

December 9–15, 23–29 (Revelation 1–22)

The Book of Revelation: A Testament to the Lamb of God

The key to understanding the book of Revelation is to simply remember why it exists: to testify of the mission, mercy, and majesty of Christ.

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The book of Revelation is certainly one of the more daunting books of scripture in our canon. Before they have even finished the opening chapter, readers encounter a blur of cities with strange names, stars and candlesticks, and a mysterious figure variously identified as “the Son of man” (verse 13), “the first and the last” (verse 11), and “Alpha and Omega” (verse 8), out of whose mouth appears “a sharp twoedged sword” (verse 16).

By the time readers cross the finish line of John’s vision 21 chapters later, they will have encountered—among other things—colored horses, a terrifying dragon, beasts from both the land and the sea, and scores of angels blowing trumpets and emptying vials upon the people of the earth.

Readers of the book of Revelation can come away anxious and fearful as they discern between both the literal and figurative depictions of what awaits those who live in the final days prior to the Lord’s Second Coming.

The Key to John’s Revelation: Jesus Christ

It is understandably easy to get caught up in the supernatural frenzy that runs through so much of John’s vision. After all, all of these symbols (wings, horns, eyes) and numbers (3½, 6, 7, 12, 144,000) beckon the reader to “crack the code” and decipher mysterious secrets hidden within John’s lengthy vision. However, to read the text of the book of Revelation as a

sort of intricate puzzle that must be solved risks going beyond the mark and missing the vision’s central message. After all, Joseph Smith once said that “the book of Revelation is one of the plainest books God ever caused to be written.”¹

A simple “key” that readers can use to understand the book of Revelation comes in the first five words of John’s record: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). When we read about the dragon, the beast, the vials, the trumpets, and so forth, we need to do so within the context of the work and mission of our Savior, Jesus Christ. All that comes after verse 1 needs to be read through the lens of “What does this tell me about Jesus?” This mind-set actually goes to the heart of what the term *revelation* in the title means. In the original Greek, the word for “revelation” is *apocalypsis*, from which we get our word *apocalypse*. But unlike the modern use of *apocalypse* to refer to the end of the world, *apocalypsis* means “to unveil something that is hidden.” What John’s vision

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ILLUSTRATION OF CHRIST WITH LAMB BY JUSTIN KUNZ



What can we learn from Revelation 5, where Christ is represented by both a lion and a lamb?

serves to do, then, is to “unveil” Jesus Christ—to *reveal* his true nature, character, and mission.

Thus the book of Revelation is a vision that gradually “unveils” elements of the Savior and His atoning mission through the use of various images and symbols. One of the most important of these is the image of Jesus as a “Lamb,” a symbol that appears near the beginning of John’s vision and is a continual presence (although not always in the foreground) throughout. By the time John reaches the climactic end of his vision, the true nature and character of the Lamb will be revealed.

Revelation 5: Jesus as the “Conquering Lamb”

One of the most vivid of these unveilings comes in Revelation 5. Here John stands before the throne of God. The Father, sitting on the throne, holds a sealed book (really a scroll) in His right hand, and a “strong angel” asks the question, “Who is worthy to open the book?”—that is, break the seals (verse 2). John weeps as he beholds that no person is found worthy to open and read the book (see verse 4).

John is informed by one of the elders that “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath

prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (verse 5). Yet when John finally sees this “Lion,” it is no lion at all. Rather, what John sees is a “Lamb as it had been slain,” who approaches the throne and takes the book from the Father.

Those gathered round the throne begin to sing praises to the Lamb:

“Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

“And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth” (verses 9–10).

Some see in this episode Jesus accepting the divine role of Savior in a premortal setting, while others understand it as Jesus returning to the presence of the Father following His sojourn in mortality.

What fascinates me as a reader of the book of Revelation is the paradox used to represent Jesus as two contrary animals, a lion and a lamb. It is difficult to think of two more different animals to pair together. Lions represent strength and regality, and they had a particular connection with the tribe of Judah (see Genesis 49:9; 1 Kings 10:19–20), from which it was prophesied the Messiah Himself would descend. A lamb, on the other hand, is an animal often associated with docility and meekness, in every way the antithesis of the lion. As if to emphasize the meekness of the Lamb even further, this particular Lamb is slain, or sacrificed, and it is the shedding of the blood of the Lamb that sets in motion the events that John will view next.

Revelation 5, with its images of Jesus as both a “Lion” and a “Lamb,” presents its readers with a riddle of sorts: Can victory be obtained through

submission? Can one conquer through meekness? Can life be obtained through death? John's vision will be, in large part, an attempt to provide answers to these riddles.

Revelation 7: Jesus as the "Redemptive Lamb"

In Revelation 7, the scene shifts to a group of 144,000 (12,000 from each tribe of Israel) who are "sealed" in their foreheads. In conjunction with this scene, John also sees a crowd of people, so many that "no man could number" them (verse 9). This group, clothed in white, stands before the Lamb and collectively praises the Lamb. John is then told that these people represent those "which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (verse 14). Here in Revelation 7 John learns that the blood of the Lamb plays a further important function—namely, to cleanse the innumerable host who stand before the Lamb.

John's vision again presents its readers with a riddle. When blood touches clothing, the blood typically stains it. An article of clothing that is "washed" in blood should turn red. But, in this case, the blood of the Lamb turns a stained article of clothing white, signifying the redemptive power of the Lamb. This serves as an inspiring and hopeful symbol of Jesus's Atonement; He is able to take those who repent and transform them into something that they never could be on their own.

