

Dr. David Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1, Introduction and Background Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1, Introduction and Background, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture introduces Dr. Mathewson's course on the Book of Revelation, highlighting the book's history of both **obsession** and **neglect** among Christians. He argues for approaching Revelation by first understanding its **first-century context**, specifically the challenges faced by seven churches within the Roman Empire, where the **emperor cult** presented a significant conflict with Christian faith. The lecture then introduces the importance of considering the **literary genre** of Revelation—a blend of apocalypse, prophecy, and letter—to properly interpret its meaning and avoid common misunderstandings. Finally, the lecture emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic interpretations like "God wins" and explore the **complexities** of God's victory, the church's perseverance, and the call to exclusive worship.

2. 16 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Revelation).



**Mathewson_Revela
tion_Session01.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts by Dr. Dave Mathewson on the Book of Revelation.

Briefing Document: Dr. Dave Mathewson on Revelation, Lecture 1

Overview: This lecture by Dr. Mathewson introduces the Book of Revelation, addressing common misunderstandings and establishing a foundation for proper interpretation. He identifies two dominant, and problematic, approaches to Revelation within church history, and then begins to discuss the historical context of the book and the literary genres it employs.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Common Misunderstandings and Neglect:

- Revelation is often the most misunderstood, ignored, and neglected book in the Bible.
- It has historically had trouble being accepted into the New Testament canon due to its complex and seemingly bizarre imagery.
- Two primary, but flawed, approaches to Revelation:
- **Obsession:** An unhealthy focus on the book, treating it as the only important text, often attempting to correlate its imagery to modern-day events and current political environments.
- **Neglect:** Ignoring or avoiding the book due to its strange imagery and complex symbolism, resulting in people retreating to the safer ground of other more familiar Biblical texts.
- *"Probably no book in the history of Christianity has been so misunderstood or ignored and neglected as the very last book of the Bible."*
- *"Revelation to many is still a book with seven seals. Despite the fact that Revelation claims to be unsealed, for many the book of Revelation is still sealed."*
- The speaker emphasizes the problems with approaching the book as if it primarily predicts future events, likening it to imagining John was a time traveler.
- *"As one author said, it's as if John was a time traveler and he traveled into the 21st century and saw all these events."*

- The strange imagery, like the locusts described in Revelation 9, leads many to dismiss the book as bizarre and irrelevant to their lives.
- **"These locusts look like horses prepared for battles... On their heads, they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces...They had tails that stung like scorpions..."* *
- Even outside the Church, Revelation is met with suspicion, with figures like Nietzsche describing it as a "rabid outburst of vindictiveness" and George Bernard Shaw calling it the work of "a drug addict".
- *"Friedrich Nietzsche...said, Revelation is the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all of recorded history."*
- *"George Bernard Shaw said that Revelation was a curious record of the visions of a drug addict."*
- Despite this, the book is a source of inspiration for various media like movies.

1. **Reorienting to Revelation:**

- Given its place as God's word in the Biblical canon, the book deserves a closer look that avoids both fear/suspicion and unhealthy obsession.
- *"If we believe that the book of Revelation is God's word and belongs in the canon of Scripture as part of God's word and his revelation to his people, then it seems that we need to stop again and perhaps reorient ourselves to the book and take another look at it."*
- The title "Revelation" (Greek: *apokalipsis*) means "unveiling" or "uncovering", suggesting it is meant to reveal God's truth, not hide it.
- *"In fact, ironically, the book of Revelation, the very title Revelation, comes from a Greek word, apokalipsis, which means an unveiling or an uncovering...Revelation then is primarily meant not to conceal its message and hide it as something so mysterious and secret that no one could ever possibly understand it."*

1. **Key Questions for Understanding Revelation:**

- What kind of book is Revelation? Understanding its literary genre is crucial to proper interpretation.

