

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 35, Revelation

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, lecture 35, The Book of Revelation.

Okay, your last New Testament class.

No cheering, please. What, as I said before, we do need to, I do need to let you out at a quarter till because I have a plane to Colorado to catch. So, at about a quarter till, we wrap up what I want to do though is talk about the Book of Revelation briefly in regard to just two or three passages.

If you're interested, if this isn't enough, I am offering a May, this technically isn't the last class I'm teaching. I am offering a May term class on interpreting the Book of Revelation. So, if you're interested.

But I want to just review briefly what we talked about in regard to what Revelation is doing and what it's about and then illustrate that by looking at a handful of text. Before we do that, the other announcement is Monday in this class, same time, same place, is your exam number four. And I will not be here but one of my former TAs will be monitoring the exam during that time and then you're off until the final.

Yep. What time is the final? Good question. It's Wednesday.

I think it's Wednesday. Wednesday, 2.30 to 4.30, okay? What? It's Wednesday. It's Wednesday of final exam week.

So, you might check your schedule to be sure. All right. Let's open with prayer and then we'll look at the Book of Revelation for a few minutes.

Father, thank you for bringing us to this point for sustaining us, and giving us strength and energy. And we pray that you will continue to sustain us as we face finals and final projects and begin to wrap things up. Lord, we ask for your help and enablement to do that. And, Lord, I pray now that as we think about the Book of Revelation we'll learn to think sensibly about it and understand how it continues to function as your authoritative word to your people today. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Right. I suggested to you that the Book of Revelation was primarily written to address Christians who were living primarily in Western Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey.

The main problem that they faced was not particularly persecution, although some had been persecuted.

One person had died because of his witness to Jesus Christ. But a larger problem facing the church was not persecution but more accommodation to Roman Empire. That is, we looked at briefly the system of emperor worship that permeated much of the cities in Western Asia Minor.

Many of them would have had temples constructed in honor of the emperors. And most of the pressure would have come more at a local level. Remember we said when we think about persecution and suffering in the first century is we shouldn't necessarily think of the emperor himself sanctioning an official vendetta against Christians to drag them out in the street and behead them and things like that, although that did happen later and at times.

But most of the persecution and suffering was rather sporadic and local. It would have been local authorities who were keen to keep favor with Rome and to show honor and allegiance to and gratitude to Rome because of all they had provided. And that is what John is addressing, the temptation of some Christians to think that they could render allegiance to Jesus Christ yet still render allegiance to the emperor sitting on the throne and to the Roman Empire as well for all that it had offered.

And often it became an issue of worship and allegiance and exclusive loyalty. Who was the true God? Who was truly seated on the throne? Was it God himself or was it Caesar? Who would they give their loyalty to? So, what revelation primarily does then is Revelation is not so much a prediction of what's going to happen in the future. It's an attempt to prophetically expose the true nature of Rome.

Again, remember empirically as the people look out at the first century, they see this grand empire that Caesar is on the throne and it keeps growing and expanding and it offers peace and all kinds of benefits and wealth to those who come under its rule. But what John wants to do is expose the true colors. Remember revelation as an apocalypse, it means it unveils, it pulls back the curtain behind history to allow them to see the true nature of things.

And so, what revelation does is that the primary purpose of the book or one of the primary purposes is to expose the true nature of Roman rule. It's not the beneficent, wonderful entity that it seems to be, but instead, it exposes the pretensions of Rome. It exposes Rome as arrogant and prideful.

It exposes Rome as oppressive of the poor and murderous of God's people. It exposes Rome as accumulating wealth and hoarding wealth, especially at the expense of the poor. It portrays Rome as a bloodthirsty beast that feasts on Christians and anyone else who resists it.

So what John is trying to do is the same thing the Old Testament prophets do. And that's why John often utilizes a lot of imagery and language from the Old Testament prophets, like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah, because those prophets too critiqued cities and empires in their day that were also anti-God, godly, that were also arrogant and pretentious and proud and oppressed God's people and accumulated wealth, etc., etc. And now John confronts a similar situation in the first century, except this time it's not historical Babylon or Egypt or some other city.

Now it's the city of Rome. And so primarily Revelation is trying to expose the true nature of Rome so that the Christians will not be tempted to give in to it, and so that those who are suffering will be encouraged to persevere and endure because John does indeed show where history is headed, where it's going to end up. There is eschatology, and not yet in it.

But again, it's so that they can see their first-century situation in a new light. They can see Rome for what it really is, and therefore resist it and not give in to the empire. We said too that the closest modern-day analogy that we might have to Revelation or one of them would be the political cartoon.

