During his three-year ministry in Asia, Paul had continually warned the Saints that after he left “shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, of yourselves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:28–31). His words show that troubles would come from two sources. The first would be the wolves, those who would join the Church as a means of taking advantage of the Christians. The other would be insiders, Christian leaders speaking “perverse things” and using their positions to persuade congregations to follow another gospel and, in the process, leading many astray.

The message to the church units showed that the Savior was well aware of what was happening and was reaching out to save those islands where hope still remained. He gave each congregation specific and clear warnings. The most important one was that He would abandon the churches unless they returned to Him. He clearly told each congregation to stop the spread of heresy in its area, repent, hold to the truth, and thereby gain salvation or He would remove them.

The letters follow a general six-part format that gives balance and symmetry to the whole. The first part is a divine commission composed of a clear statement that the message was from the Savior. Though He never uses His name, He does use titles, mostly drawn from chapter 1, that point to some aspect of His work and ministry and serve to unite the message as a whole. The titles also give a description of the speaker that highlights an important aspect of His attributes and personalizes His message.

The second part is a formal recognition composed of a complimentary opening introduced by the phrase “I know thy works.” This section looks to the past and present condition in each of the congregations and sets out a diagnosis. The third is a criticism or rebuke beginning with “I have something against thee.” Here the Lord identifies the major problem each congregation faced.

The fourth is an admonition designed to meet the particular challenge faced by that congregation. The fifth is a call to hear designed to motivate the receptive to continue faithful. And the last is a promised blessing introduced by the words, “to him that overcometh.” The promise gives hope for divine reward to each individual who stands faithful. The exceptions to this format are Smyrna (2:8–11) and Philadelphia (3:7–13), which receive no condemnation, and Sardis (3:1–6) and Laodicea (3:14–18), which receive no compliment.

Looking at the relationship of the letters, we see they form a chiasm composed of three groups. The first group of the first and last churches, Ephesus and Laodicea, was getting dangerously close to losing their identities as Christian churches. Salvation could come only if they repented and fully returned to their Lord. The second group, Smyrna and Philadelphia, were the strongest but even they were poor and had little power. The Lord could only ask them to endure more trials in faith with the promise of eternal salvation. The middle group, Pergamos, Thyatira, and Sardis, to varying degrees, had groups of faithful and less faithful. The Lord admonished them to purge themselves of unwanted elements, primarily those seeking compromise with paganism, that were killing the Church.

In this and the next chapter, we see Revelation's heavy dependence on Old Testament images. For instance, in the promises one finds seven key themes that correspond to the Garden of Eden story. That there is a direct parallel should not be surprising since the Eden account uses powerful symbols that are part of later temples. For example, the tree of life, cherubim, sacred waters, sacred vestments, Eden's eastward orientation, and divine revelation, belong to both accounts. In John's writings, we see seven key items that correspond to Genesis:

1. the tree of life (Genesis 2:17; 3:24; Revelation 2:7)
2. physical death and the second death (Genesis 2:17; 3:3; Revelation 2:11)
3. bread and hidden manna (Genesis 3:19; Revelation 2:17)
4. dominion (Genesis 1:28; Revelation 2:26)
5. sacred vestments (Genesis 3:21; Revelation 3:5)
6. expulsion and return (Genesis 3:23–24; Revelation 3:12)
7. receiving names (Genesis 2:23; 3:20; 5:2; Revelation 2:17; 3:12)

In fact, these items more than correspond; the promises reverse the conditions of the Fall. Overcoming mortality brings humankind back in harmony with their Creator. The Lord's specific counsel here also demonstrates that He is not a distant God but a personal Savior who cares for both congregation and individual. Even so, the combined letters give the feel that the congregations would not be able to save themselves from apostasy. In no case was the promise of salvation given to any unit, but it was given to those individuals within it who endured in faith.

### ***2:1–7. Message to the church at Ephesus***

The church in Ephesus, at the time John wrote, had kept itself free from the heresies that afflicted other congregations. Yet a group of spiritual libertines, the Nicolaitans seems to have set up a prophetic tradition that stood opposite that of John and those associated with him. They refused to recognize his authority or that of the other authorized representatives of the Lord. They rationalized away standards that forbade Christians from practicing idolatry and immorality, feeling that due to Christ's Atonement, nothing was forbidden. The Ephesians resisted this hated heresy and won the Lord's plaudits. Even so,

they were yet on the brink of apostasy of another more subtle yet still deadly kind: defection was sneaking through the back door. It did not take the form of heresy but of loss of purpose.

The community's determination to guard the truth seems to have produced a rigid orthodoxy that left little room for Christlike compassion. The Savior had told His followers years before that "by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another" (John 13:35). His doctrine and its application were meant to bring loving unity. The Church's unity and love was the primary outward witness that Jesus was God-sent. In Ephesus, however, love had grown cold. They would not forgive one another, and the result for this congregation was a sterile environment in which the fruit of the gospel could not blossom. Therefore, the church was near death.

The Lord promised the sweet fruit of the tree of life to those who overcame. The tree symbolism had particular relevance in Ephesus. The temple of Artemis (or Diana) was a tree shrine. Her devotees were drawn there to partake of her power. The Canaanite god Baal and his consort were also worshipped in groves. We see in Revelation that all such worship was but a perversion of a truth. According to the Book of Mormon, the tree represents the pure love of Christ (see 1 Nephi 11:21–22). One partakes of the tree by eating its fruit—that is, by accepting the Lord and His Atonement and achieving eternal life. The understanding based on the Book of Mormon that the tree represented the pure love of Christ seems particularly apropos given the spiritual condition of the Ephesian Saints.

