

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 36, Excursus on Revelation 1

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 36, his excursus on Revelation, session number one.

Today we want to start by looking at the book of Revelation, the very last book of the New Testament. And the book of Revelation presents a number of challenges for the interpreter and the reader, mainly because we really have no modern-day analogies or close analogies as to what Revelation is. Most of us are familiar with writing and reading letters and writing or reading narratives.

And we're familiar with stories and how they work and poetry. But when it comes to the book of Revelation, we really have nothing to compare it to that would allow an inroad into the book. So, I want to take a little bit of time and try to unpack the book of Revelation, looking at, as we have with other New Testament books, looking at the historical background of the book, looking at the literary type and how that influences the way we read the book.

Now, first of all, it's helpful to look at how the book of Revelation has been treated in the history of Christianity. And basically, the way Revelation has been dealt with or treated can be divided into two broad categories. First of all, you'll note in your notes under What has the church done with the book of Revelation? First of all, many have chosen to ignore it.

Although Revelation claims to be a book that has been unsealed, for many, it's still a book with seven seals. And we find it too mysterious and too problematic. And again, because we have no parallels or analogies in our day, we're not certain how to read it.

And it just appears too confusing. And we start looking at it, and there are all kinds of different ways to read it and approach it. So, we would rather bypass it and retreat to the safer ground of the Gospels that are grounded in the historical Jesus, or we would retreat to Paul's epistles, where we find perhaps more straightforward communication, and we'll leave Revelation to someone else or some other time.

Even as brilliant of a theologian as John Calvin was, who wrote commentaries on every book of the New Testament, he didn't write one on the book of Revelation. And many other commentators, taters, would have been better off to follow his example, perhaps. But even Calvin didn't write a commentary on Revelation because he wasn't sure what to do with it.

So that's one approach, is to ignore it and retreat to the safer grounds of the Gospels or the epistles. The opposite extreme is to become so obsessed and infatuated with it, that all we do is focus on the book of Revelation and try to figure out exactly how it's going to be fulfilled, and we try to figure out how Revelation matches up with events that are occurring in our own day. And when you go to the computer, if you Google Revelation or Apocalypse, you'll note that entire websites are devoted to trying to decode the book of Revelation and trying to figure out how its visions and prophecies are being fulfilled today.

And we read about events going on in the Middle East in light of Revelation. And so all kinds of ministries and websites and persons devote their entire energy and focus to trying to figure out the book of Revelation. They become obsessed with it.

The Left Behind series is a good example of a series of books. Although it is fictional, it still attempts to portray realistically how the authors think that Revelation is actually going to be fulfilled in the future. So those are two very common approaches to trying to figure out Revelation.

Again, to ignore it is too hard to figure out because we don't know what to do with it, or the opposite extreme, becoming obsessed with it and pouring all our energy into trying to figure it out, especially in light of how it fits with modern-day events. Revelation in that respect becomes kind of like a crystal ball that we look into to try to figure out what's going to happen in the future. But I would suggest to you that the way to approach Revelation is to avoid both of those extremes.

We don't want to reject it because it is part of God's Word. Revelation opens by promising a blessing for the one who reads it and listens to it and takes it to heart. So, because it's God's Word, we can't afford to reject it.

But neither can we become so obsessed with it that we ignore the rest of the Bible or we come up with these fancy full interpretations that the author could have never possibly intended and the readers never could have possibly grasped. So, I would suggest the starting point is, like any other New Testament book, we need to first of all put Revelation back in its original context. And as we've done with Paul's letters, as we've done with the Gospels, as we've done with the other general epistles, it's necessary to first ask, what did this book mean in its original historical context? What was the author trying to do? What was the author trying to communicate? How would the first readers most likely have understood and grasped it? So that's what we want to do.

It's interesting that while many people would advocate approaching the other New Testament books that way, by reconstructing the historical background, asking what the author intended, and how the readers most likely would have grasped it, it's intriguing to me that we abandon that approach when we come to the book of

Revelation. Yet in my opinion, that's where it's needed the most. So, let's start by asking a series of questions related to the historical background of Revelation.

Why was it written? Who was the author? Who were the readers? What situation were they facing? What crisis or problem precipitated the book of Revelation? First of all, the author and date of the book. When it comes to the authorship of Revelation, there's some uncertainty. We know that the author's name is John.

He tells us in the book. The problem is, in the early years of church history and early Christianity, some of the church fathers mentioned a few different Johns that could be responsible for the authorship of the book of Revelation. And I don't want to go into detail as to who those Johns are and could be.

You can read in your textbook, introducing the New Testament, regarding some of the options. The primary option, or one of the most popular options, is that the author of Revelation was the same author as the fourth gospel, the gospel of John, that is, the Apostle John. Many have held to that view, and there's good evidence for that, to see John as the author of the book of Revelation.

