

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 34, Revelation

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 34 on the Book of Revelation.

Okay, before we start, just a couple of announcements, mainly by way of reminder, both of them related to the exam, first of all, is this Thursday, that'd be tomorrow at 8 o'clock in this room, there will be an extra credit review session, and hopefully I'll have, I'll also have a review sheet, a study guide up on Blackboard as well so that you can look at some, I'll have that sometime before the review session. So that is a Thursday, that is an extra credit review session. I'm still working on the possibility, though not the certainty, but the possibility of a review session for the final exam as well.

The second thing is, as I said, this Friday is your last class here, except, because I'll be gone, but on Monday, next Monday will be exam number four, which covers Hebrews through Revelation. Though I will not be here, I do have someone to come and monitor the exam during the period, so you'll show up on Monday, as you would for any class, and you'll take exam number four, and then that is it until the final, which I think is Wednesday of finals week, the 18th of finals week. I can't remember the exact time, but also this Friday I will talk a little bit about the final exam, just to mention a couple of things, and there will eventually be a study guide.

I also would remind you, too, if you want to see, if you want to look at copies of previous exams, you can stop by my office and pick those up, or if you just want to email me and ask for them, I can email you copies. Of course, I can't give you exam number four yet, because you haven't taken that, but I can give you the first three exams, but again, I'll be gone for all week, so if you're not able to stop by and pick up a hard copy by Friday, then please email me and I can email you copies of the exams to look at and study, because, as I said, the final exam, although the wording may be different, or the answer and question portions may be swapped or something like that, the final exam is covered in the same material as the four section exams. There's no new material, so anything from the semester, the whole semester, is fair game, but it will be stuff that appeared on the four-section exams.

If there's material in your notes that was not covered from any of the section exams, you're not responsible for that. So, again, if you do want to see previous exams, as I said, I don't care what you do with them, because I won't be here, so you can't sell them or anything like that or pass them on, because whoever's teaching New Testament next year will no doubt use very, very different exams, use his own exams. Tomorrow, 8 o'clock.

8 o'clock in this room. Yes, yeah, here, Jenks room 406. Good.

All right, let's open with prayer, and what I want to do today and on Friday, then, the time we do have Friday, is talk about the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation, which I'd intended to spend a little bit more time on, but for various reasons, we won't spend as much time as I thought we would, but still I want to give you a sense of what the book is and what it's about and primarily leave you with a sense of how to read it in light of the kind of literature it is, a sense in light of how it was functioning, what is a sensible way to read the Book of Revelation, and we'll talk a little bit about that today, but let's open with prayer. Father, thank you for sustaining us and keeping us, particularly during this stressful time as we approach the end of the semester, which means projects and looking forward to finals and all those other things. Lord, we pray for the continued provision of strength and endurance.

Father, I pray that that will not distract us from thinking clearly and sensibly about your word, and now as we consider the last book of the New Testament and the Bible, Father, I pray that you will instill in us a desire to read it and listen to it more carefully, but also the ability to read it sensibly as you intended it to be understood and as you intended to communicate it. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

All right. The Book of Revelation. This is a picture of—I don't know if anyone's ever seen these or studied these, but these are a series of woodcuts by Albrecht Dreher, and he produced a series of famous wood engravings or woodcuts on the Book of Revelation.

This is Revelation chapter 6, the so-called four horsemen of the apocalypse, where in chapter 6, when the seals of the scroll are broken with the breaking of the first four seals, a different colored horse with a rider rides out onto the scene of John's vision. But these woodcuts are some of the well-known and famous representations, visual representations of Revelation that have been passed down to us and are very influential. But when we think about the Book of Revelation, and when you think about how it has been read and understood throughout history and how it has been treated, there have been at least two possible very general responses.

One of the responses is to basically reject it or ignore it because Revelation is such a strange book to us, and we'll ask why that's the case. But because it's such an odd and peculiar book, because it's full of symbolism and images that simply sometimes don't resonate with us at all, we have nothing to relate them to, almost no way to identify with some of them. Some of them we do, but others, I mean, where does—What in the world is John doing in describing this vision of locusts that have human heads and teeth like a lion and tails like scorpion? I mean, where in the world did he get that? And all these scenes of bloodshed and slaughter, and just the uncertainty

that has surrounded its interpretation and all the variety of ways it's been read, for some, signals kind of a do-not-enter sign.