I suggested to you that while a political cartoon, it refers to actual events politically or historically or things that are actually happening, it does not describe them scientifically or literally, but describes them in highly symbolic language. So, the point of this cartoon is not that you could go somewhere and find this actually happening. The point is what it says about an actual situation in the American continent, in the ridiculous rise of gas prices.

It's kind of a commentary on that. It helps you see it in a new light. The author could have just given you a little paragraph and told you what he thought about the situation with the rising gas prices, but by using the vehicle of a political cartoon, he's able to evoke your emotions and get you to respond and see the situation in a new light.

In a sense, Revelation is a long political cartoon in that it gets the readers to see Imperial Rome and their first-century situation in a brand-new light. So, Revelation, like a political cartoon, uses graphic, sometimes exaggerated symbolism that's not to be taken literally, although it does refer to actual events that are taking place in first-century Rome and will take place in the future, it describes those events with highly symbolic language, often coming right out of the Old Testament. But let's look at a number of texts in Revelation that perhaps illustrate how this works.

The first one, the first section I want to look at is the plagues in Revelation. Revelation actually revolves around three sets of seven plagues. You have seven seals and then seven trumpets and then seven bowls.

And as each of the seven seals is unsealed, as each of the seven trumpets is blown, and as each of the seven bowls is poured out, something happens. And when you add them all up, especially the trumpets and the bowls, you find that what they share in common is, in the trumpets and bowls you have water turning into blood, and you have people breaking out with sores on their bodies, you have darkness covering, sometimes it's a third or a half or more, by the time you get to the bowls, the entire earth is darkened, you have locusts, again those weird locusts that have heads like human beings and long hair like a female and teeth like a lion and a tail like a scorpion, yet they're still clearly locusts. You have a reference to frogs.

Now when you hear this, what does that evoke in your mind? Where have you heard these things before? The Exodus. Remember the plagues from the Exodus where the water turns to blood, the Egyptians break out in sores, there's darkness covering the land, there is locust plague, and the frog plague comes out of the water. So, what is John doing? Basically, he's simply modeling the judgment that he describes that's going to happen, he models it on the Exodus.

It's as if John wants to say, in the same way, that God judged the evil empire of Egypt, so he will also judge Rome. I wonder if these plagues, if a lot of these plagues in Revelation are not meant to be an attack on imperial Rome. Again, just to show that in the same way, God judged a wicked empire in the past, in the Exodus, so God will judge empires that resist God and oppress His people and arrogantly set themselves up over God.

God will judge them as well in the same way that He did in the Exodus. Now, I don't know, again, I take it that these plagues should be understood symbolically. The problem is I'm not sure what they're symbolizing.

Are they symbolizing actual physical occurrences? Or are they more spiritual plagues? Or a combination of the two, perhaps, is the best option? But again, it doesn't seem that John is interested in telling you exactly what things are going to look like. He's more interested in that you recall the Exodus. The main point of the plagues, the seals the trumpets, and the bowls, is not for you to figure out exactly how God's going to judge.

The main thing is that you will recall that just as God judged in the day of the Exodus, so He will judge Rome as well. And again, the author does that over and over. He appeals back to the Old Testament to show that in the same way that God was at work with His people in the Old Testament and the same way He judged evil empires in the Old Testament, now He is about to judge another evil empire, and that is imperial Rome.

So again, the plagues are built on or modeled after the Exodus, and the point is not to figure out what they refer to. The main point is to demonstrate that God is going to judge in the same way He has in Exodus. Another significant portion of Revelation is the numbers.

I'm going to skip a couple of sections in your notes for time's sake, but let me just say something briefly about the numbers. I've given you a series of numbers in your notes, and I don't intend to talk about all of them individually, but the number three and a half years, the number 666, the number 12, the number 1,000, the number 10, the number 4, the number 7. All those numbers are significant in Revelation, but again, in my opinion, they all must be understood symbolically. The main importance of the numbers is not their mathematical value, but the main significance is their symbolic value.

So, for example, a very easy one is, why would John have seven plagues? As we said, there's the slide I showed before. There are seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bulls. Why the number seven? Is it because if you sat there with a calculator, you could count up seven exact plagues? Or why would he use the number seven? The earth was created in seven days, which you're exactly right about, modeled in that idea was that the number seven suggests completeness or perfection, going back to the probably reflected in the seven days of creation.

So, starting with the seven days of creation, then the number seven takes on a symbolic significance of perfection or completeness. So, when you read about seven plagues or seven seals, the point is not that there will be seven actual ones that follow each other. But the point is seven signifies completion or perfection, the complete number of judgments or the perfected, completed judgment of God upon his people.

