

# JOSEPH SMITH

## AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

*The Prophet Joseph Smith helped remove some of the mystery surrounding the book of Revelation and showed its relevance in our day.*



**By David A. Edwards**

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**T**he book of Revelation was written in the first century A.D., but it was the last book of the New Testament to be accepted as canon (authoritative scripture). Some Christian scholars in later centuries questioned its authorship, objected to some of its doctrines (for instance, its teachings about the Millennium or its teaching that people would be judged according to their works), and found its Old Testament allusions and visionary narrative to be too strange and too different from other New Testament writings.

But certain irrefutable facts led to the book's general acceptance. For instance, many of the earliest Christian writers mentioned the book of Revelation, attributing it to John the Apostle, and quoted from it extensively and approvingly in their writings. Several other books whose canonicity was not disputed could not claim such evidence.

By the early 19th century, when God called Joseph Smith as the prophet of the Restoration, the book of Revelation was included in almost all versions of the Bible and was widely read. The imagery of John's vision stoked people's imaginations and gave rise to

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Because of Joseph Smith, we know that Nephi learned that John the Revelator was appointed and foreordained to write the visions of the last days now found in the book of Revelation (see 1 Nephi 14:19–29).

many different interpretations, as it continues to do today.

As the prophet of the dispensation of the fulness of times, Joseph Smith was in a unique position to shed light on the book of Revelation and help make it less daunting to read and understand. He did this in at least two ways: (1) he explained specific parts of the book of Revelation and expanded its overall context, and (2) he demystified it.

### **Explain and Expand**

The best example of Joseph Smith's providing an explanation of the book of Revelation is in Doctrine and Covenants 77. Received in March 1832, this revelation consists of a question-and-answer about specific verses in Revelation, chapters 4–11. The Prophet said that this explanation was revealed to him while he was engaged in his inspired translation of the Bible (see D&C 77, section introduction).

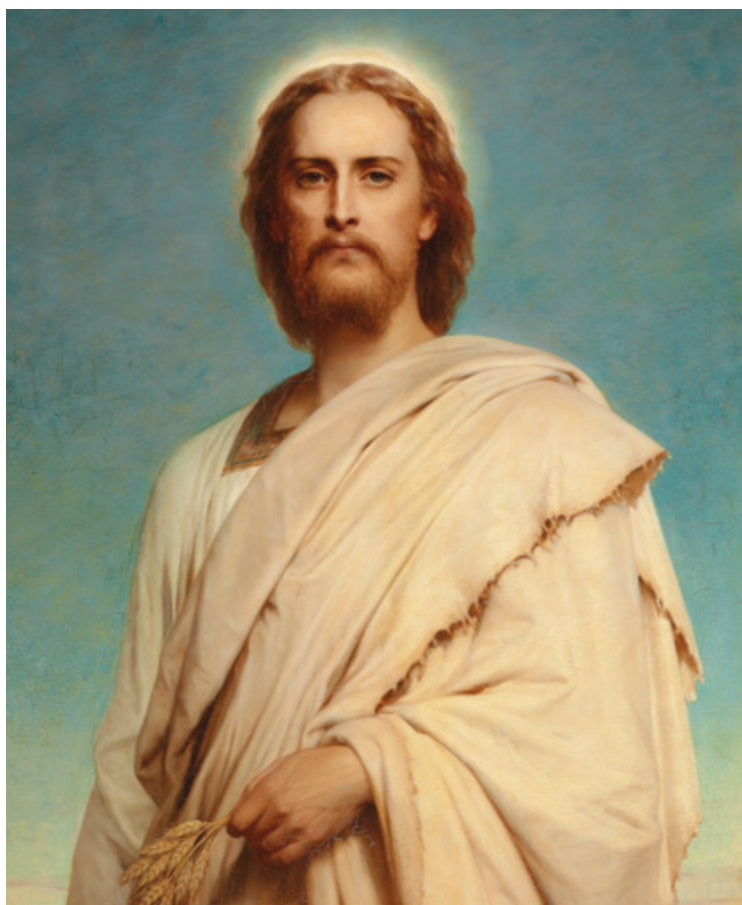
The questions are pretty straightforward, essentially asking, “What does this mean?” and “When will this happen?” The answers are likewise straightforward, though not always exhaustive. The answers sought and received by the Prophet Joseph Smith place various speculative interpretations out of bounds and generally help us see how John's vision relates to the latter-day work.