It's as if Revelation, although it claims to be unsealed, although John sees a book in his vision that's unsealed, for most of us, Revelation remains unsealed or still remains sealed. That is, it has a sign off-limits or caution, one of those yellow caution tapes wrapped around the book, so we tend to stay away from it and steer clear. As brilliant a scholar and thinker and theologian as John Calvin was back in the Reformation time, he wrote a commentary on every New Testament book except for Revelation because he didn't know what to do with it.

In my opinion, there are a lot of people that would have done better to follow his advice and his lead. But that's one possible approach is to simply neglect it and steer away and go back to the safer ground of Paul's letters, where we read about salvation and justification by faith and obedience to Christ, etc. Another approach is to become so obsessed with it that it becomes the center of all our thinking our activity and all our energy.

So, again, it's interesting, if you were to go back to your computer and Google Revelation or Apocalypse, you would find entire websites, and entire ministries devoted to understanding and interpreting the book of Revelation. Most of you are familiar with this. If you haven't read them, you've seen them at one point, the Left Behind series produced by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

Although they are clearly fictional, they are still meant to portray precisely how these readers think the book of Revelation is going to play out in the end. So the idea is, as you read these books, there's a sense that things are moving in this direction. You can see how things could easily arrive at the scenario that these two authors paint.

And so, you find books, you find ministries, websites, almost obsessed with the book of Revelation and trying to understand it and trying to squeeze it into the mold of the 21st century. So, we look at the 21st century and what is going on in the Middle East and in Europe and then in the United States, and then we try to ask how that fits in with what we read in a book like Revelation. Again, almost an obsession trying to figure that out.

So those are two extremes that are not unique in the 21st century. They have, in fact, characterized interpretations of Revelation not long after the book was written and came into the Christian canon. Again, either rejecting it and neglecting it out of uncertainty about what to do with it, or, again, becoming so obsessed and enthralled with it that one can think about little else than the book of Revelation and how events in our own day seem to be playing out as kind of a script that was already written in advance in the book of Revelation.

Now, what I'm going to suggest to you, though, that if I can kind of tip my hat as far as my approach to the book out front, in my opinion, we need to, first of all, treat Revelation, and hopefully I'll be able to demonstrate this, we need to treat Revelation like any other book in the New Testament. That is, we need to ask the main question, what in the world was the author trying to communicate, and what situation was the author most likely addressing? One thing, hopefully, you will come away with understanding, is in the same way that Paul wrote, although there are still the scriptures of God's people that continue to reveal God and speak to us today, in the same way that Paul wrote the book of Galatians to a very specific crisis and problem in the church and a very specific readership, Revelation, I think, is the same way. The author is writing a book that addresses a very specific problem and set of circumstances in the first century.

And so, in the same way that we try to reconstruct and understand what was going on behind Galatians or behind 1 Peter or any other book so that we can understand it better today, I think we have to do the same thing with Revelation. I'm always perplexed when I hear some persons who should know better treat all the New Testament books like that, that is, what did the author intend, what was most likely he intended, what was the original situation and circumstances that Paul or Peter or John or whoever was addressing, but then they get to the book of Revelation and they completely abandon that. They start trying to read Revelation again as kind of a script of the 21st century written in advance.

And so, we kind of throw caution to the wind and start asking what in the world is going on in our day seems to match up what we read in Revelation. And we fail to ask the question, why might this book have been written? What problem in the 1st century could have been addressed? What most likely did the author who wrote this book and had this vision that's recorded in this book, what most likely was he trying to communicate? So, I think that has to be our starting point. Like any other New Testament book, before we can ask the question of how this book continues to speak to my situation, and how this book resonates in the 21st century, we need to first ask what were the original circumstances in which this book was produced. What was the problem or issue that it was addressing? What was the author trying to do and try to accomplish in writing this book? First of all then, so what I want to do then is address a series of issues very briefly related to the background that gave rise to Revelation.

That is, like we have in other books, trying to construct a scenario, what most likely was going on that caused John to sit down and write this book in the first place. First of all, as far as the author and date, I don't want to say a lot about that. It's beyond dispute that someone named John wrote this book because he identifies himself as John, the author John, in the very 1st chapter.

The problem is that we know of a number of Johns in the 1st century. In fact, the early church as well as modern evangelical Christian scholars sometimes are divided as to exactly who this John was. Was it the same John who was the apostle of Jesus Christ that may have written the 4th Gospel and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John? Is that the same John? That's a strong possibility and there's a strong tradition behind that that again comes very early.

But it's interesting. When you read the book carefully, the author never claims the authority of an apostle like Paul did in writing his book. And one thing we're going to see, Revelation is also a letter.

It's not just this prophecy or a wild vision. Revelation is also a letter where the author identifies himself. But it's interesting.