But again, there are other possibilities, other church leaders in the first century, a couple of others named John, that could be responsible for the book. And the interesting thing, the main thing I want to point out is, whatever the case, whoever this John was, number one, he was well known to the churches. When you read the first chapter of Revelation, he identifies himself as someone who is a fellow participant in their sufferings, and he appears to know the churches fairly well.

So, whoever this John is, whether he's the Apostle or another well-known John, a prophet in the first century, he was well known to the churches. Second, it's interesting, even if this is the Apostle John writing this, and it could be, that he doesn't claim apostolic authority. Unlike Paul's letters, where Paul writes, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, the author does not claim apostolic authority, even if he is one.

Instead, he claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet. He writes as one who comes at the conclusion of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. And over and over, he draws on Old Testament prophetic forms in his work.

He claims to write with the authority of a prophet. He claims to have similar experiences as a prophet, as Isaiah and Ezekiel, and some of the great prophets in the Old Testament. So, whoever this John is, he primarily writes as one who writes at the climax of the prophetic tradition and writes with the authority of a prophet.

In fact, there's a lot of debate sometimes as to whether the New Testament authors thought they were writing scripture. We've already looked at some of Paul's letters,

and whether he thinks he's writing scripture or not, he does seem to think at times he's writing something that is authoritative, on par with Old Testament scripture, that's to be listened to and obeyed, and has the authority of God's spirit behind it. In other books, like the book of Luke, when you read chapters 1, 1-4, Luke doesn't seem to realize that he's writing anything other than a typical first-century biography about the life of Jesus.

But John, in the book of Revelation, John does seem to think, in my opinion, seems to think he is writing something that carries the authority of Old Testament prophetic literature, and Old Testament prophetic scripture. Maybe John didn't think he was writing something that would conclude the entire canon, or at this point he did not perhaps have the perception of a New Testament canon that would stand alongside the Old Testament, nor is it clear if he thought his book should be included in the Old Testament canon, that's not the point. But the point is, he does seem to think, and is conscious, of writing something that should be taken with the same authority as Old Testament prophetic texts, and Old Testament scripture.

As far as the date of writing, there have been a number of proposals, and once again, I don't want to go through all of them, you can read your textbook to find out some of the options. But the two most common dates, one of them is during the reign of Nero. If you turn to the very back of your notebook, you'll note a list, I think on the very back page of your notebook, you'll see a list of emperors.

If you locate Nero, who ruled especially in the mid-60s AD, some suggest that the book of Revelation was written during the time of Nero. Nero, as we saw way back at the beginning of the semester, Nero was known at times for his cruel treatment of Christians. As tradition has it, he accused them of the burning of Rome, and some would suggest that the visions and the mentions of persecution in Revelation fit what took place during the reign of Nero.

And so, some would date it in the mid-60s AD, and that's a possibility, during or just shortly after Nero's reign. However, probably the most common approach to the dating of Revelation is to date it towards the very end of the first century. Again, if you look at that list of emperors in your notes, you'll note that an emperor named Domitian was ruling Rome towards the end of the first century.

Again, some early church fathers in the earliest days of Christianity date or attach Revelation to the reign of Domitian, and that has become probably the most common view among scholars today, that Revelation was written during the reign of the emperor Domitian towards the end of the first century. If that's the case, Revelation may have been then the very last book of the New Testament written. Although, again, it comes at the end of the canon, not because it was the last book written.

Remember, the New Testament is not arranged chronologically, but there are other reasons why it comes at the end of the New Testament. So, without presenting a lot of argumentation, again, read your textbook. I'm going to assume that Revelation was written towards the end of the first century, roughly 95-96 AD, and during the reign of the emperor Domitian.

Now, when you read the book of Revelation, the most characteristic thing, actually, you'll find one of them mentioned in your notes, but I want to mention two characteristic features of the book of Revelation, and they kind of go together. One of them is, probably the most characteristic feature of Revelation, its symbolism. Nearly every verse of the book is packed with rather strange, at times, bizarre symbols.

You read one chapter where John sees this vision of locusts, yet they have the head of a human being, the hair of a woman, the teeth of a lion, and have crowns on their heads, and they have tails like scorpions. I mean, what kind of vision is that? What in the world is John seeing? And you have a book full of dragons and serpents, you have a book full of smoke and sulfur and fire and brimstone and thundering, and all kinds of, at times, all kinds of strange creatures and all kinds of strange symbols dominating the pages of the book of Revelation. So, we'll return to the symbols of Revelation, but that should tell us that one of the things we need to be alert for is, where did John get these symbols? Why does he communicate in symbols? What's he trying to do? The second primary feature, a characteristic feature of Revelation related to that, is the use of the Old Testament.