The number 12 probably goes back to the 12 tribes of Israel. Wherever you see 12 or its multiples in Revelation, like 144, 12 times 12, the significance of that is 12 goes back to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. 12 is symbolic of the people of God.

666. I always tell the story when... I don't know if anyone goes to Soul Fest. Some of you have been to Soul Fest up in New Hampshire.

And if not, I encourage you to go there. And it's being advertised here around Gordon. But we had something similar when I lived in Minnesota called Spirit Fest.

It was the same kind of thing, a Christian band arts festival. And we had to have a little tag in our arms. And I got my tag that day in the line.

And the last three numbers on my tag were 666. And, of course, I kept it on and I wore it. I wasn't about to take it off.

But some people were surprised that I would do that. But perhaps they never asked a question like that, I wonder if that's only because the person before me got 665 and the person after me got 667. So, it was just a coincidental thing.

But often we take that number 666 and we make a big deal out of those actual numbers. But, again, when you think about it, there are a number of ways to consider 666. 666 would correspond to one short of the number 7, 777.

The number 666 probably also had reference to the name Nero who was a Roman emperor several years before Revelation was written and was known for being a particularly awful emperor in the way he treated Christians. So maybe he wanted them, and maybe John also wanted them to recall Nero and how he treated people. And that is the true spirit and that's the true color of Roman rule.

So, the point of 666 is not wherever we find those literal numbers in barcodes or on credit cards or in license plates or phone numbers. That's not the point. Usually, that's just coincidental.

What is significant about that number is what it symbolizes. It symbolizes satanic opposition to God's people. It symbolized, for the first-century readers, it symbolized Rome in opposition to God and his people.

And that which stood for a pretentious, arrogant display of human power in the first century. And 666 signified that. Probably, again, as embodied in Nero.

So, in my opinion, all the numbers in Revelation are not to be added up or calculated to come up with dates, times, or specific numbers. Instead, they are important for their symbolic value of them. Another text, Revelation 12-13.

Revelation 12-13 is a story of a dragon who attempts to devour a child who is about to be born, but he does not succeed. And then the dragon goes and calls two friends to help him. Two beasts.

A beast from the land, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the land. Their main task is to seduce the world to worship them but also to oppress anybody who refuses, especially Christians who obey God's word and keep the testimony of Jesus Christ. Now, again, just thinking in terms of the first century, the dragon, in chapter 12, the dragon is easy to figure out who that refers to because John comes out and tells us.

It's the serpent of old. It's Satan from Genesis chapters 1, 2, and 3. So John tells us who the dragon is. But then the dragon goes and calls on two cohorts, two beasts, a beast from the sea and a beast from the land to help him.

And, again, the job of the two beasts is basically to get everyone to worship them and worship the dragon and to persecute anyone who refuses to comply. Now, thinking in terms of the first readers, who would they most likely have identified these beasts with? What would be your guess? Given the situation, John is addressing. If you're a first-century Christian living in the Roman Empire and you read this chapter and you read the story of these beasts who are out to get God's people and who are trying to set themselves up as sovereign over all the earth and to enforce worship, who would you identify those with? Probably the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor.

And I'm convinced that when John's readers first read that, that's who they would identify with. So, again, do you see what John is doing? He's exposing the nature of Rome. When they empirically look out in the stage of history, they see this grand empire that is growing and increasing and offers peace and wealth and benefits to anyone and protection to anyone who submits to it.

It's glamorous and attractive. Yet John exposes, in this apocalyptic critique of Rome, he exposes them for who they really are. He's telling the Christians, behind that facade, Rome is actually a hideous, bloodthirsty beast that is actually in the service of the dragon, Satan, who is the true person behind the attempts to attack the Christians.

So what John is trying to do in chapters 12 and 13 is show them, and this is important, to show Christians the true nature of their conflict. Again, their real struggle is not just with Rome, but ultimately the dragon, Satan, lies behind these attempts to exterminate God's people. As the pressure builds and as things heat up in their relationship with Rome, they can understand that the true force behind the temptation to compromise or any persecution, the true force behind that is the dragon himself, that age-old serpent from Genesis, who is out to get God's people.

So, it's meant to help Christians understand and cope with their own situation, to get them to see the true nature of their struggle. That's the primary message of Revelation 12 and 13, is to show the Christians, here's the true nature of what you face. As you face persecution or temptations to compromise, let me lift the curtain and show you behind the scenes of history to the true nature of the struggle.