He doesn't identify himself as an apostle and he doesn't claim the authority of an apostle like Paul often did. That doesn't mean he's not one. But what I want to point out is the author claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet.

We've said before that a number of New Testament documents appear to be written without any inclination on the part of the author that he was writing scripture. Again, go back and read Luke 1, 1-4. You don't have any hint.

Luke doesn't seem to think or even realize he's writing scripture. He's just writing a narrative of the life of Christ because he saw fit to do so. But with Revelation, I'm convinced that the author, John, whoever he was, whether he was the apostle John or some other John, a leader in the early church, the author, I think he did think he was writing scripture.

He was writing something that rivaled the Old Testament or was to be taken on the same level of authority as the Old Testament prophets did. So, I think Revelation is one book where the author did think he was writing scripture. Maybe he didn't think, well, this is going to be included in a canon of the New Testament or maybe he didn't think it was going to be included in the Old Testament.

But clearly, he seems to think he's writing something on the same level of authority and as the fulfillment and completion of the Old Testament prophetic witness. So, whoever this John is, whether, again, it's John the apostle or another well-known John in the early church, he's writing a book with the authority of an Old Testament, not an apostle, Old Testament prophet. When it was written, there were a number of suggestions, and I don't want to go through all of them.

The most common suggestion today for the date of Revelation is that Revelation was written sometime in the last half of the last decade of the first century. That is around 95, 96 AD when the emperor Domitian, if you go to the very end of your

notes for this class, the New Testament notebook, I have a list of emperors. You can scroll up, starting with the very first one down into the second century.

If you scroll down that list, you'll find Domitian's name reigning in, again, roughly 95 to 96 AD would have probably been the time when Revelation was written. It doesn't tell us, but again, there's some early church testimony from the second century or so that locates Revelation during that time. There are other indications in the text that it certainly fits what we know about the reign of Domitian, the Roman emperor ruling during this time.

So, most likely, Revelation could lay claim, either Revelation or the Gospel of John or maybe 1 John, one of those three books could lay claim to being the very last New Testament book written. But Revelation clearly, again, comes at the end of the Old New Testament, not because of its chronological order, but for a number of other reasons, but probably could have been the very last book written, but most likely sometime 75, 76 AD, towards the very end of the first century when Rome was ruled by the emperor Domitian at that time. Now, when you think, before we look at a couple of issues related to its background, one thing related to its background is more related to its literary type, but one of the most characteristic features of the book of Revelation is its symbolism.

Revelation is a book that is shot through with a very unique and graphic symbolism. You have seven-headed dragons and beasts running around the visionary landscape of Revelation. As I said, you have locusts that have human heads with hair like a woman, teeth like a lion, and gold crowns on their heads, but tails like scorpions.

And when they fly, it sounds like rushing wind. I mean, what in the world is that? So, it's full of all kinds of colors. It's full of all kinds of numbers and measurements.

It's just kind of a feast for the eyes as far as its visionary quality is concerned. We'll talk more about how we understand that, but it's important to realize the most characteristic feature of Revelation is its symbolism, which means that when we interpret Revelation, we will not interpret it with a strict literalness that we might other kinds of literature. Instead, we are going to respect its symbolic value, and we're going to ask, how do we understand these symbols? What are they trying to communicate? Rather than simply interpreting them like we would a scientific formula or discovery or some news report or something like that.

So, the most characteristic feature of Revelation is its symbolism. Now, this brings us to the question, why would John write a book like that? The first thing to recall is if it's correct to place Revelation towards the end of the first century, one of the things that, and this kind of goes back to the first week or so of this class, we talk quite a bit about the fact that politically and religiously during this time, Rome basically ruled over everything. Rome was the dominant empire and the superpower of the day.

Furthermore, especially towards the end of the first century, while there was still nothing like an emperor-wide or officially sanctioned persecution of Christians, there certainly was a context of Roman domination and imperial rule that often made it uncomfortable for Christians to live in. Especially with the increase and prominence of emperor worship. Virtually everywhere you went in a Greco-Roman city, whether it was in Rome itself or in Asia Minor or even Greece, you would have not only seen temples dedicated to various gods, but it was becoming more common, though at first, it was usually only acceptable to worship or dedicate a temple to a dead emperor, but it was becoming more common to deify and set up temples to living emperors.

For example, the city of Ephesus, one of the cities to which revelation was addressed, contained a temple erected in honor of the emperor Domitian. Most of the major cities in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, and elsewhere, would have, along with temples dedicated to pagan gods, would have also had temples dedicated to emperors. Sometimes, once in a while, the emperor himself would sanction the building of these temples, but more often than not, the emperor really had nothing to do with them.

