

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 37, Excursus on Revelation, Session 2

© 2024 Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson on his second excursus on the book of Revelation in his New Testament in History and Literature course.

Last class period we looked a little bit at introductory issues in relationship to Revelation, the historical background.

We said Revelation primarily was addressed to Christians living within the context of imperial Rome and Roman rule under the influence of emperor worship under pressure to show allegiance to Rome, to be involved in occasions to honor the emperor, etc. There was perhaps some persecution, though it would have come primarily at the local level, with no officially sanctioned persecution by the Roman emperor himself, most of it would have been local officials keen to keep favor with Rome and to show their gratitude and allegiance to Rome. The problem that would have caused Christians is whether to resist that and perhaps suffer the consequences or whether to compromise and become complacent in their devotion to and faith in Jesus Christ.

So, Revelation then was written primarily as a means of exposing the true nature of Roman rule to show its spiritual bankruptcy, to show its corruptness, to expose its pretension, its arrogance, its desire for and hunger for wealth at the expense of the lives of others and the desire to accumulate wealth even if it means oppression. John exposes that entire system to get his readers to see the true nature of Rome. It's not all it's cracked up to be, but instead, John will show it's actually a hideous bloodthirsty beast and God's people have everything to lose if they give in to that and should instead embrace Jesus Christ in faith and obedience and worship no matter what the consequences.

We looked a little bit at the literary genres of Revelation and one of the problems we encountered is that Revelation really has no close literary parallels today. As I said, we write and read letters and narratives and stories and poetry, all of which are found in the Old New Testament, but when it comes to the book of Revelation, which we said was an apocalypse, a prophecy in the form of a letter, we really, when's the last time you've read or written an apocalypse? We said an apocalypse is the, it's actually a first-person narrative of a visionary experience of a heavenly world and the future that lies behind the empirical world. In other words, all that the readers see is the world on the stage of history, and what an apocalypse does is it lifts the veil so the readers can see behind the empirical world into the true heavenly reality and the future that lies behind it.

An apocalypse then is a visionary account, a first-person narrative of a visionary account of that transcendent visionary experience of the heavenly reality in the future. The problem is we simply don't communicate that way any longer, but if I were to suggest one possible literary analogy, one possible modern-day literary parallel, it might be the political cartoon. This is not original to me.

Others have suggested this, but the more I think about it, the more I think that is helpful. When you think about a literary, I'm sorry, a political cartoon, a couple of things about it, first of all, political cartoons are meant to comment on or refer to actual events, actual historical persons and events. They're not just fictional.

They're not just science fiction. They are actually referring to specific events that are happening or have happened or will shortly happen. They refer to actual persons that you and I can identify and read about, know about from the news, for example.

It refers to actual political values ideas and happenings in our 21st-century world that we can identify. Political cartoons are rooted in reality. They refer to actual historical persons, places, and events.

However, the second thing to bring up is the way they do that through highly exaggerated symbolic depictions of those persons, places, and events. A lot of times, we are able, because we are familiar with both the setting and our political scene and our persons and our historical circumstances, because we're familiar with that and because we are familiar from seeing them over and over again because we're familiar with some of the symbols that political cartoons use, we're usually able to identify them and to resonate with them. A story that I like to tell, I remember when I was in seminary and I was living in Montana, during the summers, I would go home and work, and one summer, I was helping a rancher dismantle an old cabin, an old log cabin, because some of the logs were still good, and he was going to use them to build his own cabin.

So, we were tearing it apart, and in between the logs, to keep out the cold Montana winter winds, whoever had built that cabin stuffed newspapers in between the logs to keep the wind out. And so, as we pulled these logs off, these newspapers began to fall out, and I noticed that a couple of them had political cartoons from back in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, and some of the cartoons, I simply didn't understand for a couple of reasons. Number one, I wasn't sure of some of the symbols and what they meant, although others I was.

Second, I couldn't, my history is rusty, so I couldn't remember historically and politically what was going on in the United States and the world back in the 1940s and 50s. So, I was kind of in the dark about these political cartoons. The same is true with Revelation.

It functions like a political cartoon, and if we don't understand the historical situation and background, nor some of the symbols that John used, we'll probably misunderstand Revelation's visions. So, Revelation functions much like a political cartoon. It is sort of a commentary on the historical, religious, and political circumstances of the first century.

John uses symbols from the Old Testament and the world of the first century to help describe, much like our political cartoons, in a highly exaggerated symbolic way to help us understand, or help us readers understand the true nature of their conflict with Rome, the true nature of what is going on in the first century. Much like political cartoons, with their symbols and exaggerated depictions, say something and help us to see the political and historical situation from a specific perspective. Some of the symbols in political cartoons are stock.

So usually if we see an eagle, we immediately identify that with the United States of America. If we see a donkey or an elephant, we identify those as symbolizing respective political parties. So, do you see? The point is not that somewhere in the United States there's a donkey or an elephant with stripes and stars on them.

That's not the point. The point is those animals symbolically represent political parties. So, when we look at Revelation and we read this description of a seven-headed beast or dragon, it's not literally describing a dragon that existed somewhere in the first century or that will exist.