The Lord gave the Ephesians a direct warning. Unless they repented, He would come to them, but this would not be associated with the delights of the Second Coming that many anticipated. This coming would be immediate and bring a judgment that would blot out all remnants of the true Church. The remedy could come only through remembering what the gospel was designed to do. They were, after all, a menorah created to uphold the Lord of light and proclaim His gospel and His love in unity. The light would allow others to see what the Church was all about and be drawn to its Lord. If the Christians did not spread the light, no matter how pure the doctrine, the Church would be left in darkness and die. In addition to the message to the Church in general, there was one to each individual who read or heard John's words. The message was that there were blessings for each who personally overcame the problems affecting the Church: individual salvation was not contingent on the Church's salvation. The Lord would bless any who did His will.

### ***2:8–11. Message to the church at Smyrna***

It was difficult to be a Christian in Smyrna. Many Saints were poor, and their religion exacerbated this condition. Employment opportunities were limited for the Saints because many would have nothing to do with anything idolatrous. Their problem differed from that of the Saints in Ephesus. There the Church had to protect itself from self-styled apostles, here the Church had to defend itself against self-styled Israelites.

From the third century BC on, the Jews formed an important and influential element in Smyrna, many contributing to its wealth. Almost from its inception, Christianity faced Jewish hostility. From the mid-first

century, certain Jews made life difficult for the Saints, but here the Lord castigates only those Jews who were actively persecuting His people, insisting that they really were not true Jews because they did not live the essence of the Mosaic law. Jewish Christians often protected themselves from having to perform acts of idol worship by claiming the privileges the Romans granted the Jews. When, however, the Jews denounced the Christians, the latter were brought to trial facing harsh punishment.

Ancient sources show that Jews brought five charges against the Christians: atheism, political disloyalty, cannibalism, breaking up homes, and immorality. Many Christians had little recourse from these attacks because the wealthy felt that their riches put them above the law. Thus, they were able to slander the Christians with impunity. Though the Roman magistrates were the executors, the writer identifies the actual force behind the Saints' troubles as the devil. Thus, Revelation shows that a battle was being played out on both the physical and spiritual planes. The Lord wanted the Saints to keep in mind the broader perspective like Paul, who knew that the Christians "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). By keeping this perspective, they understood the cosmic proportion of their struggle, which made the present distress more understandable.

Only Smyrna and Philadelphia received no rebuke from the Lord. Yet, the very faithful congregation at Smyrna received no hope that persecution—at least for the foreseeable future—would abate. The congregation did not even receive hope that it would survive. All promised rewards look to the next life. The Lord's promises had meaning for these faithful Saints because they were sustained by sure testimony grounded in revelation.

These words account for the spiritual strength of the Saints at Smyrna and why they were willing to suffer as they did. They had undeniable testimonies via the Holy Ghost that their life was pleasing to God and that they were doing His will, and they would not back down no matter how great the pressure. It is little wonder that the Lord greeted them with tender words of love, encouragement, and promise. Their great challenge was to endure for the full period of persecution. To falter after receiving so much light would bring upon them the second death. On the other hand, to stand firm guaranteed them eternal life. The Lord does not promise them power over the first death, only the second. This promise illustrates that the message of Revelation is anchored to reality. The Saints have no guarantee that they will escape mortal death and must view their present condition with an eternal perspective.

### **2:12–17. Message to the church at Pergamum**

The luxurious city of Pergamum was the seat of Roman government in the province of Asia and a center for Roman pagan practices. Sincere worshippers paid homage to their patron gods to keep or gain their favor. Even the less believing would have seen the advantages of adopting Roman gods, especially the deified emperor, as a way of ingratiating themselves to the major power of the day. By the turn of the century, all citizens and subjects were obligated by law to make offerings to the imperial god, the divine emperor;



otherwise, they were condemned to death as traitors and enemies of the state. Both the devout and less devout were threatened by those forces, which worked against the traditional gods.

The Christians were a major force that threatened the status quo. The governor's court was in Pergamum, and the Christians were brought to it for trial. Here, it seems, they faced the "seat of Satan," and here Caesar and Christ contended as in few other places. The Lord assured these Saints that He knew "where thou dwellest." Unfortunately, it was also "where Satan dwelleth" (Revelation 2:13). This fact accentuates the reality that where light and darkness dwell, there can be no peaceful coexistence. As a result, those who held fast to their testimony of the Lord, declaring it openly even before magistrates, could expect the wrath of Satan's agents to be brought against them.

It is possible that the appeal of the Nicolaitans and those who followed the doctrine of Balaam was their promise of relief from persecution. Here we see the difference between the Church at Ephesus and Pergamum. Ephesus, with its overemphasis on complete doctrinal piety, had lost concern for the outside world, loving neither it nor those touched by it. At Pergamum the opposite was true. Here the Saints de-emphasized doctrine, resulting in an overidentification with the world. Though they had withstood external pressure by Roman authorities, subtle internal pressures were leading the Saints to make dangerous compromises.

It appears that the appeal of the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was that it offered a convincing rationale for compromising with paganism that would deflect its concerns. The problem was that these compromises opened the door to practices that the Lord found repulsive. Thus, the Lord's warning for the congregation is to resist these evils and repent or face His withering denial—the sword of His mouth—at their divine Judgment. Once again, the Lord did not make individual salvation contingent on that of the Church itself. Each person who heard and responded was promised the reward, including access to the new name or key word so necessary to gain eternal life.

The idea of a new name is significant. Names in ancient societies identified not only the person but also his or her status, and to be given a new name by another was to enter into a personal, even intimate, relationship that brought a higher status. Patronymics indicated that a person was free and even of nobility. As such, he or she was in a position to inherit the family fortune.