It was more the local officials in the town, the wealthy persons, who wanted to kind of show their gratitude and their loyalty to Rome. They would establish these temples in honor of the emperor. And it was expected then that you participated at certain events or in certain occasions, you would participate in certain occasions to show your gratitude and your honor and even worship the emperor and Rome, to show them that everything you own, your well-being, your physical well-being, spiritual well-being, everything you owed a debt of gratitude to the Roman Empire.

And so, there were numerous opportunities to express that. Even the cities of the first century, there would have been a number of visual reminders in the form of statues and temples, engravings, and other kinds, even on the coinage, a reminder of the significance of the emperor and everything that Rome had done for you. And to fail to show gratitude, to fail to show loyalty and allegiance to the emperor and to Rome would have been treated as a sign of extreme disrespect and disloyalty.

Now, it's often, the book of Revelation is often associated with persecution. That is, we often see Revelation as a source of comfort to Christians who are being persecuted. Yet, when you read the book carefully, and most, let me back up and say, that most of the information that we have about the readers of Revelation comes out of chapters 2 and 3. These seven letters or seven messages to seven churches in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey.

And a couple of those you recognize. One of them is Pergamum. Remember the lost letters of Pergamum? The other one is Ephesus.

But there are a number of letters that are addressed to churches in Asia Minor. And this is where we get much of the information. When you read those letters, there's something interesting that emerges.

Out of those seven letters, only two of those churches or two of those letters are addressed to churches who are suffering any kind of harassment or persecution. Remember again, I would emphasize, Domitian is not on some quest to wipe out Christians. There's not some officially sanctioned emperor-wide attempt to destroy Christians.

Most of the persecution came at the local level. It wasn't necessarily Domitian that was doing this. Most of the persecution, mistreatment, and harassment would have come at a local level from those authorities who wanted to make sure that Christians and everyone showed proper respect and loyalty to Rome.

So, what is intriguing though is when you read those seven letters that tell us most of the information we know about the readers, only two of those seven churches were suffering any kind of mistreatment and persecution. In the other five, the main problem is that the cities of Asia Minor, out of those seven cities, most of the Christians living in those cities of Asia Minor were more tempted, the main problem was compromising with Roman rule or imperial rule. That is, they thought that one could worship Caesar and worship Jesus Christ at the same time.

So, it appears that the main problem behind Revelation is not persecution, although there are some who are being persecuted, and one person by the name of Antipas, do you remember that name? One of the fictional characters in *Lost Letters of Pergamum*. One person by the name of Antipas has, in fact, lost his life. But you don't yet have this wide-scale persecution of Christians being dragged out in the streets and being beheaded and put to death and things like that.

That isn't quite happening. But again, most of the persecution is more at a local level in the form of harassment, and one person has, in fact, died for his faith, this person named Antipas in Pergamum. But otherwise, the main problem in the cities in Asia Minor is, again, all these cities were affected by Roman rule.

You couldn't go anywhere and escape the long arm of Roman rule. And again, most of these, all of these seven cities in Revelation 2 and 3, almost of them would have had a temple built in honor of the Roman emperor and required or expected that people would show their loyalty to and even worship to Imperial Rome as a sign of gratitude for all the things that Rome had done, all the blessings that Rome had done. Rome and the emperor were seen as the savior of the world.

Rome offered true peace and well-being for those who fell within its rule and those who submitted to its rule. And so, you can see why many Christians were quite willing to compromise. They wondered, can we remain faithful to Jesus Christ but still remain faithful to Rome? Can we worship Jesus Christ and still worship Caesar? And some Christians were saying, yes, we can.

So, what was the plight? In light of this, what was the plight of Christians? The plight of Christians was twofold. Number one is some of them, some of them indeed were suffering harassment and persecution because of their witness for Jesus Christ, because of their refusal to worship Caesar and to worship Christ alone. But second, others were interested or willing to compromise.

And again, that seems to be the main problem behind Revelation. The primary problem it addresses is not persecution. The primary problem Revelation addresses is complacency and compromise among the Christians living in these cities within the context of imperial Roman rule.

This is, you've seen this slide before, earlier on I think. This is the remains of the Temple of Domitian in Ephesus. And again, most of the cities would have had temples built in honor of the emperor along with other pagan temples to pagan gods.

You've seen this as well. This is simply a map of the missionary journeys of Paul. But the cities, Smyrna is one of the cities mentioned.