- *"As a British scholar Richard Baucom said, part of the problem in the church's history with understanding Revelation and many of the misinterpretations have begun by failing to conceive of what type of book Revelation actually is."*
- Why was it written? Historical context is vital; understanding the circumstances surrounding its production is paramount.
- *"Why was the book of Revelation written in the first place? What were the circumstances that surrounded the production of the book and the writing of the book of Revelation?"*

1. Historical Context:

- Like other biblical books, Revelation needs to be read in light of its historical context.
- The book was written to seven historical churches in Western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).
- These churches were at the heart of the Roman Empire, the political, religious, economic, and military power of that time.
- Rome presented itself as the bringer of peace and prosperity, and its Emperor was seen as a divine figure deserving worship, which was enforced through the emperor cult.
- *"Rome, at least in the world's view and in Rome's own view, Rome had brought peace and prosperity to the entire empire...Even the emperor himself began to be seen as an agent of the will of the gods and all the gods such as Zeus and others...they were seen as worthy of devotion and allegiance and one's worship."*
- The emperor cult was integrated into the political and economic lives of the cities, with temples, festivals, and trade guilds.
- The most likely date of writing is 95/96 AD during the reign of Emperor Domitian.
- The churches faced a dilemma:
- **Resistance:** Refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord and God, facing persecution (though mostly local, not empire-wide) and ostracism. The death of Antipas is noted as an example.

- **Compromise/Complacency:** Integrating into the Roman culture, compromising their exclusive allegiance to Jesus, and not recognizing the extent of this compromise.
- *"Many of them were deliberately trying to rationalize that they could worship Jesus Christ, but also worship Caesar at the same time, that Jesus Christ was Lord, but they could also acknowledge Caesar and in doing so avoid what happened to Antipas"*
- The book serves as a source of:
- **Comfort and Encouragement:** For those who are suffering due to their faithfulness to Jesus.
- **Warning and Exhortation:** For those who are compromising, calling them to repent and return to exclusive worship of Jesus Christ.
- *"For those two churches in chapters 2 and 3 and any like them, the book of Revelation will be a source of comfort and encouragement for them to persevere. But for those who are compromising...the book of Revelation will be a source of warning and exhortation."*
- Revelation's purpose is to expose the true nature of the Roman Empire, offering a counter-narrative to its self-proclaimed status as bringer of peace and prosperity. Rome is portrayed as a corrupt, godless, violent, and idolatrous system.
- *"Revelation is going to unveil Rome in its true colors, to expose it for what it really is, to show it for what it really is. It's a corrupt, godless, idolatrous, violent system that opposes God"*
- The book is a call for exclusive worship and obedience to God and Jesus Christ at all costs.
- *"Revelation, because of the nature of the Roman Empire, Revelation is a call to exclusive worship and obedience to God and Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost."*
- 1. **Re-evaluation of "God Wins" Interpretation:**
 - The common understanding of Revelation as just "God wins" is too simplistic.
 - It emphasizes the *how* of God's victory: through the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Lamb, and the faithful witness of His followers.

- *"God wins through sending His Son, Jesus Christ, sending His Son as a slaughtered lamb through sacrificial faithful witness to accomplish God's purposes."*
- The book raises the question: who is worthy of worship and obedience? Only God and the Lamb (Jesus Christ), not the Emperor or other earthly powers.

1. **Literary Genre:**

- Understanding Revelation's literary genre is essential.
- Meaning is genre-bound, according to literary scholar E.D. Hirsch.
- *"A well-known literary critical scholar named E.D. Hirsch said that meaning is genre-bound. By that, he meant simply that meaning in any given piece of literature is dependent on its literary genre, what kind of literature it is."*
- This step is often ignored when interpreting Revelation, partly due to a lack of good models or modern analogies.
- Revelation is a blend of three literary types:
 - **Apocalypse:** Though the term may be modern, the literary type was understood in the first century; it doesn't primarily mean the end of the world as it often does today.
 - **Prophecy**
 - **Epistle/Letter**
- These genres would have been familiar to the first readers, allowing them to intuitively understand the text's intended meaning.
- The speaker ends by asking the question - what *is* an apocalypse, and says that this will be the beginning point for the next lecture.

Conclusion:

Dr. Mathewson's first lecture lays the groundwork for understanding the Book of Revelation by emphasizing the need to avoid common misinterpretations and to consider its historical context and literary genre. The book was written to address specific issues faced by first-century churches within the Roman Empire, calling them to resist idolatry and maintain their exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.

4. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1, Introduction and Background

Revelation Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. What are the two main approaches that the church has historically taken toward the book of Revelation?
2. Why do some people neglect the book of Revelation?
3. According to the lecture, how has Revelation been viewed by some outside of the church?
4. What does the Greek word *apokalipsis*, from which Revelation derives its title, mean?
5. What two questions does Dr. Mathewson state that he will examine to better understand Revelation?
6. What is the historical setting of the book of Revelation, and where were the churches located that the book was addressed to?
7. What was the "emperor cult" and what was its purpose?
8. What were the two possible responses of Christians to the Roman Empire, according to Dr. Mathewson?
9. According to the lecture, what was the purpose of Revelation?
10. What three literary genres does the book of Revelation consist of?

Answer Key

1. The church has historically approached Revelation with either an **obsession**, focusing almost solely on its interpretation and often linking it to contemporary events, or **neglect**, avoiding it due to its strange imagery and perceived difficulty.
2. Some people neglect Revelation because of its strange and fantastic images which can be bewildering. They might also be put off by those who focus obsessively on the book and find it safer to read other New Testament texts.

3. Some outside of the church view Revelation with suspicion, seeing it as a source of violence and the cause of social ills. Some have described it as the product of a vindictive mind or a drug-induced hallucination.
4. The Greek word *apokalipsis* means "unveiling" or "uncovering." It suggests that Revelation is meant to reveal God's truth to his people, rather than conceal it.
5. Dr. Mathewson will examine (1) *why* the book of Revelation was written, exploring the historical circumstances surrounding its production, and (2) *what kind of book* it is, delving into its literary genre.
6. Revelation was written to seven historical churches located in Western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). These churches were situated at the heart of the Roman Empire and its political and cultural influence.
7. The "emperor cult" was a system designed to foster worship and allegiance to Rome and its emperor by incorporating temples, statues, and festivals. This system enforced recognition of Rome's divine status and the emperor's authority.
8. Christians could either **resist** the Roman Empire's demands for worship and allegiance, facing ostracism and persecution, or they could **compromise** with the empire's practices, blending their faith with Roman cultural and religious practices.
9. The purpose of Revelation is to expose the true nature of the Roman Empire as a corrupt, godless, idolatrous, and violent system. It calls Christians to resist this and maintain exclusive worship and obedience to God and Jesus Christ.
10. Revelation is a blend of at least three literary genres: an **apocalypse**, a **prophecy**, and a **letter** or epistle. Each of these genres contributes to the book's meaning and purpose.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Answer the following essay questions, incorporating material from the provided sources.

1. Discuss the historical context of the book of Revelation, focusing on the political, religious, and economic environment of the Roman Empire and how this context shaped the purpose and message of the book.
2. Compare and contrast the two primary responses that Christians had to the Roman Empire, according to Dr. Mathewson, and analyze the consequences of each response for the churches of Asia Minor.
3. Explain why understanding the literary genre of Revelation is crucial for correct interpretation, using examples from the lecture material to demonstrate how a misunderstanding of genre can lead to misinterpretations.
4. How does the lecture challenge common interpretations of Revelation, such as the simplistic idea that "God wins"? Describe in detail the more complex picture of the ways in which God's people are called to overcome as described in the lecture.
5. Discuss the significance of Revelation as a critique of Rome, elaborating on the ways in which the book serves to "unveil" or expose the nature of the Roman Empire and what message this sends to the Christian audience.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Apocalypse:** A literary genre characterized by symbolic visions, often revealing divine secrets or the future. It often involves heavenly journeys and the unmasking of evil forces.
- **Apokalipsis:** The Greek word meaning "unveiling" or "uncovering," from which the book of Revelation gets its title.
- **Canon:** The list of books accepted as authoritative scripture in a religious tradition.
- **Domitian:** Roman emperor who ruled from 81-96 A.D., the most likely timeframe for the writing of Revelation, according to the lecture.