In the gospel sense, having the right name indicated one was an heir to eternal life. That the believers will be given a white stone in which the new name is written does not mean the individual did not know the name before, only that it was now made permanent. The Christian already had one new name, that of Christ Himself. Therefore, it was all-important that the faithful stay true to the name, for the reward could be lost. Taking the name of Christ did more; it brought them under God's protective power, one that did not guarantee protection from physical death, but from spiritual death. That, coupled with the reception of the new name, signified that one was a member of the eternal community of the redeemed.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah often bestowed a new name to show that a new and adoptive relationship had been established with Him. The giving of the name stressed the idea that the Lord had redeemed the

newly renamed one and brought him or her into His circle. Further, following Hebrew belief that names represent the essence of a person, receiving the new name showed that not only had one's status changed but also his or her essence had changed. They not only had a new name but were a new person in Christ.

The situation of these celestial souls stands in contrast to others who also received a new name. That name, however, belonged to the satanic beast. It did not bring protection, for "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name" (Revelation 14:11).

### ***2:18–29. Message to the church at Thyatira***

Few Christians lived in Thyatira. There seems to have been just a scattered group meeting in house-churches that was of little interest to the authorities. In spite of their small numbers, the faithful Saints practiced their religion, showing forth loving service and winning the praise of the Lord. They were, however, in danger, from more than the beginnings of heresy. Living in a city dominated by trade guilds worked to their disadvantage. Each guild had its patron deity that members worshipped at the guild meetings. Christian laborers could hold to their standards, refuse to join the guild, and thereby lose opportunity for employment resulting in isolation and poverty. On the other hand, they could compromise their standards, join the guild, and enjoy the community and prosperity but bring upon themselves the ire of the Christian leaders and the Lord Himself. It appears that some were giving in to compromise, which may have been fostered by the Nicolaitans.

The problem was compounded in Thyatira due to the seductive work of a charismatic woman characterized as Jezebel. Unlike Judaism and many pagan religions, Christianity had expanded the role that women played in the Church. Paul's letters show that they prayed, taught, bore testimony, and ministered among the Saints. Since most Christians, even toward the end of the first century, continued to meet in house-churches, the women of those households had special status as the patron of the congregation. This position, along with the Church's more liberal policy toward women, opened the door to abuse.

Certain overzealous women years before had pushed the limits of this policy, earning a very strong reprimand from Paul (see 1 Corinthians 14:34–35). It would appear that Jezebel went beyond even these women, claiming she was the interpreter of God's will for the community. Her appeal seems to have come from her compromise with pagan religions that allowed the Saints to escape persecution and enjoy the prosperity of the city. Her logic could have been based on the writings of Paul, who taught that an idol was nothing and, therefore, eating sacrificial meat was really no problem (see 1 Corinthians 8:4–6). Paul, however, had counseled against it because it opened the door to apostasy (1 Corinthians 8:10–13).

Jezebel seems to have ignored any constraints and openly advocated compromise for prosperity. In this way she also led the way from spiritual fornication to physical. But she was guilty of more than false teachings. She seems to have been persecuting those who refused her seductions, including the Church leadership. The Lord's statement that He had given her time to repent suggests she had been active for

some time all the while refusing to heed counsel. If Jezebel's teachings and the work of the Nicolaitans were not enough of a challenge for the Saints, it seems that certain heretics were claiming to possess the mysteries of godliness. So disgusted was the Lord with this counterfeit worship that He branded it as "the depths of Satan."

The main task of the few faithful members was to hold on to the original gospel and works of charity. It was not the austere orthodoxy of Ephesus but the inviting orthodoxy of Christ that was to be their safeguard. Those who resisted the seductions of Jezebel were promised Christlike authority leading to rulership over heavenly kingdoms. Thus, they had an acute need to stay true to their testimony, even when it might cost them their jobs or perhaps even their lives. It is in this light that Paul's statement that if "thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" needs to be understood (Romans 10:9). For these Saints, confession with the mouth was neither an easy road to grace nor an effortless path to salvation. Each time they bore witness, their lives were on the line.

### ***3:1–6. Message to the church at Sardis***

Sardis was located about fifty miles east of Ephesus and was the terminus of the Royal Road. As a result, it was quite wealthy and able to support a standing population in excess of sixty thousand. To understand the Lord's warning to the Saints at Sardis it is necessary to know that the main export was woolen goods, and when the cloth became soiled, it lost its value. As a result, its citizens were sensitive to unclean clothes, especially in relation to worship of their gods, insisting that dirty robes not only defiled the devotee but also dishonored the god.

Temple imagery here points to the sacred garments worn by those who have been endowed as well as the vestments worn during the temple service. Symbolically, despoiling these holy items would be breaking the covenants associated with them and thereby forfeiting their shielding power. Another nuance here, however, may be more in keeping with what the Lord had in mind. It was the custom of Greco-Roman people to celebrate military victories with a splendid parade in which the victor and his entourage were all arrayed in white. Once again, echoes of temple worship can be heard, for it is in those holy buildings as disciples wear white and enter into vicarious saving work that they walk with victorious God.

The spirituality of the Saints in Sardis reflects the history of the city itself. Once the capital of the Lydian Empire, it had declined to political insignificance, living mainly on the reputation of its old glory. The Christian Church had also once been strong there, but now, due primarily to acute complacency, it stood in the deadly shadow of apostasy. Sardis and its sister city Laodicea were the only congregations untroubled by outside pressure and inward error. Yet neither received any praise from the Lord. Instead, both received scathing rebukes.

It is likely that in Sardis the lack of opposition had led to complacency and spiritual weakness. The church at Sardis received the second most severe rebuke of all the churches to which the Lord addressed

letters. Only Laodicea surpassed it. The likely reason was that it was spiritually dead: the Sardis branch had compromised to the point that it was Christian in name only. There the pagans were in harmony with the Christians primarily because they found nothing to object to. The guarded acceptance that had once been the virtue of the branch had opened the doors to full-scale tolerance that had turned into license. Those who gave themselves over to compromise had, symbolically, soiled their spiritual clothes.