For example, this revelation helps us see that the seven seals in the book described by John beginning in chapter 5 of Revelation represent seven major time periods in earth's history and that the final two are the ones that deal with our day and beyond (see D&C 77:6–7), helping us see why John's vision spends so much more time with the sixth

and seventh seals. Joseph Smith's revelation then goes on to explain how some of the figures in the sixth seal (the four angels and the 144,000 servants sealed from the tribes of Israel) relate to the work of the Restoration and gathering in the last days (see D&C 77:9–11).

This explanatory revelation was, of course, not the only contribution the Prophet Joseph Smith made to our understanding of the book of Revelation from his translation of the Bible. As he worked, he sometimes was inspired to simply render the text more clearly,<sup>1</sup> but often he also was inspired to add or revise text in order to draw links to other scriptures so that they reinforce one another.<sup>2</sup> Part of Joseph Smith's work with the Bible, then, appears to have been to weave these common threads between the various books of scripture in order to present a unified tapestry of teachings and prophecies, and the book of Revelation is no exception.

In addition, through other revelations and translations, Joseph Smith expanded upon the context of the book of Revelation by showing that it follows a pattern of panoramic visions given to various prophets throughout the ages. In the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, we learn that Nephi, the brother of Jared, Moses, and Enoch all had similar visions showing the sweep of human history, including the end of the world. We also learn that although these other prophets were shown the end of the world, they were forbidden from sharing it with the world because John was foreordained to write it (see 1 Nephi 14:25–26). So, the Book of Mormon, brought forth



## ONE OF JOSEPH SMITH'S FAVORITE QUOTES FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10).

This statement of the angel to John was repeated often by the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is a key to understanding the nature of testimony as well as the need for prophecy and revelation in the Church and in our personal lives. For example, Joseph Smith said:

"Salvation cannot come without revelation; it is in vain for anyone to minister without it. No man is a minister of Jesus Christ without being a Prophet. No man can be a minister of Jesus Christ except he has the testimony of Jesus; and this is the spirit of prophecy" (*History of the Church*, 3:389).

through the Prophet Joseph Smith, teaches us that we were meant to have John's description of the events leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and that it is worthy of our study.

Because of such additional light revealed through Joseph Smith, we are better able to see the overarching theme of Revelation: that "there will be an eventual triumph on this earth of God over the devil; a permanent victory of good over evil, of the Saints over their persecutors, of the kingdom of God over the kingdoms of men and of Satan. . . . The victory [will] be achieved through Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> In addition, Joseph Smith emphasized that Revelation's message centers on Jesus Christ as the focus of our hope and teaches us that by being faithful to Him and His work in the latter days, we can overcome the world.

### Demystify

In a conference of the Church on April 8, 1843, the Prophet Joseph Smith said, "The book of Revelation is one of the plainest books God ever caused to be written."<sup>4</sup> This

statement may have shocked his listeners because it so thoroughly contradicted their own experience. So what did the Prophet mean by it?