Revelation 13: Jesus and the "Parodied Lamb"

In Revelation 12, John sees a dragon cast out from heaven. The dragon, he learns, is "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan" (verse 9). In

the next chapter, John learns that this dragon is associated with two beasts, one from the sea and one from the earth (see 13:1, 11). John describes the first beast in terms that are eerily similar to the conquering and redemptive Lamb that John has witnessed thus far:

"And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority.

"And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.

"And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast" (verses 2–4).

What John witnesses here is a parody or counterfeit of the true Lamb. Like the true Lamb, this beast was critically wounded and should be dead yet isn't, and like the true Lamb who serves at the behest of God sitting upon His throne, this beast serves the dragon.

With this scene, John's vision warns readers that they have reached a crisis of decision—each of us must choose which being, the beast or the

The blood of the Lamb cleanses the innumerable host, symbolizing how our Savior's Atonement can cleanse those who repent.





The Church is compared to Christ's bride, reminding us of the love the Savior has for us.

ILLUSTRATION OF CHURCH BY JUSTIN KUNZ

Lamb, we will align ourselves with. The adversary is quite adept at taking truth and reconstructing it in a way that serves his needs while still appearing to be true. Only by a close examination, only through additional witnesses, can we be confident that we have chosen wisely.

Revelation 19–22: Jesus as the “Divine Lamb”

In Revelation 19, the scene shifts once again to a large wedding banquet, celebrating the marriage of the Lamb to His bride, “arrayed in fine linen, clean and white” (verse 8). It is from this scene that the true nature of the Lamb is finally made known, as John witnesses “heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True” (verse 11). The Savior, now fully revealed as “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords” (verse 16), falls upon the beast, slaying its followers with the “sword” that “proceeded out of his mouth”—the word of God (verse 21). Evil is conquered, and the New Jerusalem is established upon the “new,” celestial earth (see 21:1–2). In the midst of this scene rests “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (22:3).

For a dark and at times horrifying vision, the book of Revelation ends with one of the most beautiful and poignant images in all of scripture:

“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

“He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (21:6–7).

Choosing to Follow the Lamb

While the book of Revelation can feel intimidating and appear dark and foreboding, with its chaotic imagery and intense scenes of violence, focusing

on the Lamb allows us to keep John’s central theme front and center—this is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” What is revealed is Jesus’s sacrifice, His patience, and His love for each of us, that we are all “lambs” seeking our shepherd.

John’s vision reminds us that the stakes are as high as they can be and that the day when we must, in Joshua’s words, “choose you this day whom ye will serve” (Joshua 24:15) is here. Will we choose the Lamb, who has given us everything, or will we choose the dragon, who seeks only to make us as miserable as he is? (see 2 Nephi 2:27). The choice may seem, at first glance, a difficult one, as the world can be an alluring arena. But the ultimate message of Revelation, the one that John desires that we remember long after we finish his record, is simply this: Jesus wins! ■

NOTE

1. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 5:342.

DISCOVER MORE

For additional insights, read “Messages of the Book of Revelation for Latter-day Saints” by Richard D. Draper in the digital version of this issue in the Gospel Library app or at ensign.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

SYMBOLISM IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The book of Revelation is filled with symbolism that can be difficult to interpret. The following charts can be used as a tool to help you study and understand John's vision. The information comes from a variety of sources, including from scholars both inside and outside the Church.

Numbers

- **7:** completion; a number often taken to represent God and His divine Creation (Revelation 5:6).
- **3½:** incomplete; half of 7 (Revelation 11:9); sometimes expressed as 1,260 days (3½ years; Revelation 11:3), 42 months (3½ years; Revelation 11:2), or "a time, and times, and half a time" (Revelation 12:14).
- **4:** pertaining to the earth; four corners/four directions (Revelation 7:1).
- **6:** divine counterfeit; a number that is close to 7 but comes up short.
- **666:** likely representing the counterfeit trinity of the dragon and the two beasts—they are a "false godhead"; historically it likely referred to the Roman emperor Nero (Revelation 13:18).
- **12:** pertaining to Israel; twelve tribes of Israel; New Jerusalem measures 12,000 stadia (Revelation 7:5–8).
- **1,000:** a number signifying "a lot" of something (Revelation 5:11).
- **144,000:** (12 x 12 x 1,000), the number of the elect, perhaps signifying that there are a lot of them (Revelation 7:4).

Beings

- **Lamb:** Jesus Christ (Revelation 5:6).
- **Dragon:** Satan (Revelation 12:3).
- **Beast from the sea:** false Messiah (Revelation 13:1).
- **Beast from the land:** false prophet or false Holy Spirit (Revelation 13:11).
- **Harlot:** Babylon, the great and abominable church (Revelation 17:3; see also 1 Nephi 13:5–6).
- **Bride:** the Church of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7).

Other

- **Eyes:** knowledge or wisdom (Revelation 5:6; Doctrine and Covenants 77:4).
- **Horns:** power or authority (Revelation 5:6).
- **Wings:** motion or speed (Revelation 4:8; Doctrine and Covenants 77:4).
- **White:** righteousness or conquest (Revelation 6:2).
- **Red:** violence or bloodshed (Revelation 6:4).
- **Black:** ominous foreshadowing (Revelation 6:5).
- **Pale:** light green color; sickness or death (Revelation 6:8).
- **Trumpets:** warnings of judgment (Revelation 8:2).
- **Vials:** judgment (Revelation 16:1).
- **Seals:** belonging to someone (Revelation 7:3–4).
- **Scroll/book:** God's plan of redemption (Revelation 5:1).



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