The cities that John is addressing that Revelation is written to are situated in Western Asia Minor, which again, was kind of a hotbed of Roman rule and imperial and emperor worship. So, what is the major theme of Revelation? If it's not persecution, what is it? Basically, what John is going to try to do is to try to convince his readers try to convince his readers to follow Jesus Christ, to obey Jesus Christ no matter what the cost. By demonstrating that only Jesus Christ is worthy of their worship, even if it requires suffering on the part of the people.

So, over and over, in all these stirring visions and strange symbols, whatever we make of them, at the heart of John's message is an attempt to convince his readers that only Jesus Christ is worthy of worship even if it means suffering. And to get them to resist the temptation to show their allegiance and worship to the pagan Roman empire that many of them are tempted to follow. But at the same time, encouraging those who are resisting to encourage them to continue to do so by maintaining faithful witness to Jesus Christ no matter what the cost.

So, what that means is the main theme of Revelation is not end times. It's not primarily about the end times. It's primarily about the first-century readers trying to

get them to understand that they have everything to lose if they throw their lot in with Rome.

If they place their confidence and trust and their worship and allegiance in Rome, this pagan empire, they have everything to lose. But instead, they should embrace Jesus Christ. They should follow Jesus Christ in obedience no matter what it costs, no matter how much they might have to suffer in doing so.

And some have already suffered and John envisions more to come. So, Revelation is both an encouragement but even more so a warning. Now, what kind of book is Revelation? Again, we've talked about this so I just want to repeat what we said earlier in the semester when we talked about literary genres in the New Testament.

Revelation is actually kind of a unique hybrid form. It actually consists of three different fairly distinct literary types blended into one book. And I want to focus on two of them.

One of them is that Revelation is clearly what is known as an apocalypse or at least we call it an apocalypse. They wouldn't have called Revelation an apocalypse necessarily in the first century. That's a term that we have used to designate this type of literature.

What an apocalypse is, at least given the title we've given it, what apocalypse is, it's basically a first-person narrative account of someone's visionary experience. And what happens is someone has a vision and now they write that down for the benefit of the readers. In a sense, they can re-experience the vision that the person had.

So that's why he communicates in all this graphic, strange imagery. He wants his readers to feel and experience the vision in a similar way that the author did when he had the vision himself. So, the author has his vision communicated by God to him and now writes that vision down.

What an apocalypse does is an apocalypse basically, the main thing an apocalypse does is not so much predict the future, though it does that partially, but it's an attempt to help the readers understand and make sense of their present situation. And I always describe it like this. An apocalypse works like this.

If you go and watch a play, all you see is what's going on in the stage. You see all the actors interacting with each other and you see the different scenes and the different movements in the play and you hear the dialogue and then once it's over, it's done. However, as you're aware, in a traditional stage setting, there's a big curtain behind the play and if you were to lift that curtain, you would see that there's much more than meets the eye.

There's a director back there, there are costume designers and those that help people change from costume to costume, and there are the set persons that take down and put up various sets. There are all kinds of things going on behind the scenes that make the play work as you observe it with your visible eyes, though you don't necessarily see behind the curtain. That's what an apocalypse is.

An apocalypse unveils, it lifts the curtain so that you can see behind the scenes to see that there's more than just what meets the eye. Now, let's put that in the context of the first Christians. As you have Christians living in Asia Minor, I'll go back to this map just briefly, as you have Christians living in Asia Minor with Rome ruling over everything, that's all they see.

From their empirical viewpoint of the world, all they see is the Roman Empire ruling all things and in control of the world. And all they see are all these signs of imperial rule and the pressure they have to show gratitude, even worship to the Roman Empire. What revelation does as an apocalypse, and the word apocalypse means a revealing or unveiling, what it does, that it lifts the curtain so they can see behind the stage of their first-century world to see there's more than what meets the eye.

Behind what I see lies an entire heavenly world and a future towards which history is moving. And having seen that, now they are able to see their world in a new light. So now that they have, for example, in Revelation 4-5, John sees a vision of heaven with God and Jesus Christ seated on the throne and all of creation acknowledging their sovereignty.

Having seen that, then John can go back and look at his world and say, that's not all there is to it. That's deceptive in a sense. Yes, Rome rules visibly, empirically, I see Roman rule, but now I have had a vision where I know that behind the scenes that is not necessarily perceptible to the visible eye, God and Jesus Christ are actually on the throne ruling over the entire cosmos.

And at the end, there is a goal to which my existence is moving, and that is a new creation where God and the Lamb and God's people will reign and rule supreme. So with that knowledge, now John can look at his first-century existence and situation in a brand new light. Yeah, Rome isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Caesar is not the final authority. And we don't need to worry about resisting Roman rule. There's no need to give in to worship because the true king is seated on his throne, on his heavenly throne.