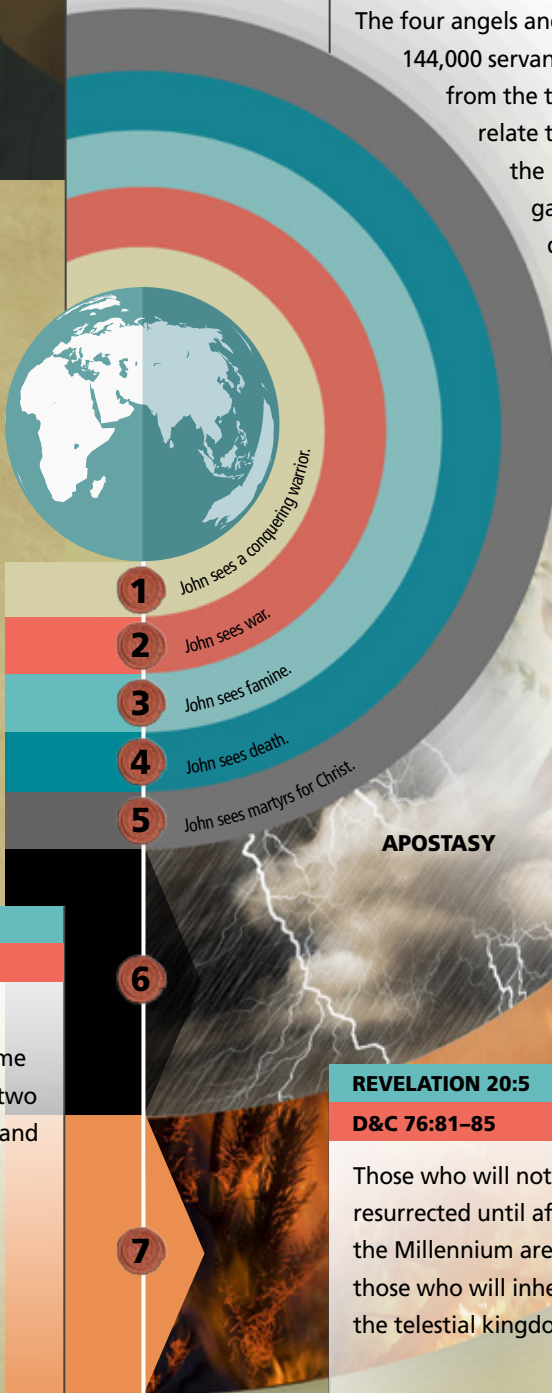
While Joseph Smith certainly did unlock some of the mysteries of the book of Revelation, in this address he also seems to have aimed to demystify it. He did this by showing that the book's cryptic imagery isn't always as cryptic as we may think and that a scripture's having impenetrable imagery doesn't necessarily bestow it with any greater importance or meaning for us.

For instance, elsewhere in the address, Joseph Smith showed that a careful reading of the book of Revelation can place limits on permissible interpretations. He pointed out that the first three chapters of the book deal with John's day and "things which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1) and that the rest of the book deals with "things which must be hereafter" (Revelation 4:1), or beyond John's day.<sup>5</sup> By placing some limits on what the imagery in these parts of the book could apply to, these time frames render them somewhat less mysterious.

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



Because of the additional light revealed through Joseph Smith, we are better able to understand Revelation's theme of the victory of Christ and His Saints over the devil and the world.



After the seventh seal is opened, Christ will return, and the wicked will be destroyed.

The earth will be cleansed, and the Millennium will begin (see D&C 88:89–110).

**REVELATION 7:1–8**  
**D&C 77:8–11**

The four angels and the 144,000 servants sealed from the tribes of Israel relate to the work of the Restoration and gathering in the last days.

**REVELATION 20:2**  
**1 NEPHI 22:26**

Satan will be bound during the Millennium “because of the righteousness of [Christ’s] people.”

**RESTORATION**

**RESURRECTION**

**APOSTASY**

**REVELATION 12:4, 7–9**  
**D&C 29:36–37; 76:25–29**

John’s vision briefly harks back to the pre-mortal war in heaven in order to highlight the ongoing war on earth between God’s and Satan’s forces.

**REVELATION 5–8**  
**D&C 77:6–7, 12**

The seven seals represent seven time periods. The final two deal with our day and beyond.

“The earth shall pass away so as by fire” (see D&C 43:32–33).

**REVELATION 20:5**  
**D&C 76:81–85**

Those who will not be resurrected until after the Millennium are those who will inherit the telestial kingdom.

“And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven” (Revelation 21:2). This could refer to the return of the city of Enoch (see Moses 7:63).

## REVELATION 20:11–13

### D&C 128:6–7

The books (on earth and in heaven) from which men will be judged by their works include records related to the salvation of the dead.

## REVELATION 17:5

### 1 NEPHI 13:6; 14:10

The entity identified by John as “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations” is the church of the devil. This church encompasses all forces opposed to Jesus Christ, His gospel, and His Church, for there are only two churches: the Church of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil.

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.<sup>6</sup> He also explained a principle related to such figures:

“Whenever 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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 that vision, we may neglect things that matter most.<sup>8</sup>

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 3:21; 21:7). ■

#### NOTES

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 with the glory of his Father*. And every eye shall see him; and they who pierced him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.” The words added by Joseph Smith (in italics) connect this verse with other scriptural teachings about Christ’s Second Coming—for instance, Matthew 16:27 (“the glory of his Father”) and Jude 1:14 (“ten thousands of his saints”).
3. Bible Dictionary, “Revelation of John.”
4. *History of the Church*, 5:342.
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).
7. *History of the Church*, 5:343.
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).

