

Dr. David Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3, Hermeneutics of Revelation Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3, Hermeneutics of Revelation, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Dave Mathewson focuses on interpreting the Book of Revelation. He argues that a symbolic, rather than literal, approach is crucial, drawing on the book's apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary genres. Mathewson emphasizes understanding the historical context (first-century Roman Empire) and utilizing Old Testament and Greco-Roman literary sources to interpret the symbolism. He proposes that interpretations should align with what John and his contemporary audience could have understood, primarily aiming to encourage and exhort believers rather than solely predict future events, and stresses the need for humility in interpretation. Finally, he explains the symbolic significance of numbers within the text.

2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3 – 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_Session03.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

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

Briefing Document: Hermeneutics of Revelation - Dr. Dave Mathewson Lecture 3

Introduction

This document summarizes the key principles for interpreting the Book of Revelation, as presented by Dr. Dave Mathewson in his lecture on hermeneutics. Mathewson emphasizes a symbolic, rather than literal, approach to understanding the text, grounding his interpretation in the historical and literary context of the book. He stresses the importance of understanding the first-century audience and their likely interpretation of the text.

Main Themes and Principles

1. Genre and Meaning:

- Revelation is a complex text belonging to three genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter.
- Genre profoundly affects how meaning is conveyed. As E.D. Hirsch states, "meaning is genre-bound."
- The literary genre should inform our interpretation of the text.

1. Symbolic Interpretation (Not Literal):

- **Core Principle:** Revelation should be interpreted symbolically unless the text clearly indicates a literal understanding. Mathewson argues for "turning the literal interpretation principle on its head" and assuming symbols unless otherwise indicated.
- Revelation employs symbols and metaphors to describe real persons, places, and events in a highly imaginative way (similar to a political cartoon).
- Example: The seven-headed beast in Revelation 13 is likely a symbol of the Roman Empire or the Emperor, not a literal, physical beast.

- Revelation 1:20 provides a key: the seven stars are "the angels of the seven churches," and the seven lampstands "are the seven churches." This sets a precedent for interpreting other symbols.
- The description of Jesus in Rev 1:12-17 is symbolic, using imagery (eyes like blazing fire, sword from his mouth) to convey meaning, not a literal depiction.

1. **Historical Background and Context:**

- Understanding the historical circumstances of Revelation's writing is crucial. This includes knowledge of the Roman Empire, the Emperor, and the challenges faced by early Christians.
- The beast image would resonate with first-century readers due to their understanding of Rome.
- Many of Revelation's images are drawn from the Old Testament and Greco-Roman literature.
- John uses imagery that would resonate with both Jewish and Greco-Roman readers.
- Commentaries from scholars like Greg Beale, David Aune, Grant Osborne, George Caird, and Richard Bauckham are recommended for unpacking these backgrounds.

1. **Meaning vs. Reference:**

- While knowing the historical background can help determine what specific persons, places or events the symbols are referring to, it's sometimes more important to focus on the meaning of the symbols themselves (theological significance) rather than pinpointing their exact referents.
- The beast, regardless of its precise identification, represents an oppressive, idolatrous, and godless power.
- Like the political cartoons from the 1940s and 50s in the log cabin story, some of the references are difficult to grasp due to our distance from the original context.

1. **Present, Future, and Past:**

- Revelation addresses the present (1st century) and future, and at times the past.
- Primary focus is on the present situation of the first readers, helping them understand and respond to their context.

- It projects the present onto the broader screen of God's intention for history and depicts future judgment and salvation, similar to Old Testament prophecies.
- The vision of the woman giving birth in Chapter 12 refers to Christ's birth, a past event from John's perspective.

1. **Cyclical Structure:**

- Revelation often cycles between descriptions of the present and the future, moving to the end of history only to circle back and begin again, giving the reader different perspectives.
- Examples include the end of Chapter 6 (final judgment), the end of Chapter 7 (eschatological salvation), and the end of Chapter 11 (God's kingdom established), all of which feel like the end but then the narrative begins anew.
- This cyclical pattern whets the appetite for the fuller revelation of the end in chapters 19-22.

1. **Intended Audience and Meaning:**

- **Key Principle:** Interpretations must be consistent with what John could have intended and what his first-century audience could have understood.
- Reject interpretations that assume the first-century audience couldn't have understood the book.
- Revelation addressed the specific issues and problems of first-century Christians, not just some distant future.
- John's letter does not say to seal up the prophecy like Daniel was told; the time of fulfillment is at hand. "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book because the time is near" (Revelation 22:10) - directly relevant to the first-century readers.

1. **Encouragement and Exhortation:**

- Revelation is primarily a book of encouragement to a suffering church and exhortation to a complacent church, not primarily about predicting the future.
- Its purpose is to encourage believers to worship God and the Lamb exclusively, regardless of consequences.
- Any reading that does not lead to greater obedience, holiness, and worship has missed the point of Revelation.