Most of these symbols, even if John sometimes puts his own spin on them, and even if at times he may draw on the broader Greco-Roman world for some of his symbols, is a lot of John's symbols come right out of the Old Testament. Virtually every verse has some kind of a reference to the Old Testament, even though John never quotes it, such as you find in Matthew, this took place to fulfill what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, or sometimes Paul will say, just as it was written, and then he'll quote an Old Testament text. You never find that in Revelation.

Instead, the author simply weaves the images and the language of the Old Testament, especially the prophetic books, into his own vision. So, it's important to understand the Old Testament background and to understand where John gets some of his language. Often, the meaning of some of John's symbols and languages depends on what they mean in their Old Testament background, where John gets them.

Now, why was Revelation written? Again, often when we think of the book of Revelation, I'm afraid we often treat it like going into, if we were going to go and having our palm read, or go to have a tarot card reading, or if we look into a crystal ball, the primary purpose is to figure out what the future holds. And yes, Revelation

does talk about the future, but there's far more going on than just predicting the future. In fact, I would suggest that is a rather minor feature in the book, or at least not the most important feature of the book of Revelation.

It's not primarily to predict and forecast the future. So, what was it doing? First of all, Revelation was a response to Roman domination and imperial or emperor worship. Revelation was a response to Roman domination and emperor worship.

As we've already seen way back at the beginning of the semester, during this time, Rome was the dominant world power, and it just continued to grow and eat up broader and broader sections of the earth. It was the dominant world rule of the day that replaced other world rules like Persia, Assyria, and Babylon. Now comes Rome, and it basically has spread all over, and its influence can be felt over much of the inhabited world.

You couldn't go anywhere in the Mediterranean area without being affected by Roman rule. Moreover, Rome was known for providing peace, prosperity, and well-being for all those that fell under its influence, and all those that would show allegiance to it. At this time also, though, the Roman emperor emerged as, in some respects, the savior of the world, the one who was responsible for the well-being, the great patron of all people.

At this time also, most of the cities in the Greco-Roman world, many of them had established temples in honor of the emperor, and there was a vibrant emperor cult going on where members of the society were at times required or at least encouraged to be involved in and engage in emperor worship. Emperor worship was often tied in with commerce and trade, and whatever job you had in the first century was often tied into emperor worship and opportunities for emperor worship and being involved in feasts and festivals in honor of the emperor. And so, emperor worship had permeated much of society, and many Christians then were living in this kind of context, in the midst of a situation where they may be compelled to show allegiance to the Roman Empire, and even be involved in opportunities and occasions to render allegiance to, even worship to the emperor, which, as we said at this time, was probably the emperor Domitian towards the end of the first century.

So, it would have been, in a sense, an affront to the Roman society to not show gratitude to the emperor for all the emperor had provided for you. And in my opinion, revelation is a response to that situation. Again, everywhere you go in some of the first-century cities, there would have been visible reminders in the forms of statues and architecture and even inscriptions of the debt of gratitude that you owe the emperor.

And again, the emperors at this time tended to be divinized or treated as deities. And so you can begin to see the problem this would cause for many Christians living in

that situation. Should I resist this and worship Jesus Christ? I mean, Jesus Christ is Lord, but should I resist Roman rule and these occasions to worship the emperor, or can I go ahead and be involved in these as a rather harmless activity, especially if it means losing my job or suffering some other kind of disadvantage or persecution?

That last word is persecution. Some have suggested revelation was primarily meant to address Christians who were being persecuted in the first century under the Roman Empire. And when you read the book of Revelation, persecution does appear to be a primary theme.

You read over and over again how God's people are beheaded on behalf of the testimony of Jesus Christ, how God's people suffer at the hands of the beast and the Roman Empire. And some have suggested revelation is primarily a book of comfort. It's meant to comfort Christians who are suffering persecution at the hands of imperial Rome.

And there's probably some truth to that. But remember, we said a couple of things. Number one is that at this point, most persecution would have been primarily local and sporadic.

There was not yet anything like this officially sanctioned empire-wide persecution of Christians. There was no official vendetta from the emperor on Christians, where they sent Roman armies through the towns and dragged Christians out into the streets. That's not happening at this point.

Instead, most of the persecution does not come from Rome. It comes from the local authorities who are keen to curry favor with Rome and to remain in good stead with Rome. Again, they would have seen it as an affront not to be involved in these various occasions to show gratitude towards Rome and to be involved in emperor worship.

And for Christians to resist this then may have resulted in different levels and different types of persecution. So, the first thing to remember is any persecution taking place at this time, and it probably did, would have been mainly local and sporadic. The second thing is, when you read Revelation, at least one person, a man named Antipas, has died for his witness to Jesus Christ.

Antipas from Pergamum. And other than that, we're not told if anyone else has, but we know at least one person has. But again, this seems, for John, this seems to be only the beginning of a conflict that could escalate.