John's imagery, set as it was within a temple context, suggests it could have been priestly garments that the Christians had soiled. As such, faithless Saints doubly dishonored themselves and their God. Remembering and repenting, however, could bring about a renewal of life. Otherwise, even the few who remained would not be able to save the rest. Even so, those who were faithful would not lose their reward. In this case, it took the form of three blessings: first, they would be arrayed in white garments, very likely a sign of their triumph over their enemies; second, their names would remain in the divine ledger, thus assuring their citizenship in the eternal world; and third, Jesus would stand by them at the divine court, thus assuring their full acquittal and access to eternal freedom.

### ***3:7–13. Message to the church at Philadelphia***

Philadelphia was known for its many temples and its enthusiastic religious festivals. Its devotion to its gods earned it the nickname Little Athens. The city sat in a lush vineyard area, which made it natural for its patron deity to be Dionysus, the god of wine. The Philadelphian Saints showed a faith second only to those of Smyrna and, like it, received no condemnation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Lord's letter reflected much of the same encouragement it gave to the other faithful branch and in fact covered the same ground point for point. The Lord beckoned these people to look to the future when God would establish His kingdom and reverse the earthly conditions so hostile to His people. In that day, all will pay homage not only to the Lord but also to those who had been faithful to Him.

The promise of dominance over the Jews parallels that of dominance over the Gentiles given earlier (see Revelation 2:26–27). The Jews who scoffed at the idea that the Philadelphian Saints were the objects of God's love would be forced to acknowledge their error in the future. In the meantime, because of their faith, the Lord would spare the congregation from the immediate and earthshaking trial soon to come. His words show that He fully intended to preserve these Saints, not by taking them off the earth but by protecting them from the machinations of Satan that would hit the world as a flood. The light of priesthood would burn bright in this little congregation even as it was dimming and going out in other branches. The Lord's promise that He would come to them quickly takes on quite a different meaning than it did to the other branches.

The Lord promised Ephesus that He would come quickly, but it would be to take away their lampstand. He promised Pergamum He would come quickly but to fight against them with the sword of His mouth. Finally, He promised Sardis He would come quickly but as a thief in the night with the implication that He would take away objects of value. To Philadelphia, conversely, His coming would signal the end of their

hour of trial. To those who overcame, the Lord gave a threefold promise: First, He would write the name of God upon them by which all would know that they were His special possession. Second, He would write upon them the name of the divine city, thus showing that they were citizens therein. Finally, He would write upon them His own new name, showing that they had not only become one with the Lord but were also like Him.

### **3:14–22. *Message to the church at Laodicea***

Like the other cities to which John wrote, Laodicea sat astride important crossroads that made the place ideal for trade and business. It was also known for two important services: its banking industry and its renowned woven goods. It was so wealthy that unlike a number of its neighbors, it was able to use its own resources to rebuild itself after a very strong earthquake hit in about AD 60. Also, the city boasted a flourishing medical school and thus was a center for the worship of the healing god Aesculapius. The city was especially well known for its Phrygian powder, a substance used as an important ingredient in an effective eye salve.

The challenge the city faced, sitting as it did on a plateau, was getting potable water. The city developed an elaborate piping system that brought water from the springs five miles away to a central system from which it was dispersed to various locations. The problem was that the water, already hard at its source, became more hardened as it traveled through stone pipes. Coming from geothermal active areas, the springs from which the water was drawn suffered at times from sulfur contamination and thus developed a bad taste that became more acute when the water was tepid. How different was the situation in Laodicea's two sister cities. Colossae, ten miles to the east, had water that was sparkling, clear, and cold year-round, while at Hierapolis, six miles to the north, the water was warm and healing from hot, natural springs.

Though blessed as no other congregation, the Laodiceans were guilty of one of the gravest sins: pride. The congregation as a whole seems to have been wealthy, secure, and at peace with its neighbors. It does not even seem to have been afflicted with the heresies that threatened to destroy other branches. The problem was that the Saints took credit for their peaceful station and rich condition. By believing they needed nothing from God, they became gods unto themselves. That act bordered on blasphemy. The result was a growing spiritual blindness such that they could see neither God's blessing in their lives nor the degree to which their arrogance offended Him. As a result, their devotion to Him and His Church had become but a thin veneer. Thus, the members' spiritual condition caused them, like their water, to be hard, lukewarm, and nasty. So great was the sin of pride and the resultant ingratitude that it crowded out all the virtues the branch possessed.

As a result, the Lord had nothing good to say about it. The Laodiceans' blindness was becoming so acute that they could not see their real spiritual condition—wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked—conditions from which they could be saved only by the greatest effort on their part. Given the depth of their sin, the Lord's promise to these lackluster Christians seems out of place unless we remember that

His words are not to this branch alone but to all the churches. Even so, He was not prepared to give up on them. At the very moment that they heard the content of this letter, He stood knocking at the door waiting for them to invite Him in. The implications of that imagery should have sounded a clear warning. The Lord was not with them. They had forced Him outside. Even so, He was willing to return if they would respond to His knock and open the door. The move was theirs. If they made it, He would again dine with them, perhaps an allusion to the sacramental supper through which they could have His Spirit to be with them always. If they refused, they would ever remain spiritually wretched.

### ***Conclusion***

The writings of the New Testament show that the early leaders had little hope that the Church itself or even some of its branches would remain faithful. It was not, therefore, apostasy *from* the Church that they feared the most but the apostasy *of* the Church. Even so, they fought desperately against it, perhaps more as a means of delaying the inevitable and saving souls than by the belief that their efforts would really make a difference in the end.

From the content of the letters, it is apparent that the Church's spiritual life foundered in seven areas. Two were external: willingness to compromise with paganism and failure to stay true to the faith due to harassment. Five were internal: the acceptance of unauthorized leaders, approval of false doctrine promulgated by pseudoprophets, half-heartedness and indifference, a loss of love for the Church and its Master, and pride and self-conceit. Even as John wrote, various branches were succumbing to one or more of these pressures.