So that's what Revelation does. Again, I find it helpful to compare it to the stage is first-century Asia Minor that John sees. But when Revelation, when he has this vision, it lifts the curtain so he can see behind and beyond his first century to see there's a far bigger picture.

Rome is not all there is to it. What I see with my physical eye in Asia Minor is not the complete story. There's an entire heavenly world with God seated on his throne and there's a future towards which things are moving.

Now with that, armed with that new perspective, John can now encourage his readers to live and respond appropriately to the situation. So that's kind of what an apocalypse does. The other one, to skip ahead, the other literary form of Revelation, that we probably overlook but Revelation participates in is the form of a letter.

Revelation ends, begins, and ends just like one of Paul's letters. How that is significant is in the same way that the book of, I'm sorry, in the same way that Paul's letters, for example, Galatians, were addressing very specific problems, so Revelation is addressing a very specific issue. And in the same way that Paul was addressing his readers with information that they could understand and would meet their crisis and provide answers, in the same way, I take it that Revelation is communicating a message that would have been understood by the first-century readers.

Again, it's a letter. It's addressed to a very specific problem and the church needs to see their problem and situation in a new light and Revelation provides that. So again, we often focus on, oh, this is a prophecy, this is an apocalypse, but we often forget it's a letter as well.

And so, John uses the form of a letter because that's the best way to immediately address his readers and to address their specific situation in a way that they will understand. So, Revelation must contain information that the readers can grasp and understand that will meet their problems, will help them respond to the crisis that they're facing, which is Roman rule and emperor worship. All right, so in light of this, how should I interpret Revelation? First of all, as I've already said, Revelation is symbolic and not literal.

I was raised in a church that said you need to interpret Revelation literally and only interpret it symbolically if nothing else works. I would flip that in its head and say you should interpret everything in Revelation symbolically unless there's really, really good reason not to. Because Revelation is an apocalypse.

It unveils heaven in the future, but it does so in highly symbolic language. Perhaps the symbolic language is fitting for information that cannot be grasped just by the human senses but now requires kind of a mysterious type of language, a symbolism that is meant to get you not only to understand cognitively the meaning of John's Revelation but to feel it as well. In other words, John's not just after your mind, he's after your emotions as well when he writes this letter.

So, in my opinion then, when we read through Revelation, we must interpret it symbolically. Revelation is not like watching a CNN news broadcast on what's going on in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world. It's more like taking a walk through an art gallery and seeing different symbolic portrayals of different events, a series of artistic, visionary depictions of the different events as they roll before John's eyes throughout the book.

So, what that means is that it's important to read it, not to say, well, what does this mean? What does this refer to and how is this going to be fulfilled? But sometimes just to read it to kind of get the point and to feel, to respond to it, not just mentally, but emotionally as well to John's vision. Second, the meaning of Revelation, however, we interpret the symbols, the chapters, and the different visions in Revelation, the meaning of the book must be something John intended and his readers would have understood. Remember, Revelation is a letter.

In other words, Revelation is not to be understood as if John sits down and looks at a crystal ball and sees the future and now he comes back. He sits down and looks into a crystal ball and sees the 21st century unfold and now he goes back and tries to explain that to his readers. No.

Revelation as a letter, Revelation was written by an author to first-century readers to address their needs with something they could understand. So that means any interpretation of Revelation that John could not have possibly intended and his first-century readers could never have grasped should probably be rejected. So again, when I hear people talking about, well, this refers to nuclear warfare or this refers to Osama Bin Laden or this refers to computers or on and on or the barcodes, again, ask yourself, could John really have intended that? And would his readers have ever understood that? If the answer is no, then red flags should go up in your mind.

Remember, we need to interpret Revelation like we do any other book in the New Testament. First of all, by asking, what did this book most likely mean in its first-century context? What was John the author living in first-century Asia Minor, what was he trying to communicate to his readers living in first-century Asia Minor, pre-technological first-century Asia Minor that didn't have computers and thermonuclear warheads and helicopters and all those other things? Yeah, the question is, what about the Old Testament prophets who appeared to prophesy sometimes better than they knew? Yeah, I mean, I would temper what I just said by saying this does not mean that John understood everything, how everything would be fulfilled, and how everything would wrap up, but it does mean if he didn't know it, then neither do we. The second thing is, John actually reverses what the Old Testament prophets, especially what Daniel does.