- **Emperor Cult:** A system of fostering worship and allegiance to the Roman Empire and its emperor through temples, statues, festivals, and other symbolic acts of devotion.
- **Epistle:** A letter, typically written by an apostle to a church or individual in the New Testament; one of the literary types in the book of Revelation.
- **Genre:** A category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter.
- **Greco-Roman:** Relating to the cultural and intellectual mix of ancient Greece and Rome.
- **Hermeneutics:** The theory and methodology of interpreting texts, especially religious ones.
- **Judaizers:** A group of early Christians who believed that Gentile converts needed to follow the Mosaic Law in order to be saved.
- **Lord:** A title denoting authority and sovereignty, used for both the Roman emperor and for Jesus Christ, leading to conflict for Christians of the time.
- **Patronage:** A relationship of dependency and obligation between a patron (usually of higher status) and a client (usually of lower status) which was a key concept in the Roman Empire and its economy.
- **Peace of Rome (Pax Romana):** A period of relative peace and prosperity in the Roman Empire, attributed to its military might and imperial rule.
- **Prophecy:** A type of literature involving a message or revelation from God delivered through a prophet, often involving predictions or divine judgments; one of the literary types in the book of Revelation.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1, Introduction and Background, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about the Book of Revelation

1. **Why is the Book of Revelation often misunderstood or neglected?** The Book of Revelation is frequently misunderstood or neglected due to its complex and often bizarre imagery and symbolism which can be difficult for readers to interpret. There's also a tendency for some to become obsessed with trying to correlate its visions with modern-day events leading to misinterpretations, while others simply find it too strange and prefer to focus on more familiar biblical texts.
2. **What are the two main approaches the church has historically taken toward the Book of Revelation?** Historically, the church has largely approached Revelation in two ways: obsession and neglect. Obsession involves an unhealthy focus on Revelation, often interpreting it as a direct prediction of contemporary events, while ignoring the rest of the bible. Neglect involves avoiding the book altogether due to its strange and bewildering content, preferring to focus on more straightforward texts.
3. **What is the historical context in which the Book of Revelation was written?** The Book of Revelation was written in the late first century to seven specific churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) that were part of the Roman Empire. These churches faced the challenges of living in a society where emperor worship was demanded and integrated into the political, economic, and religious life, creating a dilemma for Christians who were devoted to Christ. The author, John, was likely in exile for his faith.
4. **What was the "emperor cult" and how did it affect early Christians?** The "emperor cult" was a system of enforced worship and allegiance to Rome and its emperor, who was often seen as divine. This system was integrated into daily life, through temples, festivals, and even the trades. Christians who refused to worship the emperor faced ostracism, persecution, and economic hardship. The pressure to conform presented a real challenge to their exclusive devotion to Jesus Christ.

5. **What were the main issues facing the churches addressed in Revelation chapters 2 and 3?** While some churches were resisting the pressure to conform to the Roman Empire's demands and faced persecution, many others were compromising and becoming complacent. These churches were increasingly incorporating aspects of Roman culture and religion into their lives to avoid conflict. As a result, they were losing their faithful witness.
6. **What is the main purpose of the Book of Revelation, according to the text?** Revelation primarily aims to expose the true nature of the Roman Empire as an idolatrous, godless, violent, and oppressive system that opposes God and demands worship for its rulers. It serves as a prophetic critique of Rome and calls Christians to exclusive worship and obedience to God and Jesus Christ, no matter the cost, while comforting and encouraging those suffering for their faith.
7. **Is "God wins" an accurate and sufficient summary of the Book of Revelation?** While it's true that the book concludes with God's victory, "God wins" is an oversimplification. Revelation emphasizes *how* God wins—through the sacrificial death of Jesus, the suffering of his followers, and their faithful witness. It is not merely about a final triumph, but a call to action and commitment to a particular way of life.
8. **What type of literature is the Book of Revelation, and how does this affect its interpretation?** Revelation is a blend of three literary genres: an apocalypse, a prophecy, and an epistle (a letter). Recognizing these genres helps to understand how the book communicates meaning. It is not intended to be taken as a literal prediction of the end times, but as a message of challenge and encouragement to the first-century churches in light of their specific historical circumstances while also serving as a timeless message for all Christians.