Of the problems listed, the one of greatest concern in the book of Revelation was authority, the question of who had the right to preside over and to define the doctrine of the Church. The problem was not new. Peter cautioned the Saints that "there were false prophets also among the [Old Testament] people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in opinions of destruction, even denying the Master that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their licentiousness; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be blasphemed" (2 Peter 2:1–2). Paul warned the Saints, "Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears" (Acts 20:30–31).

By the time John wrote his epistles these prophecies were a reality. In sorrow because that time had come, he wrote, "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John 2:18–19). Note the root of the problem: men and women deliberately perverting the way of God, willing to deny Christ even though they had been taught differently. Paul lamented that he was amazed at how fast some departed from the faith and that all of Asia had turned from him (Galatians 1:6; 2 Timothy 1:15).

These were not ignorant deceivers but deliberate workers of darkness. Peter testified that they “walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness” and despise constituted authority. These apostates could not be renewed “again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:4–6). Spurning authority, despising truth, loving error and the glory of men, these hell-inspired antichrists carefully spun their web of half-truths, counterfeit ordinances, and false doctrines and were able to suck out the juice of these Christians’ spiritual lives.

Revelation gives names to some of the doctrines these false prophets and apostles of darkness taught. There was the doctrine of Balaam and the associated doctrines of the Nicolaitans along with the teachings of the false prophetess Jezebel (Revelation 2:6, 14). They seem to have been preaching a form of idolatry that included spiritual fornication. The phrase “to eat meat offered to idols,” associated with both the Nicolaitans and Jezebel, referred not only to food consecrated to an idol but also to participation in pagan feasts with their sometimes-orgiastic rites. Therefore, it would seem that Jezebel and the Nicolaitans were part of the same heretical group working within the Church to pull people into their salacious ways.

Their doctrine probably appealed to spiritual prostitution more than physical, but the imagery depicting extreme sensuality gives an accurate feel for their allure. The false apostles who appeared at Ephesus may have been migrant missionaries perhaps belonging to this same group. They set up a prophetic tradition that stood opposite to that of John and those associated with him. They refused to recognize his authority or that of authorized representatives of the Lord and presented a real threat to the true Church. Many Saints were persuaded by the new seduction and not only left the truth but also fostered the evil. Therefore, the Lord warned them through John to “repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place” (2:5).

The letters give but the slightest hint that the churches could or would survive this crisis. Though the Lord offered hope of salvation, this was not to the body of the Church but to its individuals. Indeed, for the most faithful among the branches (the church at Smyrna), the Lord holds no promise of continuance: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried ... be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (2:10).

Even though the Apostasy was moving forward with increasing success, the Lord was still reaching out to branches and Saints in the hope that they would respond and return to Him. The Church was at the point that by rejecting this outreach and refusing to come back to the true doctrine, they would bring upon themselves the promised judgments of God. The dilemma is that there is no way of saving them but by the very truth whose rejection will condemn them utterly. Offering repentance and showing the way back, He left them, and them alone, fully responsible for their fate.

He appeals to the leader of each branch, showing that He yet recognized their position and was still willing to work with them. Even so, the situation depended upon the Saints’ response to the prophet. The urgent call to repentance grew out of the prospect of an imminent coming of the Lord, not in the form of the great king but as a thief in the night who would take away the lampstands. It is important to note that

the Saints would remain. The idea behind the imagery is that the Christians with their heresies were there to stay; it was the true Church that they were in danger of losing.

John's commission was to publish the vision of God to the churches when apostasy and persecution were about to destroy them. While John was tethered to the isle of Patmos, counterfeit authorities made their way through the ranks of the Church. False leaders continually gaining authority and strength were finally able to silence John's influence among the Church members. But they did not silence his testimony. His revelation endured in spite of their machinations.

As disconcerting as the letters to the seven churches was, Revelation brought with it hope, the same hope that allowed it to find place as the last book of the New Testament. To the faithful Saints living in the Roman province of Asia, John bequeathed, through the book of Revelation, a strong testimony that God lived and that Jesus was the Messiah. His message was a light that pierced the darkness of the gathering Apostasy and illuminated the eventual triumph of God. It reassured the Saints that the present distress was not the end of the war but of a single battle. Though God seemed vanquished, He was not and would turn seeming defeat into glorious victory. And Revelation showed how. Thus, it became a beacon of hope to the faithful until, one by one, they passed away. With each passing, the light of truth dimmed and finally went out.

### **Excursus on the State of Apostasy at the End of the First Century**

Acts chapter 1 through Revelation chapter 3 is the story of a hard-fought struggle that could not stop a heart-breaking defeat. Primitive Christianity, despite all efforts to the contrary, was destroyed. The earliest Christians were well aware of the danger. Even during His ministry, the Lord had warned the Saints through a parable that an apostasy was coming. His enemy, He explained, would destroy the Church by sowing tares (false beliefs) among the wheat (true doctrine), choking out the latter. Modern scripture tells when these seeds of destruction were planted.

According to Lord, with the demise of the Apostles, Satan's earthly assistants sowed their seeds: "Wherefore, the tares choke the wheat and [drove] the church into the wilderness" (Doctrine and Covenants 86:2-3). As John wrote, the evil sower was already at work. Unfortunately, the ground was already fertile and ready for his seeds. After the death of the Lord, Christianity fractured. People began to bring in false doctrines and heresies (see 2 Peter 2:1).

Luke documents the beginning of problems. He states, "Certain men came down from Judea [to Antioch of Syria] and taught the brethren, and said, except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Those who continued to hold this view, in spite of the teachings of the Apostles to the contrary, became one of the strongest factions in the early Church, the Judaizers. These proved to be Paul's greatest adversaries and greatly contributed to the difficulty of his work.