1. **Humility in Interpretation:**

- Acknowledge the difficulty of interpreting Revelation and admit that one could be wrong.
- Be open to considering different interpretations.
- Avoid dogmatic certainty.
- Rely on good commentaries for guidance.

1. **Symbolic Numbers:**

- Numbers in Revelation should be interpreted symbolically, not literally.
- **Examples: Three and a half:** A short, intense period of time that is cut short. Incomplete.
- **Four:** The entire earth.
- **Six:** Imperfection, falling short of seven.
- **Seven:** Perfection, completion.
- **Ten and its multiples:** Completion, wholeness.
- **Twelve and its multiples:** The people of God (modeled after the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles).
- **Fractions:** Fragments, partial or limited in scope.

Conclusion Dr. Mathewson provides a clear framework for approaching the book of Revelation. He emphasizes the need to understand the text in its historical context, the use of symbolic language and imagery, and the book's primary purpose of encouraging and exhorting God's people. By following these principles, interpreters can move beyond speculation about future events and engage with the profound theological and spiritual message of Revelation.

4. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3, Hermeneutics of Revelation

Revelation Study Guide: Hermeneutics and Interpretation

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. According to the lecture, what are the three literary genres to which the book of Revelation belongs?
2. What is the primary principle for interpreting Revelation, and how does it contrast with the approach the lecturer was taught growing up?
3. What does the lecturer suggest the seven-headed beast in Revelation 13 most likely represents to the first-century readers?
4. How does Revelation 1:20 serve as a key to interpreting the rest of the book's symbols?
5. What are the two primary sources from which John draws the images and symbols he uses in Revelation?
6. What are the two primary purposes the book of Revelation serves for its readers?
7. What does it mean that Revelation is cyclical, as opposed to linear, in its approach to time?
8. What is the principle for interpreting Revelation based on what John and his first-century readers could have understood?
9. What is the primary way that Revelation was meant to encourage and exhort God's people?
10. How does the lecturer recommend we approach the book of Revelation regarding certainty of meaning?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The book of Revelation belongs to three literary genres: it is an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter. Understanding these genres is crucial because meaning is genre-bound; the way a text communicates is directly influenced by its literary type.

2. The primary principle is to interpret Revelation symbolically, not literally, unless the text gives a clear reason to do otherwise. This contrasts with the lecturer's upbringing, where he was taught to interpret literally unless there was a clear reason for symbolism.
3. The lecturer suggests that first-century readers would most likely associate the seven-headed beast with Rome or the Roman Empire, or perhaps even the emperor himself because these entities were known for their oppressive and powerful nature.
4. Revelation 1:20 provides a key by demonstrating that symbols like lampstands and stars are meant to represent something else (churches and their angels), setting a precedent for the symbolic interpretation of the rest of the book's images.
5. John draws the images and symbols he uses in Revelation primarily from two sources: the Old Testament and the Greco-Roman background. Understanding these sources is essential to grasping their meaning.
6. The book of Revelation primarily serves to help its readers understand their present situation by offering a new perspective that is based on the reality of the spiritual realm, and to encourage them to remain faithful to God amidst persecution.
7. Revelation is cyclical in its approach to time because it repeatedly cycles between describing events in the readers' present, the first century, and projecting that on to a depiction of future salvation and judgment, before starting again in the first-century.
8. Interpretations of Revelation must be consistent with what John could have intended and what his first-century readers could have understood. An interpretation that is beyond the grasp of the original audience should be viewed with suspicion.
9. Revelation was meant to encourage those suffering persecution and to warn the church that was compromising its faithfulness to Christ by focusing on the importance of worshiping God and remaining loyal to him, no matter what the consequences.
10. The lecturer recommends that we approach Revelation with a good dose of humility, acknowledging that we might be wrong. It is crucial to consider other interpretations and to avoid dogmatic certainty on end-time events.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Answer each question in essay format.

1. Discuss the importance of genre in interpreting the book of Revelation. How does understanding its nature as an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter affect its interpretation?
2. Explain the concept of symbolic interpretation in the context of Revelation. Provide specific examples from the lecture and discuss why this approach is crucial to a proper understanding of the text.
3. Detail the significance of understanding the historical background and context in interpreting Revelation. How does knowledge of the Roman Empire and the first-century world contribute to a better understanding of the book?
4. Analyze the cyclical nature of time in Revelation. How does this cyclical pattern affect our interpretation of the events and messages in the book?
5. How does the lecturer argue that Revelation is primarily a book of encouragement and exhortation rather than a prediction of the future? What does it mean to say interpretations of Revelation should be something John and his first-century audience could have understood?

Glossary of Key Terms

Apocalypse: A genre of literature characterized by visions, symbolism, and the revelation of hidden realities, often focused on the end times and the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

Hermeneutics: The theory and methodology of interpretation, especially of biblical texts. In this context, it refers to the principles used to understand Revelation.

Symbolic Interpretation: The method of understanding a text by looking beyond the literal words to their deeper, representative meaning. Images and numbers are not taken at face value but are seen to convey a concept or idea.