But at this time, any persecution is primarily sporadic and local, and there's no officially sanctioned widespread persecution going on. Instead, when you look at the cities of Asia Minor, if you go to Asia Minor being our modern-day Turkey, where the

seven cities of Revelation were located, when you go back to Revelation 2 and 3, you read about those cities. Revelation 2 and 3 mention seven cities, specific cities in modern-day Turkey, or Asia Minor, Western Asia Minor, to which the book of Revelation is addressed.

And when you read these letters to these seven churches, there are a couple of interesting things. First of all, all of these cities are clearly ensconced in imperial Roman rule. All of these cities are situated at the heart of imperial Rome and emperor worship and Roman rule.

Most of these cities had at least one temple erected in honor of the Roman emperor. They also had other temples in honor of other gods and deities, but along with that would have been temples dedicated to certain emperors. We note, for example, in Ephesus, the first city addressed in Revelation 2, the city of Ephesus did have a temple dedicated to the worship of Domitian, the Roman emperor probably ruling when Revelation was written.

But most of these cities had temples, again, not only dedicated to the gods and other Greco-Roman deities but to the emperor as well. So, to belong to these cities would have placed you in a situation where you would have been compelled and put into circumstances where you would have found it necessary to render allegiance to or even participate in events that could involve you in rendering worship and allegiance to the emperor, to the Roman emperor, and showing your support of Roman ideology and Roman society and Roman rule. Again, in most of these cities, even your trade and commerce, even your job was wrapped up with Roman ideology and Roman rule.

So, this created a plight for Christians, and there were two possible responses. There may have been more, but two general possibilities or responses if you are a Christian living during this time. First of all, you could choose to resist because you know that Jesus Christ is the true Lord and Savior of the world.

Because you know, even as Jesus said, you can't serve two masters. So, you know that Jesus alone is worthy of your worship and your obedience. But now you have the Roman emperor claiming that he is the Savior of the world who is now asking for or calling for your obedience and your allegiance and your worship, or at least local officials are compelling you to do that.

Now you're facing that situation, and refusal to do so could have serious ramifications for your work, for your entire family, for your physical safety. How are you going to respond? So, one possibility was to resist, and that could bring about various forms of persecution and at least has brought the death of at least one person, Antipas. So that's one possibility.

The other one is, and this appears to be the main problem that Revelation is addressing, it appears that a far more serious problem than persecution is that most Christians were tempted to go ahead and compromise. It is perhaps for the sake of retaining their place in society, or not wanting to suffer persecution, or for whatever reason, some Christians were willing to give in to Roman ideology and Roman rule. They were willing to worship the emperor.

They thought that they could render allegiance and worship to Jesus Christ and that it was harmless, perhaps, to do so with the Roman Empire as well. So, they wanted to have it both ways. They were more complacent in willing to compromise.

Interestingly, when you read the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, only two of those churches appeared to be undergoing any type of persecution. The other five, main problem with the other five is their involvement, their willingness to become involved in Roman rule and in emperor worship, and to give their allegiance to the Roman Empire and to Roman rule. So the most significant issue in Revelation, I think, is not so much persecution, it's compromise and complacency, giving into and buying into Roman rule and emperor worship.

So, in light of that, what is the main theme of Revelation? In my opinion, it's kind of difficult to isolate a main theme. Yes, persecution, the suffering people of God, is certainly a theme. Again, you can't ignore the theme of suffering and persecution that John sees as the ultimate destiny of his people if they do resist Roman rule.

But it seems to me, that one of the themes that could lay claim to being the primary theme of Revelation is the question, who is worthy of our worship? Who is truly worthy of our worship? Is it Jesus Christ, or is it the Roman Empire, or any other human being or human institution? In my opinion, one of the things Revelation does is try to convince the readers that only Jesus Christ is worthy of their worship and their allegiance and devotion. No other human being, no other human institution or entity is worthy of worship. That is idolatry, John tells his readers.

So, they can't have it both ways. So, Revelation is more of a wake-up call to Christians to get them to understand what is going on in their first-century context. That they are in grave danger of compromising the exclusive worship and allegiance that God and Jesus Christ alone deserve.

And that no other human being or no other human authority or institution is worthy of. So, Revelation could be seen as answering the question, who is worthy of our worship? The answer is that Jesus Christ and God alone, no other human being or authority or institution is worthy of our ultimate worship and allegiance. To do such is idolatry.

One other thing though, Revelation needs to be seen too as, again I've already said Revelation is not primarily a prediction of the future, but needs to be seen more as an unmasking or an unveiling of the true nature of Roman rule. What John is primarily doing in the book of Revelation, and this is important, what he's primarily doing is not just predicting the future and telling us what's going to take place in the 20th or 21st century or whatever. What John is primarily doing is trying to get his readers to see the true nature of Roman rule.

It's trying to unmask the arrogance and the pretension of the Roman Empire. In other words, that's why we said John is basically functioning like an Old Testament prophet. He claims the authority of Old Testament prophets.