But these were not the only ones to bring in teachings contrary to those of the Apostles. An anti-resurrection party arose in Corinth, and over time other heresies made their way into the primitive Church. Though the Apostles fought them with all their might, these forces did not weaken. The result was that, by the time of the writing of Revelation, it would be proper to speak not of Christianity but of Christianities. In the end, those who called themselves the orthodox won the day and became the foundation for most of the modern Christian sects. But, in the days of the Apostles, all these factions enriched the ground so that the tares they sowed during the last half of the first century took root and thrived. As a result, the Lord's Church was driven from the field.

At the very time John was writing, the evil sower was working across the Christian fields. John was, therefore, not only writing prophecy but also seeing it fulfilled. Paul's prophecy that a falling away would be sandwiched between the Lord's First and Second Comings was proving true. The word Paul used connoted a rebellion in which the authorized leaders were replaced by unlawful leaders who brought in a new constitution. But what did the Apostles understand the mass rebellion would consist of? There is no doubt that they saw it as a departing from the living God, but just how?

Being grounded in the Old Testament, they would have understood the rebellion as expressing itself in breaking covenants with God, more particularly in rejecting priesthood service. With the fulfillment of the Mosaic law in Christ, priesthood service devolved upon all worthy males (although the Jerusalem temple was soon destroyed). The Apostasy, then, resulted in the loss of the priesthood with its attendant ordinances and rites. It is little wonder, in that light, that Revelation, which was designed to fight against this trend, is filled with temple imagery and that the great sin of incipient Gnosticism was professing to know the mysteries of God when the best Gnostics could do was come up with a counterfeit.

Revelation shows the Lord's Church was on the brink of self-destruction. Unauthorized leaders and self-appointed prophets were gaining strength and taking over whole Christian congregations. Only immediate repentance would save the few from falling to the powers of the apostates. The reality of the Apostasy did not take the authentic Christian leaders by surprise. They had known it was coming for decades. As early as the days of the apostolic ministry, the leaders were well aware that an apostasy would be sandwiched between the Lord's First and Second Comings. They did their best to warn the congregations.

Both modern Catholics and Protestants are well aware of the apostasy passages found in the scriptural record and recognize the event as more than just a thorn in the side of Christianity. A Roman Catholic Bible translates "falling away" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as "mass apostasy," while Protestant scholars recognize that Paul taught that a "world-wide rebellion" would take place. Because of their belief that these prophecies refer to the time just before the coming of the Lord, they do not accept the idea of an apostasy of the early Church. As a result, they do not see the trial that was soon to overtake the world of the early Church as the loss of priesthood and clarity of the gospel. Instead, they insist that it refers to the work of the antichrist found in the other chapters of Revelation.

## **Revelation 4: The Vision of Heaven**

Revelation 4 presents a change of scene and subject. Up to this point, only John's world has been in view; now God lifts the Seer's vision to heaven. John leaves behind him the apostasies of the earthly Church and passes into an atmosphere of perfect accord. Here not even an echo of earthly turmoil disharmonizes the heavenly songs of adoration. Of course, for the short term, John could not win. Western civilization as a whole was still too steeped in paganism to yield to the fullness of the gospel. Judaism could not loosen its hold on the Mosaic law to accept a new law and Lawgiver. And many of those within the ranks of the Church were too willing to distort the truth for their own ends. They rejected the Apostles, but that did not mean, however, that all truth would be lost.

Though some early versions of Christianity developed twisted visions of the gospel so strange that the Lord's teachings could hardly be found in them, many clung to what truths they had. These souls continued to fight against heresy and persecution. They preserved the letters and Gospels that contained the message of salvation in Christ. The book of Revelation emphasized these same themes with the promise that the Christians' efforts would yield an eventual triumph.

The throne room theophany provided the seven churches with the reason why they should put their trust in the eternal God, as it reveals the majesty and omnipotence of God and the Lamb. Conditions for the Christians were moving from bad to worse. They were entering an intensified period of distress as both apostasy and persecution escalated against them.

The revelation, therefore, brought consolation to help the Saints get through the period of tribulation.<sup>3</sup> To do this, the vision broadened in scope. The revelation expanded John's understanding to comprehend that God was in full command of human history and would hand to the Lamb the scroll of destiny. At that moment, the Savior would execute His Father's plans in bringing telestial history to an abrupt close and usher in His millennial reign. John's vision surely must have given him and his readers strength to carry on the war.

### ***4:1. Things that must come hereafter***

John's experience seems to have been similar to that of Joseph Smith, who reported, "The heavens were opened upon us, and I beheld the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof, whether in the body or out I cannot tell. I saw the transcendent beauty of the gate through which the heirs of that kingdom will enter, which was like unto circling flames of fire" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:1–2).

John also saw the glory but in addition, he saw the adoration God continually receives there; a stark contrast to what He often receives on earth. The focus of this vision, however, is less on God and more on the specific events that will bring telestial history to a close. That vantage point makes one thing very clear: John does not see what might happen (that is, potentiality). He sees what will happen, divinely appointed destiny. It is this rock-solid predeterminism that has given Revelation its enduring appeal. Many have found strength while supported by its unwavering witness. Others have found concern in its seeming discounting of human agency. Yet for the Seer, what God has predetermined is worked out within the context of human agency.

### **4:2–3. *The throne in heaven***

John’s perspective changes from temporal to eternal. He comes to see, at least in part, how God sees. As Joseph Smith noted, “the past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal now.”<sup>4</sup> This does not, however, imply that God is somehow outside of time.

