

the rest of the vision: trumpets bring destruction upon one third of the earth (see chapters 8, 9, and 11), and the vials bring total annihilation to all wickedness (16:1–17).

THE FIFTH SEAL (6:9–11)

Greek Text

9 Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα, εἶδον ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον. 10 καὶ ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλη λέγοντες, “Ἐως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 11 καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἑκάστω στολὴ λευκὴ, καὶ ἔρρηθή αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτένεσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί. [SBLGNT]

King James Translation

9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: 10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? 11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

New Rendition

9 And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they had. 10 And they cried with a loud voice saying, “How long, Holy and True Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” 11 And each of them was given a white robe and they were told to rest a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brethren, who were going to die even as they had, should be complete.

Translation Notes and Comments

6:9 *fifth seal*: According to D&C 77:7, this corresponds to the fifth dispensational period, roughly from the birth of Christ to the opening of this, the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times. It would include the events of the Reformation that preceded the actual restoration of the fullness of the gospel. Since this period spans some 1,800 years, it highlights and underscores the schematic and nonliteral nature of “thousand-year” dispensations.

under the altar: During sacrificial rites belonging to the tabernacle, the blood of the victim, symbolic of its life, was poured at the altar's base and seeped beneath it (Lev. 4:7; 17:11). John's view of the souls of the martyrs as being under the altar probably echoes this idea.⁵⁵ Of course the souls of these martyred Saints do not literally dwell under the altar—they are in Paradise,⁵⁶ but symbolically, they, like their Savior, had given their lives for a righteous cause. That the souls of the Saints reside there emphasizes the idea that, in spite of the fact that they have suffered physical death, they are watched over by God and ultimately under his care. Thus, like their Lord before them, what seems like an earthly defeat will turn out to be their ultimate victory.⁵⁷

testimony which they held / testimony which they had: Verbs in the aorist tense have dominated John's narrative setting, but he concludes this verse with an imperfect tense, ἣν εἶχον (*hēn eichon*), "which they had." That tense refers to both an action that began in the past that continues through the present and also to duration of an act. In this way, he points to the enduring strength of the testimony these Saints held. The strength and endurance of that testimony now provided the reason for the Saints' act of crying aloud in 6:10. The sense of the verb shows that they maintained their testimony in spite of the opposition against them and therefore had a right to be avenged.

As we have seen especially in chapters 2 and 3, the Lord promised eternal blessings to those who overcome. Because of the broad use of that word, it is possible that there were souls under the altar in addition to those who were literally killed for the faith. They likely included those who suffered persecution for their loyalty to Christ yet continued faithful in their testimony. In that way, they have become one with the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world; having shared in his suffering, they will also share in his destiny.⁵⁸

6:10 How long, O Lord / How long, Holy and True Master: The noun translated "Lord" in the KJV is δεσπότης (*despotēs*), "master." In Revelation, the word implies one having both might and majesty.⁵⁹ The martyrs'

55. This entire section echoes *1 En.* 47:4 and *4 Ezra* 4:35–37. See also Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, 524–25; Charles, *Exegetical Commentary*, 1:174.

56. For a discussion of paradise, see Translation Notes on 2:7.

57. Beale, *Revelation*, 391–92.

58. Compare Revelation 13:54; Moses 7:47; Beale, *Revelation*, 390.

59. The word has a long and varied history in Greek literature and history, sometimes referring to those who were respectable (sixth century) and sometimes to those who were cruel and autocratic (fifth century). See *TDNT*, 2:44. In Revelation, it is used to

use of the title suggests the awe-inspired, if severe, reverence in which they held the Lord. It also betrays their firm belief that he would “vindicate his holiness, which had been outraged by [their] murder,” indeed, persons for whom he was personally responsible.⁶⁰ Their question was not if *vindication* would come—they were certain it would—but when.