If you go back to your Old Testament survey course if you remember some of the prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets, what they often had to do is unmask the true nature of human and worldly empires, whether it was Babylon or Egypt or Persia. The Old Testament was over and over trying to show the true colors of and expose the pretension and the arrogance of human rulers and human empires that would set themselves up as God, that would persecute God's people, that would arrogantly set themselves up as sovereign over all things. And now, what John is doing is not just predicting the future.

He's doing the same thing his prophetic predecessors did. Now, there is another empire that is emerging that, like some of the empires of old, like Babylon and Persia and Egypt and other ancient and wicked and evil cities, there is now another empire that is surfacing that is also claiming sovereignty. It's claiming to take the place of God.

It arrogantly sets itself up over the world. It is, basically, John says, a bloodthirsty beast that's out to get Christians and is out to get wealth no matter what the case. So what Revelation is primarily doing is exposing the pretension, the arrogance, the opulence, the wealth, and the corrupt ideology of Roman rule to get Christians to see its true nature so that they will not give in to it.

But instead, they will be willing to resist and live in obedience and worship to Jesus Christ alone. In my opinion, that's what Revelation is about, not just predicting the future. Yes, it does talk about the future, and we'll see why it does that, but that's not the primary goal of the book of Revelation.

For Christians living in the first century, confronted with this awesome empire that keeps growing, John now wants to expose its true nature, to expose its pretensions, its arrogance, setting itself up as God, the fact that it's bent on the destruction of God's people and of Christians. It stands for everything that is opposite of what God stands for. Its value and ideology is anti-godly, and John now wants to expose that so his Christian readers will not give in to it, but will be able to resist it.

What kind of book is Revelation? As we said before, one of the challenges that we face as 21st-century Christians is that we really have no close literary analogies to Revelation. Later on, I'll suggest one or two analogies that might be somewhat close, but we really don't have any close analogies. As I said, you read and write letters, you read and some of you write stories and narratives, you read and some of you write poetry, but when's the last time you read an apocalypse besides the book of Revelation? Or when was the last time you wrote an apocalypse? You probably haven't.

Part of the problem is we really don't have a close literary analogy to compare Revelation to. What we need to do is try to figure out what kind of book is Revelation. What literary genre or literary form does Revelation fit into that was probably familiar to the 1st-century readers, that intuitively they may have picked up on, but we don't because 2,000 years later we're unfamiliar with this literary form and we're not sure exactly how to read it and what to do with it. What was John doing in recording these strange visions of animals with eyes all over them, or beasts with seven heads and seven horns, or locusts that had tails like scorpions and heads like human beings with the hair of a woman and the teeth of a lion, etc.? What's that all about, and how do we approach that and start to read that? Actually, Revelation is a combination of at least three types of literary forms.

The first one is what is known as an apocalypse. Actually, the term apocalypse is the title that we use for it. John did not necessarily, or 1st-century readers did not necessarily have this idea in their head of an apocalypse.

And they said, oh yeah, John's writing an apocalypse to us. That's a term we've given it. But still, Revelation resembles a group of writings that existed from roughly 200 BC to 200 AD, roughly that period, a group of writings that we have labeled an apocalypse.

And that is, although an apocalypse engenders various ideas in our minds today, such an apocalypse usually evokes ideas of a cataclysmic end of the world or movies that have apocalyptic scenarios, have mass destruction, usually by means of nuclear weapons or some other kind of mass destruction via a war or battle that resolves at the end of a movie. That's often what we think about when we think about apocalyptic, some kind of destruction on a grand cosmic scale, a cosmic war or conflict or battle that the victor emerges victorious at the end. But in the 1st century, I'm convinced that the writers, the writer of Revelation and his readers would have identified Revelation with a group of writings that basically is characterized by this.

An apocalypse is basically a work that reveals or exposes the true nature of what is going on in the situation of the readers. That is, when the readers look out in their world, what they see empirically, what they see with their eyes is simply what is

going on around them. But what Revelation, what an apocalypse does is it opens that up, it opens up that world and exposes the true nature of it by demonstrating that there's more than meets the eye.

Behind the empirical world that they see, that they can touch and smell and feel and see, behind that lies another reality, lies a heavenly world and also a future that in some way determines what is going on in the present. So, an apocalypse, the word apocalypse means unveiling or uncovering, and that's what it does. An apocalypse unveils reality.

It shows that what you see physically, what the 1st-century readers, whom John is addressing, what they saw when they looked out at the Roman Empire, what they saw empirically and felt and touched, and the world they lived in was not all that there was. Behind that world lies a supernatural heavenly world and a future that should determine the way they look at and interact with their present world. Kind of a way to illustrate that, if you go to a play and you sit in your seat and you're watching a play, all you see is what's going on, on the stage.