This is... Chapters 12 and 13 are kind of a symbolic portrayal of what Paul said in Ephesians. Your battle is not with flesh and blood, that is for Revelation with the Roman emperor and Roman authorities, but instead, it is with the rulers and

authorities in the heavenly realms. And that's what John is trying to do, to expose the true nature of their conflict and the true nature of Roman imperial rule.

Now, to do that, John does something very interesting. If you recall back to the book of Genesis, remember back in the book of Genesis after Adam and Eve sin, God curses both issues, a curse on humanity, but on Satan himself. And remember he tells Satan that you will eat from the dust of the ground and crawl on the ground on your belly.

And he tells him also that you will be in conflict with the woman and you will bruise... He says you and the woman will be in conflict, your seed, and her seed, that is the serpent, Satan's offspring, and the woman's offspring will be in conflict. And then he says, Satan, your seed, will bruise his heel, but the woman's seed will crush your head and actually destroy you. That's all the way back in Genesis chapter 3. Now, notice what happens when you get to Genesis 12 and 13.

First of all, John identifies the serpent in chapter... John identifies Satan as the serpent in chapters 12, 3, and 9. And he even calls him the serpent of old. That is, this is Satan, the serpent that seduced and tempted Adam and Eve to sin. Now, John says the dragon in Revelation 12 is nothing less than the same serpent rearing his ugly head again.

The woman and the seed. Notice how many times in Revelation, these are references to Revelation in brackets. Notice how many times there are references to the woman and her offspring in Revelation chapter 12.

The people of God are portrayed as a woman and her offspring, which, again, goes back to Genesis chapter 3, verses 14 through 16. The fact that part of the curse back in Genesis 3, if you remember, was the woman would have pain in childbirth. Here, in Revelation chapter 3, the woman who symbolizes the people of God is portrayed as having birth pangs or being in pain as she is about to give birth.

She gives birth to a son, which is clearly a reference to Jesus Christ. He will crush the serpent's head. Interestingly, again, remember, that part of the promise in Genesis 3 is that the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head.

In Revelation chapter 13, one of the beasts appears as if his head was crushed or slain. I'm sorry, I guess that's it. The other one is the reference to a son.

Jesus Christ is the woman in chapter 12 who gives birth to a son, her first offspring, which is clearly a reference to Christ. But do you see what's going on? All of these references, to me, suggest that John had in mind Genesis chapter 3 and the reference to the curse, where, again, God told the serpent that you and the woman will be in conflict and enmity between you, and there will be enmity between your

seed or offspring and her offspring, and her offspring will crush your head. Even though you bruise her offspring's heel, her offspring will actually crush your head, and she will have pain and childbirth.

All those elements occur in Revelation chapters 12 and 13. So what is John doing? Basically, he's telling his readers, look, what you face, as you struggle with Roman rule, what you're actually going through is nothing less than this age-old conflict that goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. So, again, you shouldn't be surprised by it, or you shouldn't be shocked, and now they can see it in a new light. What they face in trying to deal with Imperial Rome is just Genesis chapter 3 resurfacing again.

It's just part of that age-old conflict that goes back to creation, and now it's resurfacing in the Christians' conflict with Rome. So, it's just another way of helping the Christians see their conflict with Rome in a new light, to help them deal with it, to resist Rome, to maintain their witness to Jesus Christ, to understand the true nature of the conflict. It's just part of the age-old conflict that goes all the way back to the beginning of creation.

So, I think John intentionally had Genesis chapter 3, verses 14 through 16, in mind as he sees this vision, and now as he writes it and composes it to help his readers cope with Imperial Rome. One other section I want to look at briefly is the very last two chapters of Revelation, chapters 21 and 22, where the author compares and contrasts a bride or New Jerusalem, which was common in the Old Testament. Very frequently, Jerusalem and its people were compared to God's bride.

Now John uses that imagery again, referring to a new Jerusalem. So the bride, New Jerusalem, is contrasted with the prostitute Babylon. And again, John uses imagery right out of the Old Testament.

Once again, stop and think with me. If you're a first-century reader reading Revelation, what are you going to identify Babylon with? Babylon was a historical city in the Old Testament, a city that captured God's people. You can read about it in the book of Daniel, kind of as far as Daniel and other prophets' attitudes towards Babylon.

But again, if you're a first-century reader hearing the book or reading Revelation, what most likely are you going to identify Babylon with? Probably Rome. And again, do you see what John is doing? He's saying, that in the same way God judged evil empires in the past, like Babylon, Egypt, etc., God will judge Rome as well. And indeed He did.