judge and avenge our blood: The verb ἐκδικέω (*ekdikeō*), “avenge,” denoted the procurement of justice for someone. In the context of this verse, “our blood” stands as its direct object and therefore looks specifically at divine vengeance for what has been done to these Saints. The challenge of this verse is how to understand the prepositional phrase ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (*ek tōn katoikountōn epi tēs gēs*), “from the inhabitants of the earth.” Most commentaries understand it as the martyrs’ appeal to God to take vengeance upon the inhabitants of the earth. Given the fact that the phrase is used nine times in Revelation and always to denote those who oppose the Lord, the translation works (see 3:10 [them that dwell upon the earth]; 6:10 [them that dwell upon the earth]; 8:13 [inhabitants of the earth]; 11:10 [twice] [them that dwell upon the earth]; 13:8 [all that dwell upon the earth], 14 [twice] [them that dwell upon the earth]; and 17:8 [they that dwell upon the earth]). Some, however, suggest that it could be an appeal by the martyrs to avenge their deaths, which were caused by those on the earth.⁶¹

The noun αἷμα (*haima*), “blood,” is used here symbolically to connote violent death and emphasizes the idea that the Saints were hunted down and brutally killed.⁶² According to the Old Testament, the blood of those innocently destroyed cries to God for vengeance.⁶³ It does this to invoke Jehovah to act in his capacity as the דֹרֵשׁ דָּמִים (*dōrēš dāmīm*), the “avenger of blood,” who brings recompense to his people (see Ps. 9:12; 72:14).

The demand of the Saints for vengeance, on the surface, seems out of place. It is clear from the text that this is exactly what the four horsemen have been exacting.⁶⁴ Such, however, is not the case. The actions of the

emphasize the good and respectable with the bad overtones transformed to convey reverence and respect.

60. Moffatt, “Revelation,” 391.

61. For discussion, see Aune, *Revelation*, 383–84.

62. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. John T. Willis, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976–2004), 3:241–43. (hereafter cited as *TDOT*).

63. *TDOT*, 3:249–50.

64. Aune, *Revelation*, 390.

riders are the consequence of human iniquity, not of divine imposition. It is important to note that the cry of the martyrs is for vengeance, not revenge. The latter carries the strong implication of vindictiveness while the former appeals for recompense for an injury unjustly received. Those of John's readership converted from paganism would have related to the cry of the martyrs, for they believed that punishment for wrongdoing was not a spontaneous or unilateral decision by God alone. Rather, it was God's direct response to the appeal of those whose lives had been unjustly violated.⁶⁵

6:11 white robes were given unto every one of them / each of them was given a white robe: The Lord gave the martyrs white robes, signaling their moral victory and also his pledge for future eternal glory. The robes, therefore, were not so much a reward for purity and victory as they were a sign that heaven declared them innocent of the guilt assigned them by the world and that the world, in turn, would be condemned by heaven. Though judgment loomed large for their enemies, no future condemnation awaited them.⁶⁶ As a result, they wore the same garment as the glorified Christ (3 Ne. 11:8; see also "robe of thy righteousness," 2 Ne. 4:33), divine messengers (1 Ne. 8:5; 14:19; JS-H 1:32), and the exalted Saints (3:4–5; 7:9; 2 Ne. 9:14; D&C 109:76). The white robes symbolized the power of the Atonement, which their holy lives had taken advantage of, for they had "washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). Through the Atonement, they had become not only pure but also victorious, as the color of the robes signifies.⁶⁷

their fellowservants also and their brethren / the number of their fellow servants and brethren: That both nouns are plural, articular, and proceeded by the conjunction καὶ (*kai*), "and," suggests that the angel was referring to two different groups. However, it could be that the connecting καὶ (*kai*) is explanatory, that is, it introduces additional detail. In that case the phrase would read, "their fellow servants, that is, their brothers," pointing to just one group.⁶⁸ The Christian community used the title "fellow servants" (σύνδουλοι, *syndouloi*) as an epithet of high honor.⁶⁹ Prefixes

65. The idea was common also for Jews and Christians. See 1 Pet. 2:23; Luke 18:3–7; 1 En. 46; 97.3–5; 104.3. See also Moffatt, "Revelation," 391–92; and Richard S. Yates, "The Rewards of the Tribulation Saints," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (2006): 322–34.