At the end of the book of Daniel, the Old Testament book of Daniel, which is a very similar book to Revelation, in fact, Revelation draws on Daniel a lot. At the very end

of the book of Daniel, after Daniel sees all these visions, he is told by an angel to seal up the contents of this book because it's for a later time. When you get to the end of Revelation, John is told by an angel, don't seal up the words of the prophecy because the time is now.

In other words, this is already being fulfilled in the day of the readers. With the coming of Christ, what the Old Testament prophets anticipated and prophesied was now being fulfilled so John is told, don't seal this up. It's not for a later generation.

It's for now. It's for your first-century readers. So, yes, John may not have understood all the implications and how everything was going to pan out and be fulfilled, but if he didn't, neither do we.

But when he does understand, when he does describe even events that he may not have understood the full significance of, when he does describe them, he still uses language that his readers are familiar with. He's not describing tanks and helicopters and things from the 21st century. He's using language and images that come right out of his first-century context and out of the Old Testament.

Third, don't lose sight of the forest for the trees. Don't get so bogged down in trying to figure out all the details and what everything refers to that you missed the main message. Revelation has much to say about almost every area of Christian belief.

It has so much to say about who Christ is, who God is, what it means to trust in Jesus Christ, and what it means to follow Him in obedience. It has so much to say about worship, salvation by grace through faith, and what it means to live a life of obedience and discipleship to Jesus Christ. Yet we miss that when all we do is try to treat Revelation like a code where we say, what in the 21st century does this refer to? And we go through and draw all these detailed correspondences.

So don't become so preoccupied with examining all the individual trees and the forest, that is the little details of the vision that you don't see what the whole forest looks like. And Revelation's visions all communicate something important, yet we miss that if we become too obsessed with and preoccupied with all the details. Related to that, don't miss the main purpose of Revelation, and that is exhortation to holy living.

Revelation is not primarily about predicting the future. It's trying to motivate the readers to holy living and obedience to Jesus Christ. Even if it requires their suffering.

And finally, a good dose of humility is a virtue when interpreting Revelation. Due to the distance, to the fact that we're reading, again, somebody else's mail, we're reading a book that communicates in images and symbols that we're not privy to. And given all the controversy surrounding the book and the various ways it's been

interpreted, we always need to approach it with humility and be open to correcting the way we've been taught to read it or the way we've read it in the past.

Now, two other things I want to cover. First of all, in light of what I've just said about reading Revelation, it's often helpful to understand how Christians throughout the century have approached the book so that we can learn what to avoid or how we should approach the book. Generally, although this scheme is far too simplistic, I think, but it's so common, and it's kind of a good starting point for trying to classify how Christians have approached the book.

In history, there have been four general approaches to interpreting Revelation, but there's variation within all of these. The first one is what is often known as the Preterist approach. So, if you're ever reading a commentary in Revelation or a book on Revelation, and they talk about a Preterist view, the Preterist view basically says, Revelation only referred to events in the first century.

So, it wasn't predicting anything outside of the first century. Everything in Revelation basically was fulfilled in the first century. So, Revelation is not some prophecy about the future.

It's kind of a commentary on the present first-century situation. So, in other words, Revelation's already all been fulfilled. But like any other book in the New Testament, we can still apply it to our lives as God's people, but we have to understand, that Revelation, according to this view, known as the Preterist view, Revelation is not predicting the future.

It's simply predicting and describing events that already took place in the first century. A second approach is known as the historical approach. This one I don't want to spend a lot of time on because it's really no longer in vogue.

You don't see many people holding to this, and you can see why. This approach says Revelation is basically a forecast of history. And so, this approach often did, it took momentous events throughout history, usually starting back in the third or fourth century, and even up until the 19th and 20th century, it would take crucial events or movements or ideologies and ways of thinking and line them up with certain events in Revelation.

So, Revelation was kind of seen as a history book written in advance. Now, what would be the problem with this? What can you see right off the top of your head would be the problem with this approach? There's a number, but there's one basic one. Again, this approach has been around for quite some time.

Again, what it does, Revelation is just kind of a history book written before, and it anticipates and predicts the main movements and events in history. Yeah, that's right. That's right.

What happens when you come to the end, and the end has not yet arrived? What usually happens then is this view has to continually be revised, to take into consideration new events and new shifts in history and in thinking and technology and things like that. So you're exactly right. This had to be revised so many times.

You don't see many people holding to this approach anymore. There's a third approach that is important. This is known as the idealist approach.

What the idealist approach says is that Revelation is... Revelation does not specifically refer to any particular events or any time in history. It's basically a grand symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil that again demonstrates that God wins and is triumphant in a new creation. So, it's just a general symbolic picture that could be true of numerous times in history.

