Lesson 45
Revelation

Background
The article on the book of Revelation in the Bible Dictionary is excellent. You should read it before you read the lesson material. In addition, here is additional information that may be helpful. With a text as foreign to our way of writing and reading as Revelation is, we almost always need help.

So far in our New Testament study this year, we have seen three kinds of writings in the New Testament: (1) the Gospels, which bear testimony of Christ and his life; (2) letters to congregations of early Saints or individual members, letters that preach the gospel in the context of dealing with problems in those congregations; and (3) doctrinal expositions (Romans and Hebrews). Revelation is unlike any of those. Apocalyptic revelations like the book of Revelation were not uncommon in the early Church. Several others are still extant. But Revelation was the only one of them canonized.

Canonization wasn’t arbitrary. It happened over time as early Christians came together and agreed on which of the texts they shared were inspired and inspiring. It was a combined judgment of many thoughtful people over almost 300 years, and we assume that judgment was led by the Holy Ghost. So the fact that early Christians included Revelation among their books of scripture says a lot about it.
We say that Revelation is an apocalyptic book, the only early apocalypse that was canonized. But the Greek word *apokalypsis* means “revelation,” so it is redundant to speak of Revelation as apocalyptic. Not just any revelation, though, is apocalyptic. In particular, apocalyptic literature tells us things that we could not know except by revelation, and in particular it tells us of the last days. Apocalyptic literature, therefore, tells us of some of the mysteries of God, things that are secret.

There are various ways in which something can be secret. It may be secret simply because people don’t know about it, not because it is intentionally hidden. We know that we do not have a record of everything taught either in Jesus’s Palestinian ministry or in his American ministry. For example, we don’t have a record of his teachings during the forty days after his resurrection, and the Book of Mormon tells us explicitly that it doesn’t include everything he said (3 Nephi 19:32; 26:6, 16; 28:13–14).

But some things are secret on purpose. In the New Testament, Jesus says that he holds some teachings back from those outside his inner circle (Mark 4:10–11), and the early Christian Church knew of this practice. In addition to the documents that were simply lost because of the problems of preserving writing before the invention of the printing press, early Christians believed that some things were held back, kept secret and not committed to writing. For example, Clement of Alexandria (late second century AD) claimed to know teachings that Jesus revealed to his disciples but that were handed down orally rather than in writing.¹ In the early third century, Origen, also of Alexandria, argued that...
the prophets and apostles knew more than could be written down.  
He says that Jesus knew divine secrets “and made them known to a few.”  
Origen seems at least to have in mind Paul’s claim in 1 Corinthians 2:7: “we speak the wisdom of God in a secret, even the hidden wisdom that God decreed for our glory before the world” (translation revised). This reservation of some things from wide distribution was not unique to the Savior’s time or to his disciples immediately after him. For example, 1 Nephi 14:25 shows the Lord forbidding the prophet to write some things, and Ezekiel 3:1–3, where the prophet is given a roll (scroll) to eat and then told to speak, may be meant to indicate that some things can be taught orally but not written down.

Revelation is secret in neither of those ways, though. It has not been kept from the public either by being unknown or by being kept a secret on purpose. But it is clearly secret in yet another way: it is secret because its metaphors and symbols make it difficult to understand. It is certainly secret to most contemporary Christians. Perhaps that is another way of keeping a secret on purpose: put it in language that only the initiated can understand.

One way to think about how to read Revelation is to think of it as a temple text, a book that relies on the temple for its meaning. In both ancient and modern times, the temple has been a secret, a mystery, and it has been secret in each of the three ways mentioned: it has been unknown to others, it has been hidden from them, it has been known by them but not understood.

Ignatius of Antioch (also of the second century) wrote that the Father had entrusted only Jesus with the temple’s holy
of holies and with the secrets of God. By writing of the secrets of God at the same time he writes of the holy of holies, Ignatius suggests that the secrets of God had to do with the temple, which seems also to have been the tradition among other early Christians. For example, the early Church historian Eusebius (second half of the third century, first half of the fourth) said that both James the brother of Christ and John the apostle were high priests, and Eusebius clearly understood the high priest as a person officiating in the temple. Whether Eusebius was right is a good question. But right or not, he believed that there was an important association between early Christianity and the Jerusalem temple. It may be profitable, therefore, to think of Revelation, like the book of Ezekiel, as a revelation about the temple. As you read it, you may understand better if you watch for temple symbolism.

Keep in mind, however, that the temple used for the symbols of this book was the temple in Jerusalem rather than a modern temple. That makes being on the lookout for temple symbolism difficult. For example, perhaps the most important symbol of the ancient temple was the entry of the high priest into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. The holy of holies represented the divine world, and the court outside the holy of holies represented this world. But we may overlook that when we read Revelation because it is not part of our experience and understanding.