66. Moffatt, "Revelation," 392.

67. Beale, *Revelation*, 394.

68. See Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, 527; and Charles, *Exegetical Commentary*, 1:177.

69. The title is found three times in Revelation, at 6:11; 19:10; and 22:9, and in Col. 1:7; 4:7, always denoting the highest respect. For discussion, see Aune, *Revelation*, 411.

in both Greek and Latin usually strengthen and emphasize the regular meaning of the verb to which they are attached. The prefix *syn*, a marker of association and companionship,⁷⁰ as used here reinforces the idea of oneness and community.

that should be killed / who were going to die: The verse suggests that God predetermined the number of Saints who must be martyred before he would begin his avenging mission.⁷¹ The verb πληρωθῶσιν (*plerōthōsin* from πληρώω, *plēroō*) is usually translated as “should be fulfilled,” but it can also mean “to be made total” or “to complete,”⁷² hence the reading, “the number . . . should be complete,” as found in our Rendition. These martyrs would include those of John’s day, like James, Peter, Paul, and Antipas of Pergamos (see 2:13), and also those of the latter days, like those at Hawn’s Mill and Hyrum and Joseph Smith, along with the two future martyrs who will be killed in the streets of Jerusalem (see 11:7–8). Thus we see that neither God’s judgment nor vengeance are limited to earth life, but are fully accomplished only with the Second Coming.

Analysis and Summary

At the breaking of the fifth seal no horse thunders forth. Instead the Revelator sees the fulfillment of a prophecy given for his own day. The fifth seal represents John’s era, the era in which the Son of God was born, ministered, and atoned for all mankind. It was the era during which the new covenant was established, and the keys of resurrection were first made manifest. Interestingly, the vision depicts none of these, but rather focuses on the deliberate destruction of those who stood as witness to and for the Word of Life. As mentioned earlier, John already knew the way his dispensation would end. The Lord had made this abundantly clear. After he departed, he told his disciples, “Then shall they [the false prophets] deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another” (Matt. 24:9–11). John viewed the terrible fulfillment of that dire prophecy. Those men and women he saw in vision who had died for the Word’s sake were in reality giving up their lives.

70. BDAG, 966–67.

71. For a discussion, see the section “The Basic Theological Foundation of Apocalyptic Literature” in the introduction.

72. See Aune, *Revelation*, 412.

John saw these righteous souls under the altar of heaven. The image of the altar suggests sacrifice. The direct association of these Saints with the altar implies that their lives had been given in sacrifice because of their loyalty to God. Their position under the altar suggests that they were martyrs, their souls resting there only because their lives had been offered, as it were, upon it. What made their lives a sacrifice for righteousness was not in dying for the faith but in living for it. As Paul admonished, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1).

The term John used to describe these people must not be overlooked. They are “martyrs,” people who bore witness no matter what the cost. The title emphasizes the importance of witnessing in bringing blessings to the good-hearted and judgment upon the wicked.

The idea that the souls of the righteous awaited their reward from under the altar of heaven was popular a little later in Judaism. The rabbis taught that those buried in Israel were as if they had been buried under the altar, and those buried under the altar were as if they were buried under the throne of glory.⁷³ The whole idea suggested that martyrs are in a state of holiness and peace within the kingdom of God. These men and women had given their lives on the strength of their testimony. They had received their undeniable witness through the power of the Holy Ghost. It was this witness that they bore as John makes clear when he states that they were slain “for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” (6:9). That testimony emphasized the Lord’s divinity. He was the Messiah, the Son of God.⁷⁴ It was because they would not yield on this point that they were killed.⁷⁵ As Elder McConkie has said,

Martyrs of religion are found in every age in which there have been both righteous and wicked people on earth. Christ himself was a martyr who voluntarily laid down his life, according to the Father’s plan, that immortality and eternal life might become available for his brethren (John 10:10–18). “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). . . . True martyrs of religion receive eternal life. “Whoso layeth down his life in my cause, for my name’s sake, shall

73. A saying of Rabbi Akiba, *Aboth*, R.N. 26; see Charles, *Exegetical Commentary*, 1:173.

74. See, for example, Matt. 16:16–20; John 4:42; Acts 18:5.

75. Other passages in which we find this expression (1:2, 9; 20:4) leave no doubt that the witness is that borne by the Savior himself and which the disciples share by revelation. Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, 526.