About 300 years after this book was written, God did bring Rome to its end. But the point is, if they are not to... If Rome is going to be destroyed and John does not want his readers to have any part of it, not that they can't live in it physically, but if he

does not want them to buy into their arrogance, their anti-God way of thinking, then they must have a city, they must have somewhere to belong to. If they're not to be part of Babylon, they must have somewhere to go.

And so, the book ends with the bride, New Jerusalem, and those who are faithful. For John's readers, and I would say Christians today, who faithfully resist the temptation to give in to Roman imperial rule and all its blessings, its arrogance, its pride, its pretentious display of its sovereign power if they give up that and refuse and resist, then John says, you have somewhere to go and you have someone to belong to, and that is the bride, the New Jerusalem. Now let me say just a couple of things about this text.

I wish I had more time to talk about it, but let me emphasize two things. Number one, the New Jerusalem imagery in chapters 21 and 22, I think is symbolic of the people themselves. In other words, I don't think John is particularly describing a literal city, not that there won't be one or be several in the new creation, but primarily what John is describing, when he describes the New Jerusalem, he is describing the people themselves, the perfected people of God in the new creation.

That's very important. John is not describing an actual literal city. In fact, I've seen some people try to draw it as if John's giving you an architectural depiction of what it's going to look like or blueprints.

That's not what he's doing. John's not describing some literal city. Again, he's describing the people themselves.

And when you read chapters 21 and 22, all the measurements of the city, notice they're all multiples of 12, the number of the people of God. So, what the New Jerusalem symbolizes, is the perfected people of God in the new creation, in God's presence. The second thing important about the New Jerusalem vision is that it portrays our final destiny as a very physical earthly one.

Again, we've talked about this before, but the final destiny of God's people is not some disembodied Gnostic-type existence. Revelation lands God's people on a new earth. In a sense, heaven and earth become one in Revelation 21 and 22.

And God's people live out the rest of their eternity in their existence in a new creation. On a new creation, not floating around in clouds. With white robes and things like that.

But instead, they live out their eternity in a very earthly, physical existence. Because that's what God has created us for. And however different it may be from this earth, it certainly is going to be similar in many ways.

There is both continuity and discontinuity. But again, that's what God has created us for. And you think about it, to me, that's a future, that's a hope worth sacrificing for.

Think about what you love about this creation, this earth, and your life. Think about what it would be like stripped of all the effects of sin, all the sadness, and all the sickness, and all the disappointment, and all the pain, and all the war. Everything that makes this life miserable, and plagues this life, in the midst of all the good things and the beauty, will be completely stripped away.

And to me, that's worth sacrificing Babylon in the present for something in the future. I don't know that it's really worth sacrificing it if all I'm going to do is float around as some disembodied spirit. But the fact that God is going to recreate all things, and the destiny that he has in store for God's people is a very physical, earthly one, to me is worth sacrificing for in the present.

Because that's the intended goal. From Genesis chapters 1 and 2, since the sin of humanity, God's primary intention has been to restore humanity to live on earth with God dwelling in their midst. And that's exactly what you find in Revelation 21 and 22.

It even uses Garden of Eden imagery. Read chapter 22. The first five verses, refer back to the Garden of Eden.

The Tree of Life in reference to the River of Life, which reflects Genesis chapters 1 and 2 in the description of the Garden. One last thing. The message of Revelation.

Revelation is more than just about end times and eschatology. Instead, Revelation is a call for God's people to worship God and the Lamb no matter what the cost. It's a call, for first-century Christians, it was a call to expose Rome for what it truly was, to resist Rome.

To us, it's a call to expose and resist empire. The same anti-godly, pretentious, arrogant, boasting in one's sovereign rule, that same thing that was present in Rome, God calls us to resist that today wherever it may be found, including in the United States of America. But Revelation is a call to worship God and the Lamb and no other human thing or object, no matter what the cost.

But second, Revelation is also a call to endure. God will vindicate his suffering people. Good.

That's all I want to say about Revelation. Any questions, quickly, before I head off to the inaugurated new creation of Colorado? Just kidding. Yep.

Is there going to be a review session for the final? I'm working on that. I can't promise you that, but I'm trying to get a review session for the final. You'll know very, hopefully, you'll know by Monday.

If so, it'll probably be next Wednesday or Thursday. Again, I don't want to promise you. I'm working on it.

There will be a study guide after your exam next week. I will get a study guide up for you to look at for the final. If you didn't get the old test, you can e-mail me.

I won't be in my office all next week, but if you e-mail me, I'll be glad to attach copies of the old exams. Make sure, too, that when you take exam number four on Monday, you're welcome to keep the copy to study for the final. Thanks.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, lecture 35, The Book of Revelation.