Thus, part of the difficulty we have reading Revelation may be twofold: (1) it assumes that its readers are part of an audience that knows that there are secret—“not widely known” might be better—teachings and that this book is
like many other books that deal with those teachings; and (2) it makes its points using symbolism from the Jerusalem temple, and we are not familiar with that symbolism.

Revelation was written at a time when the Church was suffering persecution and when it expected the second coming soon. In fact, early Christians often spoke of the second coming as “The Revelation,” using the same Greek word used as the name of this book: *apokalypsis*. Christ’s second coming would reveal something that the world did not know, a secret, namely that Jesus, whom the world crucified, is Creator, King, and Judge. The book of Revelation tells us that in it we can find “hidden secrets,” things not known by those outside the Church and, perhaps, not by all of those within the Church.

However, the most important secrets of Revelation are not matters of arcane symbolism or things that require special knowledge or education, any more than the secret of the second coming is. An angel told Nephi that the things John wrote are “plain and pure, and most precious and easy to the understanding of all men” (1 Nephi 14:23)—though it may be important to remember that the angel was speaking to someone who said something similar of Isaiah (2 Nephi 25:4). Speaking of the symbols in Revelation, Joseph Smith said:

> 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 [e.g., D&C 77 and D&C 130], otherwise we are not responsible or accountable for our belief in it.
He also said:

It is not very essential for the elders to have knowledge in relation to the meaning of beasts, and heads and horns, and other figures made use of in the revelations; still, it may be necessary, to prevent contention and division and do away with suspense. If we get puffed up by thinking that we have much knowledge, we are apt to get a contentious spirit, and correct knowledge is necessary to cast out that spirit.

The evil of being puffed up with correct (though useless) knowledge is not so great as the evil of contention.7

Even though we are told by revelation what some of the figures or symbols in the book of Revelation mean, according to Joseph Smith that knowledge is “not very essential,” given to us so we can avoid contention. The better approach to Revelation would be not to worry about mapping each symbol onto some determined referent, but to learn what that symbol or its context teaches.

It may help you to keep track of what you are reading if you notice that Revelation is arranged in seven groups of seven, with an introduction and a conclusion:8

1. Introduction to the book as a whole (1:1–8)
2. Seven prophecies to the seven Churches
   - Introduction (1:9–20)
   - Ephesus (2:1–7)
   - Smyrna (2:8–11)
   - Pergamum (2:12–17)
Thyatira (2:18–29)
Sardis (3:1–6)
Philadelphia (3:7–13)
Laodicia (3:14–22)

3. The seven seals
   Introduction (4:11–5:14)
   The Heavenly Court (4:1–11)
   The book with seven seals and the Lamb (5:1–14)
   The white horse (6:1–2)
   The red horse (6:3–4)
   The black horse (6:5–6)
   The yellow-green horse (6:7–8)
   The souls under the altar (6:9–11)
   The earthquake (6:12–17)
   The seventh, encompassing seal
      The Church on earth preserved by God (7:1–18)
      The Church in heaven glorifying God (7:9–17)
      The seventh seal (8:1)

4. The seven trumpets
   Introduction (8:2–6)
   The earth is set on fire (8:7)
   The sea turns to blood (8:8–9)
   The rivers and springs become bitter (8:10–12)
   The heavenly bodies are darkened (8:13)
   The locusts (9:1–12)
   The horsemen (9:13–11:14)
   The seventh, encompassing trumpet
The angel with a small open scroll (10:1–11)
The measuring of the temple and the two witnesses (11:1–14)

5. The Dragon and the Lamb
   The woman with child (12:1–2)
   The dragon (12:3–6)
   The beast rising out of the sea (13:1–10)
   The second beast: the false prophet rising out of the earth (13:11–18)
   The Lamb and the virgins (14:1–5)
   The seven angels, one of them the Son of Man (14:6–16)
   The seventh, encompassing sign (14:7)

6. The seven bowls of wrath are poured out
   Introduction: those who have conquered the Anti-Christ sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb (15:1–16:1)
   On the earth (16:2)
   On the sea (16:3)
   On the waters (16:4–7)
   On the sun (16:8–9)
   On the throne of the beast (16:10–11)
   On the Euphrates (16:12–16)
   The seventh, encompassing bowl (16:17)

7. Babylon
   Introduction (16:18–21)
   The description of Babylon (17:1–6)
   The explanation of Babylon (17:7–18)
   The fall of Babylon (18:1–8)
The mourning for Babylon (18:9–20)
The final ruin of Babylon (18:21–24)
The song of praise at her fall (19:1–5)
The seventh, encompassing stage (19:6)