You see the actors coming out and playing their parts and doing their speeches and interacting. All you see is what goes on, on the stage. What you don't see is what goes on behind the scenes.

It is the director or manager of the play, all the persons responsible for the props and the costumes, the makeup, and everything that makes the play run. You don't see that. It's all behind the curtain, behind the scenes.

But what Revelation does is lift that curtain so that you can see there's more to reality than meets the eye. For the 1st-century readers, again, they look out and see this awesome Roman Empire growing and devouring territory and providing all these benefits for 1st-century people living in the 1st century. That's all they see.

They see the world that they live in that they can touch and feel and smell. But what Revelation does is lift the curtain to the stage of history so that they can see behind the scenes that there's more than meets the eye. Behind 1st-century Roman rule, there is an entire heavenly world and there's also a future.

There's a whole different reality that is still real but affects what happens in the 1st century. So, what Revelation does is give the readers a glimpse. First, it gives John a glimpse.

He's the one who has the vision initially. John has a vision that gives him a glimpse behind the scenes of history into the heavenly world, into the transcendent reality, and into the future. And that allows him to see the present, to see his own world, a 1st-century Roman world in Asia Minor, in a completely different light.

And now by recording this vision, this apocalypse for his readers, his readers can do the same. Now they can see behind the scenes of history into this heavenly world, into this alternative world, this heavenly reality in the future to help them better understand and grasp what is going on in the present. So hopefully now they'll be able to respond to Roman rule.

Now they'll be able to live life in the 1st century Roman Empire in Asia Minor in a completely different light. So, Revelation is an apocalypse. By that again we mean it's an unveiling.

It strips away the veil behind the scene of history so that we can see the reality that lies behind it, the heavenly world and the future. And the way John does that, the other feature of an apocalypse that we've already talked about is John does that by communicating through graphic symbols. Symbols have a way of capturing the imagination of the readers.

If John just sat down and in a narrative or a prose paragraph described, here's what Rome's really like, people may have understood that, but it would not be nearly so compelling as communicating this vision of a hideous seven-headed beast that was bloodthirsty and out to devour God's people. That's far more compelling. Revelation as an apocalypse is meant not just to affect the intellect, but to affect the imagination, to get them to respond emotionally as much as intellectually.

So that's what an apocalypse does. It's just kind of a graphic, compelling, imaginative way of getting the readers to see the first-century world in a new light through this vision of a heavenly world and a future that lies behind and beyond the first-century world they live in. Second, Revelation is also a prophecy.

By calling Revelation a prophecy, we mean, again, not primarily that it predicts the future, but like the Old Testament prophets who critiqued the empires and the ungodly systems of their day, but also who warn God's people about coming judgment if they gave in to that, Revelation does the same thing. As a prophecy, it's primarily a prophetic word. It's a word of encouragement and warning to the people.

Like the Old Testament prophets, it exposes the true nature of the world. It exposes the bankruptcy of the evil world system. It exposes the pretension and arrogance of any nation or person that sets itself up as God and opposes God's kingdom and His people.

And as a prophecy, Revelation does that. Finally, Revelation is also a letter. As a letter, Revelation is communicating information that the first-century readers must have understood and John must have intended.

When you read Revelation carefully, and this is often frequently overlooked, when you read Revelation carefully, it begins and ends just like one of Paul's letters. It's even possible that due to Paul's authority, from other letters he wrote to churches in Asia Minor, it's possible that John may have deliberately followed the letter format because of the significance of Paul's letters in that context. But whatever the case, John's book begins and ends just like a first-century letter.

So, notice verse 4 of chapter 1, John to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. So, John begins just like, his book begins just like a letter and it ends like one as well. So, the significance of that, again, is that John is writing in the same way Paul wrote to address a specific problem.

John is doing the same thing. Again, this is not a prophecy for 20th and 21st-century Christians. It's a book written primarily and first and foremost for first-century Christians living in the context of imperial rule and Roman rule.

And as a letter, just like Paul addressed different problems in his churches, now John uses the form of a letter. He takes this vision, writes it down, and puts it down in the form of a letter to address the specific needs of specific persons living in the first century. So that's why I say one of the most important things with interpreting Revelation is to do the same thing we do with Paul's letters, is to try to reconstruct the background, what was going on, what was happening, what problem or issue John most likely addressing.

And we've done that. We've looked at the situation of the churches in first-century Asia Minor and the context of imperial Rome, the problem of emperor worship, the possible threat of persecution, and compromise with Roman rule. We've looked at all that as the context for understanding Revelation.

And, again, the need to do that is supported by the understanding that Revelation is not only an apocalypse and a prophecy, it's also a letter as well. Now, what does this mean for interpreting Revelation? There are a number of things we could say, but I just want to highlight five things. First of all, you'll note there are only four in your notes, but I want to add a fifth one.