John tries to describe and impress upon his reader the power of God using images of light sparkling in hues of deep green and blood red. John combines the colors symbolizing life and death and has them radiating from the One who is the God of both. By this means, the mind’s eye beholds the unmistakable testimony of divine power—God covered “with light as with a garment,” dwelling “in unapproachable light, whom no [natural] man has ever seen or can see” (Psalm 104:2; 1 Timothy 6:16). The presence of the rainbow in this scene is most important. According to one scholar, it suggests that “there is no triumph for God’s sovereignty at the expense of his mercy, and it warns us not to interpret the visions of disaster that follow as though God had forgotten his promise to Noah.”<sup>5</sup>

### **4:4–6. *The twenty-four elders***

The vision of the throne room teaches an important lesson. Though God holds the central place, others share the dais with Him. This configuration testifies to the effectiveness of Christ’s Atonement, for those who sit on those thrones have become heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ in rank and majesty. Their station may be the reason the Joseph Smith Translation replaces “round about” with “in the midst of.” That text suggests that the thrones occupy the central place with the throne of God and, therefore, are not in an auxiliary or lesser position.

John describes God’s power as flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, and continual rumblings. Together, these three provide another aspect of the authority of God. To Sinai, Jehovah had come in the midst of thunders, lightnings, the rumble of an earthquake, and the blast of a trump (Exodus 19:16–19). Thus, the three manifest the presence of God. John shows, however, that when He manifested Himself in this manner in the last days, it will be in judgment against his enemies. Though God is a God of mercy, he is also the God of judgment.

According to Doctrine and Covenants 77:1, the sea of glass represents the sanctified and celestialized earth. Joseph Smith taught the Saints that “this earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:9).

### **4:7–8. *The four living creatures***

As the text of Revelation stands, the living creatures form the first of the concentric circles around God’s throne, and the elders form the second. John portrays these beasts as honoring and reverencing God. As John saw real elders, he saw actual animals, or better, living creatures. Joseph Smith stated, “John’s

vision was very different from Daniel’s prophecy—one referring to things actually existing in heaven; the other being a figure of things which are on earth.”

Joseph Smith’s information was based on revelation. He had asked the Lord, “Are the four beasts limited to individual beasts, or do they represent classes or orders?” The Lord had responded, “They are limited to four individual beasts, which were shown to John, to represent the glory of the classes of beings in their destined order or sphere or creation, in the enjoyment of their eternal felicity” (Doctrine and Covenants 77:3). Thus, like the elders, they are real but also stand as symbols: “They are figurative expressions, used by the Revelator, John, in describing heaven, the paradise of God, the happiness of man, and of beasts, and of creeping things” (Doctrine and Covenants 77:2).

Through these symbols, John gives us a glimpse into the nature of exalted beings other than humans. Joseph Smith asserted an extended glimpse:

John saw beings there of a thousand forms that had been saved from ten thousand times ten thousand earths like this; —strange beasts of which we have no conception—all might be seen in heaven. The grand secret was to show John what there was in heaven. John learned that God glorified himself by saving all that his hands had made, whether beasts, fowls, fishes, or men; and he will gratify himself with them. Says one, “I cannot believe in the salvation of beasts.” Any man who would tell you that this could not be, would tell you that the revelations are not true. John heard the words of the beasts giving glory to God, and understood them. God who made the beasts could understand every language spoken by them. The four beasts were four of the most noble animals that had filled the measure of their creation, and had been saved from other worlds, because they were perfect; they were like angels in their sphere. We are not told where they came from, and I do not know; but they were seen and heard by John praising and glorifying God.<sup>6</sup>

#### ***4:9–11. The scene of praise***

Revelation 4 concludes in a tremendous symphony of praise. The Seer declares that the living creatures never cease to extol God (verse 8) and then states that “whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne . . . the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him” (verses 9–10). The idea is that all beings in heaven worship God continually. It is because God is the Creator of life, mortal and eternal, that He is worthy of all honor and glory.

But there is another dimension to this praise. Not only did God give life—“You created all things”—but “by your will . . . they have their being” (verse 11). He, at every moment, sustains all life. John saw green light streaming from the throne; it is this power “which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:13). Thus, He generates all life everywhere, even in the heavens.

The doxology sung by the animals ascribed to God might and power (Revelation 4:8). The elders now add glory and honor. His worthiness springs from the fact that according to His will, all things are and were created. In symbolic terms, the Seer conveys to the mind of the reader an understanding of God's greatness. He stands at the center of heaven surrounded by all creatures He has saved, including the faithful who rule with Him in power and authority. Light and life proceed out of Him. He is the essence of being and the principle of all existence—even eternal existence. The exalted ones recognize this and return to Him praise and glory forever.

It is because He has created all things that God has providence and claim on humankind. No matter the appearances to the contrary, even where Satan seems to dominate the scene, John never gives way to dualism. God and God alone created the world and continually overmasters it. John's witness to the Church was and is that this world will become fully God's once more in the glorious millennial era. John, therefore, asserts here and elsewhere in the revelation God's rule over nature and nations. Even so, God is an unmoving, silent, if enthroned, and eternal figure; it is another who orchestrates history and brings to pass the Father's will. The next chapter discloses that immediate and powerful ruler of celestial time and history.

## **Revelation 5: The Lamb Slain from the Foundation of the World**

### ***5:1–5. The scroll of destiny***

The vision carefully sets up the importance of the Lamb. It emphasizes but one aspect of His attributes, that of worthiness. It is here that He is apart from all the other creations of God. And it is this that allows Him and Him alone to disclose divine history by opening the seals. These verses, however, create a bit of a paradox: "conquering through suffering." Just how did the Lord do this? The letters to the seven churches make it clear that the Saints overcome though maintaining constant loyalty to God and the Lamb.

That parallels what the Savior did: maintain His loyalty, even at a most bitter cost, to the Father. Thus, though physically defeated, He was spiritually victorious. He submitted completely to the unjust penalty of death. As an innocent victim, He became a qualified representative to pay the debt of His people and thus free them from sin. In this way, while He was suffering defeat through death, He was simultaneously conquering sin and Satan and creating His kingdom of redeemed, impeccable souls. These two together were the basis of His worthiness to open the book (see Revelation 5:9–10). Therefore, though it seemed he was defeated by the cross, in reality the cross provided the means through which He built His eternal kingdom and brought therein His priests and priestesses.