So, yes, it does describe the first century, but since it's just kind of a general symbolic view of the struggle between God and evil, it could refer to any period in church history that it fits. So that's known as the ideal view. The symbols are ideal symbols.

They're just general symbols. They don't refer to anything specific. They're just general symbols that could be applied to numerous situations.

That's known as the idealist. You can see the advantages. Then we don't have to worry about trying to figure out exactly what is Revelation predicting.

They'd say, oh, it's not predicting anything. It's just a general symbolic picture that can be made to fit. In the first century for John, it fit that situation, but it could fit many more until Jesus Christ comes back.

The last approach that has been one of the most popular is known as the futurist, and that approach basically says almost everything in Revelation after chapters 4 and 5, almost everything in Revelation refers to a period of time sometime in the future. That is, nothing in Revelation has taken place yet. It's all a prediction of future events.

So, from our perspective, we're still waiting for these things to be fulfilled. Obviously, the left-behind series would fit into this, but there's a variety of approaches that fit the futurist. Not everybody who thinks that Revelation is the future would try to predict the end or anything like that.

Many of them say, no, that's impossible, but they would still hold that Revelation is largely a prediction of events that have not yet happened but will happen right before and leading up to and including the second coming of Christ. In other words, the preterist view would say all of Revelation is already, and the futurist would say, no, Revelation is about the not yet, if I can use that language. Of course, I can.

I do it all the time. So, again, there are a couple of other approaches, I think, that could be added to these and should be added, but if you ever read about Revelation, most throughout history, at least Christians especially, their approaches could largely be divided into these four movements. Again, except for the second one, the other three are still very popular approaches to interpreting Revelation today.

Now, so which one is right? Well, maybe you've guessed by the next section in your notes, the question, do we have to choose? I wonder if based on the setting and based on the kind of literature Revelation is, if somehow a combination of these three perhaps is not the correct approach. Yes, Revelation, I think the preterist view does in some respects do justice to Revelation. It is addressing the first century.

It is trying to make sense of the reader's first-century world. It refers to events that are taking place or will take place in the first century. It would do no good, at least to my understanding, it would do no good for Revelation just to predict a bunch of events that are going to take place in the 21st century.

What good does that do for first-century readers wondering if they should give in to worshipping Rome or not? So, there's a sense where that's true, but at the same time, Revelation is the future. It does point to an end, a goal, where history is moving. It does end with a new creation, with God establishing His kingdom and a new creation at the end of history.

So, there is a future element. And a lot of John's symbols that come out of the Old Testament are kind of trans-temporal symbols, symbols that certainly can apply and have meaning to a variety of situations. For him, it was the first century.

But John picks up symbols that have been applied to other nations and other crises in the past, in the Old Testament. Now, he reapplies them. So, in a sense, even his symbols are trans-temporal.

They are ideal symbols that could find more than one application. So, I think we should probably keep all three of these approaches in mind as we read through Revelation. Now, let me end just by saying this.

We'll talk a little bit more about this on Friday. Everyone knows what this is. And I show these cartoons.

Seriously, I'm not poking fun at anybody or any situation. I'm just using some common political cartoons that have become popular in the last... this one, the last couple of days, but another one in the last few months. Now, when you look at this, what is this cartoon saying? I mean, if you were to go over to Pakistan, would you find a mailbox that said 9-11 and it had all these signs on the... would you find this? Probably not.

Or if you took a photo... if you took a camera over there, your digital camera, and snapped a picture of the compound in which they caught bin Laden, would you find this? Is that what your photograph would turn out as? Probably not. What is this saying? I'm not looking for... just think about that. It's saying something about the political event.

One more, quickly. This goes back a few months to March Madness. But notice the brackets have to do with... it's going for \$5 a gallon.

Again, is the point of this that if I went to Washington D.C. or somewhere, would I find five men and this other person here with this long pole, would I find them in a room watching this bracket and commenting on it, literally? No, that's not the point. The point is that the function of a political cartoon has a way of interpreting the events in our lives in a way that straightforward comment and prose may not. The point is not that these are literal.

The point is that these are rather symbolic and exaggerated ways of making a point about certain political events. In my opinion, the political cartoon is one of the closest literary analogies to Revelation that we have today. Again, we read letters and we write and read stories and write letters and stories, but when's the last time you read an apocalypse? We don't read and write apocalypses anymore.

That's part of the problem in interpreting revelation. In my opinion, the political cartoon is one of the closest literary analogies to what Revelation is trying to do. On Friday, we'll talk a little bit more about that and then look at two or three specific texts in Revelation.

This was Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 34 on the Book of Revelation.