First of all, given the kind of literature Revelation is and the background that we've just talked about, Revelation should be interpreted symbolically and not literally. I was raised in a church context that said, unless there's really good reason to interpret it symbolically, you need to interpret Revelation very literally. However, I'm convinced just the opposite is the case.

Given the kind of literature Revelation is, remember, it's an apocalypse. It communicates in symbolic language. It describes, perhaps, one of the reasons for the

symbols is because it describes a transcendent, heavenly reality, something that lies behind the empirical perception of the readers.

That may be the reason why John uses so much symbolism to communicate this vision of this transcendent, heavenly reality and the future that lies beyond the experience of his readers. So, he uses symbols to communicate that. But that means that when we interpret Revelation, we need to interpret it symbolically.

We need to realize John is not describing his first-century world or the future in literal language. He's describing it symbolically. So, when interpreting Revelation, we have to ask, what are the meanings of these symbols? What do these symbols convey and communicate? Not literally, but what's the symbolic value? The difficulty is trying to figure out what they refer to.

We'll look at some examples of perhaps where we can be sure or a little more sure of what they refer to. But the first question we need to ask is, what do these symbols mean? What are they trying to convey? What is conveyed by this picture of a seven-headed beast? Or what is conveyed by the picture of a locust with the tail of a scorpion, the head of a human being, teeth like a lion, et cetera? What meanings does that kind of image evoke? So first, we need to understand Revelation is symbolic and not literal. Second, any interpretation that John could not have intended and his readers could not have understood is probably suspect.

Again, I think we often have this impression that John wrote this book of Revelation and his readers must have been completely baffled by what he wrote. But now in the 20th and 21st centuries and longer, if Christ does not come back soon, all of a sudden we have the key or we have more understanding as to what John was saying. It's as if to repeat the language of one very popular Revelation teacher, one of those persons obsessed with Revelation, to repeat his language, he said it's as if John was transported in a time machine to the 21st century and he saw all these events and then he goes back and he tries to describe them to his readers.

But again, if that's the case, Revelation must have been completely misunderstood at the very least or worse, must have been completely out of the range of what the readers could have understood in the first century if it was only about 20th and 21st century events. But I am convinced again that Revelation, instead Revelation was, because it was in the form of a letter, Revelation was meant to communicate directly to the first-century readers. Revelation was communicating a message that they could understand.

Revelation was communicating something that would meet the crisis and their situation of trying to live out life under Roman rule. Revelation has to communicate something to them. So, I am convinced any interpretation that John could not have understood or intended and his readers could not have understood must be suspect.

Any interpretation must be something that resonates with the first-century context of the readers and the author. Third, letter C in your notes, don't lose sight of the forest for the trees. In other words, don't get so obsessed with figuring out all the little details and symbols that you miss the main message and the overall focus of the book of Revelation and the various chapters and the various parts of the vision.

Again, sometimes we need to read Revelation more holistically, let the entire vision impact us, and not get too obsessed with figuring out what every detail means and what every detail refers to. Fourth, don't miss the main purpose. Again, Revelation is not primarily about the future.

It's not primarily a prediction of the future. It's an exhortation to God's people to live holy lives in the midst of a pagan empire. Finally, there is humility.

A good dose of humility is a prerequisite for reading the book of Revelation. There's no place in Revelation for arrogant and overly confident clinging to our interpretations of Revelation. Yes, I think the main message and the main focus and function of the book are fairly clear, but when it comes to some of the details, such as what view of the millennium you take from Revelation chapter 20, we'll talk about that passage later.

When it comes to that, we have to hold our interpretations with a fair degree of humility. Yes, we can be sure that Jesus Christ is going to return and set up His kingdom, judge wickedness, and bring blessing and salvation to His people. We can be certain of that, and we cannot fudge on that.

But how that takes place and all the details surrounding that and how we understand various details in Revelation, yes, we need to figure those out and wrestle with those and hold to our positions, but do so with humility. When you look at church history, given the variety of ways Revelation has been treated and some of the misunderstandings, I think that further points to the need for a fair degree of humility when we approach a book like Revelation. Now, one last thing to talk about before we end this class, one last thing to talk about or address is, how has Revelation been read throughout church history. Now, there are a number of things I could say about this.

I want to focus on four broad approaches that mainly have to do with how we understand Revelation temporally, as far as when the events will or have taken place. But there are a number of ways to interpret Revelation. It's common to interpret Revelation from just a literary standpoint, to look at it as a literary work of art and its literary function, how the characters work, and not even be interested in whether these things are going to actually be fulfilled or not, but just to read it as literature.