8. The second coming and the end of history
   Introduction (19:6–10)
   The rider on the white horse (19:11–16)
   The supper of God (19:17–18)
   The angel of the abyss (20:1–3)
   The millennial first resurrection and victory over Satan (20:4–10)
   The judgment (20:11–15)
   The New Jerusalem (21:1–22:5)

9. Recapitulation (22:6–21)
   The witness of the angel (22:6–9)
   The time of retribution is at hand (22:10–15)
   The witness of Jesus (22:16–20)
   Closing (22:21)

This framework may help you read Revelation, but it is only a framework. Additional elements should be placed on it, for example, Revelation 1:9–3:22, where we have a vision of the resurrected Christ. Almost anyone trying to outline the book is likely to outline it at least somewhat differently. Notice also that this outline doesn’t take account of Joseph Smith’s inspired rewriting of parts, especially of chapter 12. Those inspired changes make quite a difference in places. Thus, this outline has its limitations, but it may be helpful in spite of them.
As with several other New Testament books, there is scholarly debate over the authorship of Revelation. The arguments are seldom naïve or uncomplicated. Parts of the book, for example, have been attributed to John the Baptist, which, if we think about the ways in which other scriptures have been written using earlier works, is not incompatible with John the Beloved being the final author. But as with other such disputes, for us it is enough that this is a canonized book of scripture from which we can learn. So we will use the traditional attribution of this book to John.

According to tradition, John wrote Revelation in AD 95–96 while on the isle of Patmos, a very small island off of what is now the Turkish coast. Tradition says that he was banished there by the Roman governor. If so, he may have been the only prisoner on the island because, though we have records of banishments to other islands in the area, there are no records of banishments to Patmos. It is possible that he went to Patmos for refuge rather than because he was banished.

Revelation 1

For the questions on verses 1–8, use the JST in the appendix of your LDS Bible.

**Verses 1–2:** Why was the revelation given? Why is it important for us to know that?

The word *of* in the phrase “of Jesus Christ” can be read two ways, as either “about” or “from.” Which do you think most likely? Can it mean both?
What do “things which must shortly come to pass” (verse 1) and “the time of the coming of the Lord draweth nigh” (verse 3) tell us about when the early Christians expected the second coming? Does that tell us anything about our own expectations? What is different for us?

Verse 3: Why is Revelation as important in our day as it was in John’s?

Why is it fitting that it ended up as the last book in the Bible, although it probably was written before the Gospel of John?

Verses 4–5: What addition does Joseph Smith make in verse 4?

What does he change in identifying the faithful witness? Why is that important?

Verse 6: In what sense can we become kings and priests to God through his atonement? Why is it important for us to realize this?

Verses 7–8: What does Joseph Smith add about the Savior’s entourage at his second coming?

In what way is Jesus “the beginning and the end” in the history of this world? (Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the language in which the New Testament was originally written.)

Verses 9–10: What does John tell us concerning the occasion for the revelation? Why is it instructive that the revelation came on Sunday? Does this have any meaning for our own Sabbath worship?
Verse 11: All of these churches (except Thyatira) are located on map your LDS Bible maps. Ephesus is the only city we have discussed earlier (although Laodicea is mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Colossians).

Verses 2–16: Consider as a whole the verses we have been looking at individually.

It is interesting to compare John’s description of the Savior with Joseph Smith’s description in D&C 110:1–4. How are they alike? How different?

What do the seven golden candlesticks and the seven stars signify? (See verse 20 and the footnote.)

Why might the Lord appear in this manner?

What is added to the account by the use of symbolism?

Where is Christ in relationship to the seven candlesticks? What does this tell us? In what way is he still in the midst of his Church today?

Verse 17: Considering John’s previous acquaintance with the Lord, both during Jesus’s lifetime and after his resurrection, what is interesting about John’s reaction to his appearance? How do you explain his reaction?

Revelation 2–3

As you read through these condemnations and promises held out for the future for the early Saints, ask yourself how each relates to us today.
Revelation 2

**Verses 1–7:** This is addressed to Ephesus: What does the Lord praise in Ephesus (verses 2, 3, and 6)?

The Nicolaitans may have been a group of Gnostics (a name applied to a group of several different Christian heresies). They seem to have approved of eating meat offered to idols—in direct contradiction to the decree of the Jerusalem Council—and to have believed that immorality was not sinful because what one does with one’s body doesn’t matter. What might they have appealed to in Christian belief or practice to try to justify these beliefs and practices?

For what does Christ chastise the Ephesians? (“First love” may refer to their feelings for each other, or for the Savior.)

What is interesting about the reference to the tree of life? Is this the same tree of life mentioned in Genesis 2–3?

Does this add more light to the Lord’s instructions in Genesis 3:22–24?