Greco-Roman Background: The cultural and historical context of the ancient Mediterranean world, combining Greek and Roman traditions. This is important for understanding the influences on the symbols and images used in Revelation.

Literal Interpretation: Understanding a text in its most straightforward and direct meaning without consideration of symbolic or metaphorical intent. The opposite of symbolic interpretation.

Eschatological: Relating to the end times, final judgment, and ultimate destiny of humanity, or the end of the world.

Cyclical: A pattern or concept that repeats or goes through a cycle, returning to its starting point or repeating a series of events or patterns.

Exhortation: An act or instance of strongly encouraging or urging someone to do something. A call to action or to embrace a particular course of behavior.

Complacent: Showing smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one's achievements. Being satisfied with the status quo.

Humility: A modest or low view of one's own importance. The ability to recognize one's own limitations and the possibility of being wrong

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3, Hermeneutics of Revelation, Biblicalearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on Interpreting the Book of Revelation

- How should we approach interpreting the Book of Revelation, literally or symbolically?** The Book of Revelation should primarily be interpreted symbolically, not literally. Its apocalyptic nature means it uses symbols and images to convey meaning, similar to how a political cartoon uses caricatures and figures. While there might be literal elements, particularly concerning references to people, places, and nations, the core message is conveyed through these symbolic depictions, not literal portrayals. We should approach the book by asking, what is this a symbol *of*, not what is this literally. For example, the seven-headed beast in Revelation 13 should not be taken as an actual, physical beast but rather as a symbol likely representing the Roman Empire or its emperor.
- How does the historical context of Revelation influence its interpretation?** Understanding the historical background and circumstances of the first-century readers is crucial. These readers were living under the Roman Empire and facing potential persecution, so the imagery would have resonated with their political and religious environment. For instance, the symbols of the beast and the dragon would likely have evoked the Roman Empire and its oppressive nature for these first-century readers. This historical understanding provides a foundation for deciphering the book's message. Additionally, many of the images John employs are drawn from Old Testament texts, so understanding the Old Testament background helps to decode their significance.
- Does Revelation mainly focus on the present, the future, or the past?** Revelation primarily focuses on the present situation of its first-century readers, aiming to help them make sense of their circumstances and how they should respond. It also references future events, particularly the second coming of Christ and the final judgment, but those future references help frame and explain the present situations for the original audience. While it does have a few references to the past (such as the birth of Jesus in chapter 12), the book cycles between descriptions of the present struggles of the readers and the future resolution of these struggles. This cyclical pattern helps build a fuller picture of the meaning of these circumstances within the broader scope of God's plan for history.

- **What is the significance of numbers within the Book of Revelation?** The numbers in Revelation are not primarily literal, but rather symbolic. The number seven, for example, often symbolizes perfection or completion, while three and a half represents an intense but limited period of time, and six might symbolize imperfection. Twelve or its multiples (like 144,000) often symbolize the people of God. Fractions indicate what is partial or limited. The key principle here is that the numerical value is not what is important, it is the symbolic connotations the numbers would have for the original audience that helps us to interpret the meaning of the text.
- **Why does Revelation seem to circle back, going to the "end" and then returning to an earlier time period?** Revelation has a cyclical pattern that starts by describing events relevant to the first-century readers, then moves to the end of history with Christ's second coming and judgment, and then circles back to describe the present again using different images and symbols. This is a literary technique to provide varied perspectives, allowing readers to grasp the implications of their situation by placing it within the context of God's eternal plan. This cycling effect is also used to build anticipation for the end of the book when there is a fuller description of salvation and judgement.
- **Should current interpretations of Revelation include details that would have been unknown to the first-century readers?** Interpretations of Revelation should be consistent with what John could have intended and what his first-century readers could have understood. An interpretation that relies on knowledge or circumstances far beyond what would have been known to the original readers should be questioned. This helps avoid projecting current events or ideas onto the text that would have no meaning for its original audience and focus the interpretation on the intention of the original author. The intention of the book is to be relevant for the readers that were the first recipients, and then to the church throughout history, so our interpretations should start there.

- **Is Revelation primarily a book of prediction about future events, or something else?** While Revelation does include future elements, its primary purpose is to provide encouragement and exhortation to God's people. It is meant to help them remain faithful and obedient, despite the challenges of their present circumstances and to understand the present circumstances against the larger context of God's intentions for history. It's designed to motivate readers to worship God and follow Christ, regardless of the consequences, rather than simply being a roadmap for the end times. The focus is not primarily on satisfying curiosity about the future or fulfilling literal predictions but on encouraging faithfulness and worship.
- **What is the appropriate posture for interpreters of Revelation?** Interpreting Revelation requires a good deal of humility. Given the symbolic nature of the text and the varied interpretations throughout history, interpreters should be open to considering different perspectives and acknowledging that their own interpretations could be wrong. Dogmatic certainty about every aspect of Revelation is often unwarranted. We should look to reliable commentaries that study the historical and literary background and approach the text with an attitude of learning and seeking wisdom from those who have studied it deeply.