It's been common to read Revelation from different ideological perspectives, to see it as speaking to some of the struggles that African Americans have had, or there's one commentary that reads Revelation in light of the events of apartheid in South Africa, and there are feminist readings of Revelation, attempts to read Revelation as how that relates to different issues or different ideological issues and approaches. But I want to focus more specifically on four, especially when you think of how mainly evangelical Christians have wrestled with the book and what they've done with it, and how temporally they read Revelation. First of all, you'll note in your notes under Pick an Approach, the four main approaches are these.

First of all, is what is known as the Preterist approach to Revelation. The Preterist approach is an approach that says all of Revelation was basically fulfilled in the first century. In other words, Revelation is simply a commentary on the first-century Christians and the first-century churches in the Roman Empire.

Some of them might say that Revelation, the last two or three chapters of the millennium and the new heavens and new earth, some would say is the future, but others would say, no, that's still present. The vision of the millennium and new heavens and new earth is just kind of a highly symbolic way of describing the life of God's people in the present. So, a Preterist approach would say most of or virtually all of or all of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century, period.

Now, like any other book of the Bible, it can still be applied to us, but we don't need to see Revelation as a prophecy still remaining to be fulfilled. Basically, Revelation was just a commentary on events in the first century, and that's that. There's no need to look any further beyond that.

Second is what is known as the historical view. The historical view of Revelation basically says Revelation is sort of a history written in advance. John was forecasting the entire history of the church, and so those who approach Revelation from a historical perspective thought that you could read Revelation and line Revelation up sequentially with various events throughout the history of the church, starting in the first century into the third century, then basically into the Reformation period, and then into the 19th and 20th century into our present day.

So, Revelation could be seen as a kind of forecast of, or again, a church history written in advance. The problem with that approach is that, again, as history continues to go on, it always has to be modified. So, it's no wonder that there aren't very many Christians that hold to the historical approach any longer, because, again, it's had to be modified so many times as history continues to move on and other significant events occur.

A third approach is known as the idealist approach. The idealist approach to Revelation basically says Revelation is simply a symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil. It doesn't refer to any specific time.

It's simply a general, ideal, symbolic portrayal. The symbols are transcendent. They transcend any specific historical situation.

So, they're just general, ideal symbols. Just a general picture, the symbolic portrayal of the battle between good and evil. Now, that can have different applications.

For John and his readers, it applied to the first century. But it could apply to any century and any situation that fits. Because, again, it's just kind of a general symbol, symbolic portrayal.

And, again, for John, it was being acted out in the first century. But it will presumably continue to be acted out until Christ comes back to establish the new heavens and new earth and to set up his kingdom. So that's the idealist approach, kind of just a general, symbolic, ideal portrayal of the battle between God and evil.

The last approach is what is known as the futurist approach. And all of these approaches have... I don't want to make it sound like these are monolithic and that everyone who falls into one of these categories is identical. These have various permutations and some variety in them.

And that's certainly true of the futurist approach. But the futurist approach, as the name implies, basically says revelation is primarily a prediction or prophecy of the future. In other words, the visions in Revelation have not been fulfilled yet.

They're primarily predicting the events that will take place when Jesus Christ comes back. So, if I can use the already but not yet tension again, the preterist approach would focus on the already and say revelation describes what already took place in the first century. The futurist approach would say, no, revelation is about the not yet.

Again, some futurists do think that some parts of Revelation were already being fulfilled in the first century, but they would say ultimately the visions of Revelation are awaiting to be fulfilled in the future when Jesus Christ comes back. But there's a variety of ways that they see that happening, but that's primarily what the futurist approach is. Now, you may ask, well, which approach is correct? Do we have to choose? Well, I would suggest to you that maybe the best approach is a combination of two or three of these.

Because we've already seen that the preterist approach does have some validity in that John is primarily trying to unmask the true nature of Roman rule to get the

readers not to give in to it. So there certainly is an element of John's book referring to primarily the first century. And I take it that that's primarily what is going on.

But certainly, certainly, Revelation does have a strong future element. Remember, it tries to make sense of the present in light of the future. So, Revelation's visions frequently move you and push you to the future fulfillment and the future wrap-up of history without telling you exactly how things are going to take place.

It simply continually opens up the present to be understood in light of the future. So John does talk about the future when Christ comes back and sets up his kingdom and a new heaven and a new earth, but that ultimately is to help the readers make sense of their present. There's certainly truth in the idealist view, in that some of the symbols John uses already come to him with meaning.

A lot of the symbols he uses already refer to different empires, different persons, and different events in the Old Testament. So, John is using symbols that, in and of themselves, have the ability to transcend the first century, that could find application in other times and places than just first-century Rome, and allow us to apply the book. So, in my opinion, probably a combination of two or three of those approaches does the most justice to the kind of literature Revelation is and what kind of book John is writing.

Now, that's a good place to wrap this up. Next class period, I do want to discuss one possible literary analogy to Revelation that may help us understand it, and then we'll launch into looking at several sections of Revelation in light of our discussion of the background.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 36, his excursus on Revelation, session number one.