What insight does the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 11:21–22) add to our understanding of the term?

**Verses 8–11:** What does the Lord foretell for the Saints in Smyrna? The Jews there were known to be very aggressive in their persecution of the Christians. Why would the Lord say they were not Jews? (How does Paul define a Jew in Romans 2:28–29)?

The crown is one made from laurel leaves for the winners of athletic contests. How is this an appropriate symbol?
In what way were these Saints poverty-stricken? In what way were they rich?

What promise is given to them for their own futures?

What is meant by the second death? (Compare Alma 12:16, 32 and Helaman 14:18.) Who participates in the second death?

**Verses 12–17:** Pergamos or Pergamum was the ancient capital of Asia, built on a cone-shaped hill rising 1,000 feet above the surrounding valley. Its name in Greek means “citadel.” The Lord speaks of Satan ruling from there probably because it was the center of emperor worship in Asia. One of the most outstanding constructions of the ancient world, the altar of Zeus, was there and may be what verse 13 calls “Satan’s seat” (verse 13) because of its shape.

What heresy had arisen in this city? What was the original purpose of manna in the Old Testament? What is probably meant, then, by hidden (sacred) manna?

What is meant by the white stone and the new name (see D&C 130:4–11)?

**Verse 18:** Founded initially as a military outpost, Thyatira was noted for its many trade guilds. This was the original home of Lydia, the woman who traded in purple cloth, joined the Church in Philippi, and housed Paul and his companions in her home.

What problem had crept into the Church in Thyatira? *Jezebel* is probably a name referring to a prominent woman in the congregation who was leading them astray, as Queen
Jezebel did in Israel during the days of Elijah. (Note the Joseph Smith revision of verse 22.)

What is the promise given to those who overcome (JST Revelation 2:26–27)? The reference to the “morning star” is a reference to Christ (2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16). Why would he be called the “morning star”—a term used today for the planet Venus that appears in the east, early in the morning?

Revelation 3

Verses 1–6: Sardis was a city of great wealth and fame, the capital of ancient Lydia. Twice in its history it had been conquered because of its lack of watchfulness. How does John use the people’s history to warn them of their future? What does it mean to think one lives and yet be dead? Are we ever guilty of this? What promise is given to those in Sardis? Why should we care what promise they receive?

Verses 7–13: What does Jesus mean by the “key of David?” What does he open that no man can shut, or shut that no man can open? (This appears to be a reference to Isaiah 22:21–15.)

What is signified by the name written upon the Christians? How do we take upon ourselves the name of Christ?

This is the first reference in Revelation to the “new Jerusalem.” What is meant by this term?

What does it mean to be a pillar in the temple?

Verses 14–22: Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire, known for its banking establishments,
medical school, and textile industry. All of these are reflected in Christ’s rebuke (verses 17–18).

Why would Christ be called the great Amen? *Amen* means, literally, “So let it be” or “I agree.” Is that the meaning we should think about to understand this title, or should we think about it in some other way?

The lukewarm water may refer to a water system that originated in hot springs in Hierapolis, a distance from the city, which, by the time it arrived in Laodicea, was tepid and of little use for medicinal purposes.

Why is it so difficult to work with one who is lukewarm (apathetic)? How do we manifest apathy in our religious life?

How is rebuking and chastening a sign of love?

**JST Revelation 12**

The Prophet Joseph revised the entire twelfth chapter of Revelation, even changing the sequence of verses. Use his translation in the appendix of your LDS scriptures. Some of the symbolism in this chapter is not clear at present, but enough of the symbols are known and time-honored to help us sort through the rest.

**Verses 1–5:** Who is the woman depicted in verse 1? (See verse 7.)

What does the number twelve refer to in the Old Testament? In the New?

What is the child that the woman brings into existence with great travail (verse 7)?

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Who is the “man child”?

What is the travail involved in bringing forth the man child?

What is the “rod of iron”? (verse 3). (Compare 1 Nephi 15:23–24.)

When was the man child caught up unto God and his throne? How does this give us a time frame for what follows?

Who is represented by the red dragon?

**Verses 6–11:** This introduces a reference to the premortal existence and the defeat of Lucifer in the war in heaven.

Who is Michael? The word *Satan* in Hebrew means “the accuser.” We usually think of Satan as our tempter. How is he our accuser? Does understanding him as our accuser change the way we see our relation to God? How is Satan to be overcome eventually (verse 11)?

Why are both the atonement *and* our testimony of it needful in Satan’s defeat?

**Verses 12–17:** Look at these verses in general terms rather than at their specifics. What does the future hold for God’s people? At John’s time? In our own? What did that say about how ancient Christians ought to have lived their lives? What does it tell us about how to live our lives today?