### ***5:6–7. The Lamb slain***

This image carries the force of two theological motifs: those of death and resurrection. John likely had the Passover lamb in mind, tying the image to Israel's Egyptian Exodus, which stood as a prototype of ultimate victory through the Messiah.. Jewish apocalyptic writings looked to a conquering lamb that was

to appear in the days of the Final Judgment to destroy all evil. Through this powerful symbol, Revelation underscores a central theme of the New Testament: victory through sacrifice.

Indeed, it would appear that the Lamb was mortally wounded in the act of defeating His enemy, thus showing that the act not only redeemed but also conquered. The Lamb prevailed not by sovereign might but by sacrifice grounded in love (see John 16:33). He is worthy because He purchased God's people with His own blood, expressing love even to death. The vision's metaphor emphasizes both the high value of those purchased and the universality of the Lamb's action in redeeming all the faithful from death and hell.

As elsewhere in chapters 4 and 5, God does not move. He remains seated, not even handing the scroll to the Lamb. It is the Savior who takes the book and prepares to act. In this way, the scene again highlights the fact that the Savior is the active agent whose task it is to execute the Father's will. Though this section focuses on the point at which the Lamb picks up the book and prepares to open the scrolls, the JST change provides an important insight into how the Lamb is going to execute the Father's will through the power of the Twelve Apostles. Their broad authority of supervising all priesthood functions everywhere suggests a shared responsibility.

Thus, the twelve horns and eyes may symbolize priesthood in general, in all its keys and functions as the power of the Lamb on earth. Thus, He is called the Great High Priest, for He presides over all the orders of priesthood and their offices. All this power centers in the Lamb and flows from Him to His leaders and from them to all priesthood holders. By its authority, the Savior acts to bring about the Atonement and continues to minister its saving power in the world. This is the central deed in the scroll of destiny, for all history pivots on this one act. It alone allows for the complete fulfillment of the Father's will.

### ***5:8–14. The new song***

This section discloses the glory, power, and authority of the Father and the Son and the awe in which heaven holds them. Its primary function is fourfold: first, to introduce the Lamb; second, to declare His worthiness and preparation to execute the will of God; third, to show His investiture as God's agent; and, finally, to show that all creation stands behind the Lamb's execution of God's will.

In both chapters, God sits as a majestic and silent figure not coming into direct contact with mankind. He operates exclusively through His Son. Thus, Jesus is the Word and Will of God (see John 1:1–3). The Lamb was able to do what no one else could: to comprehend and execute the will of the Father. The vision specifies why the Lamb was able to open the book and look thereon: He was slain. Victory grew out of death and redemption out of blood. His sacrifice allowed the will of the Father to operate. As the vision of the eternal throne room continues from chapters 4 to 5, John sees on the right hand of God a scroll of unparalleled significance, "written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals" (Revelation 5:1). The scroll was full. Nothing had been left out, and no more could be added.

Through modern revelation we understand that it contains "the revealed will, mysteries, and the works of God; the hidden things of his economy concerning this earth during the seven thousand years of its

continuance, or its temporal existence” (Doctrine and Covenants 77:6). It is the scroll of destiny, the scroll containing God’s works, designs, and will. The scroll imagery supports a theme frequently found in apocalyptic literature that God predetermined the course and set the end of history. The scroll itself contains the prerecorded sovereign will of God, while the seals contain earth’s history for each temporal millennium.

The placement of souls is one of the major ways in which God orders history: these spirits act in ways He foreknows. Thus, God can order the course of history while still maintaining agency. The Lamb is a case in point. God foreordained the Atonement and chose the Savior to carry it out, yet the Lord was ever free to do His own will. God did not have to apply any coercion because the Son made the Father’s will His own.

The four hymns of chapters 4 and 5 also show the ever-expanding appreciation for the effect of the Lamb’s work. The first song was chanted by the elders alone (Revelation 4:11); in the next they were joined by the living creatures, then by the entire host of heaven, and finally, by the whole of creation. All witnessed the same thing: the greatness, power, glory, and might of the divine sovereigns.

The four praises underscore for John’s readers the central fact that anchors his book—that God and Christ are in control, everything that happens has been foreseen, foreordained, and prepared for, and that each of their acts is just. These hymns of praise also helped John’s readers understand the Lamb’s other qualities besides His worthiness: the result of His work and the honors that grew out of them. Revelation 5:9–14 brings the vision of the celestial throne room to a climax as the assembly chants three glorious hymns of praise.

By prefacing the coming struggle upon the earth with the vision of the awe heaven has for the overarching power and unity of the Father and the Son, the vision emphasizes that the physical catastrophes and human conflicts, all the war and bloodshed that will overtake the world, are watched by heaven and are not outside its control. God will see to it that justice has its day, wickedness falls, and God’s people are vindicated. Thus, the exclusive sovereignty of God and the Lamb leads all creation to praise them.

This part of the vision shows the Lamb assuming earthly control in his redemptive character as slain. One must not, however, overlook the seven horns possessed by the Lamb. He is omnipotent. With this imagery, John does more than invest the Savior with the attributes of deity; he redefines omnipotence. Though it is often felt to describe God’s power of unlimited coercion, the Seer reveals its true nature as the power of infinite persuasion growing out of the invincible strength of self-sacrificing love.

## Notes

1 See 1 Nephi 1; Ezekiel 1–2; Isaiah 6.

2 “History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844],” p. 104, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/110>.

3 See Revelation 2:10; 3:10; 17:3.

- 4 “Times and Seasons, 15 April 1842,” p. 760, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-15-april-1842/10>.
- 5 George Bradford Caird, *The Revelation of St. John* (London, UK: A&C Black, 1966), 63.
- 6 “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1523, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/166>; punctuation silently modernized.

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