It symbolically represents and says something about the true nature of the Roman Empire and the emperor in the same way that the donkey or the elephant represents and says something about the respective political parties. And if you stopped and thought about political cartoons or if you go read a political cartoon, no doubt you can see, again, kind of the exaggerated symbolic portrayal of a specific historical event. And again, that's much more effective, is it not, in saying something about the event than if the person just sat down and wrote a short paragraph describing their view of the situation.

By constructing this political cartoon with these different symbols in an exaggerated symbolic way, the author is able more forcefully to say something and comment on this specific political event, whether it's our rising gas prices or something to do with our economy or the recent downfall of Osama bin Laden, etc. All those events seem to more powerfully affect us when they are portrayed with these political cartoons in this highly kind of symbolic and exaggerated language. So, I would suggest a political cartoon is a helpful analogy.

In a sense, Revelation could be seen as one large political cartoon that is meant to provide us with a specific perspective in a way that affects us both cognitively, intellectually, and emotionally to get us to respond to the political, and religious

situation of the first century and the future towards which history is heading. Revelation is kind of a political cartoon, a commentary on the first-century situation and the future to which the book of Revelation ultimately points. And like a political cartoon, while Revelation refers to actual persons and places and events in the first century and ultimately ending up in the future in the last chapters of Revelation, although it's referring to actual persons, places, and happenings, it communicates them and portrays them not literally as you would see on a CNN news report or documentary, but instead it describes them symbolically, often in highly exaggerated type of language so that you respond emotionally as well as intellectually, so that you more forcefully get the point that John is trying to get across.

Again, what is more effective for John to say, you know, you need to stay away from the Roman Empire, it's out to get Christians, it stands against everything that God stands against, it's pretentious and arrogant and sets itself up as God, you need to avoid it. Is it more effective to say that or is it more effective to paint this picture of a seven-headed horrid beast, almost of nightmarish proportions, that is seen as attempting to devour Christians, which impacts you more? So that's kind of what Revelation does and how Revelation, in some respects, is similar to at least our contemporary modern-day political cartoons. Now what I want to do, having discussed the background, the literary genre of Revelation, kind of its main theme, and what it's doing, is I want to give you a sampling of some sections of Revelation.

Again, if you want an overview of the general content and movement of the book, I would encourage you to read, once again, go back and read your textbook, *Introducing the New Testament* by Powell. But what I simply want to do is move through the book and give you a sampling of some of the major sections of Revelation and look a little bit about how they function, how they respond to the specific situation John is addressing in Revelation, how understanding the symbols and the background, especially from the Old Testament, hopefully, will help us have a little bit better understanding and perception of what is going on in the sections. The first section I want to look at is chapters four and five, which is a vision of God and the Lamb upon the throne.

Revelation chapter four actually begins the heart of John's vision, and it begins with John, as you would expect in an apocalypse, John ascends to heaven. Remember, here God is going to lift the veil. John living in the context of the first century Roman Empire, God is now going to lift the veil and give John a glimpse into the reality, the heavenly reality that lies behind the first century.

So, chapter four begins, after this I looked and there in heaven a door stood open, and the first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, come up here and I will show you what must take place after this. At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne with one seated on the throne. Now, I want you to pay attention to kind of the symbolic depiction and to not only cognitively

understand what is going on, but to emotionally feel and sense what it's like for John to see a vision like this.

He says, I saw there in heaven a throne and one seated on the throne, and the one seated there looks like Jasper and Carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are 24 thrones, and seated upon those thrones are 24 elders dressed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God.

And in front of the throne, there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, on each side of the throne are four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. The first living creature is like a lion, the second like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are all full of eyes all around and inside. And I'll stop there, but you kind of get the picture of this John's vision of heaven with a throne, and the one seated on the throne. Interestingly, John does not describe the features of the one seated on the throne but describes the fact that what he sees can be compared to the shine of crystal and precious stones.

And there's lightning and thunder coming from the throne, which evokes the image of judgment. The throne itself evokes the image of judgment. Then the four living creatures and 24 elders surrounding the throne, are described in rather graphic terminology.

So, hopefully, you get a sense of John's experience in writing these visions. In a sense, John wants his readers to experience something of what he experienced, both cognitively and emotively as well. Now, chapter four, chapter four is this picture, a depiction of God and the throne.

And you can see what's already taking place, is this throne in heaven actually meant to usurp and replace another throne? And can you guess what that is? In the first century Roman empire, Caesar would have been seated on his throne. As the people looked out at their empirical world, all they would have seen was the growing influence of Rome.

Now John is privileged to get a glimpse into heaven where Caesar is not on the throne, but now God is seated on the throne. And now all of creation is going to gather around and worship him and acknowledge his sovereignty. So right away, John is beginning to, again, lift the veil so that John is privileged to see into the heavenly reality.

So, what's going on in earth is not the full story. Yes, Caesar is seated on his throne and the Roman empire continues to grow. But now John sees a different reality where the true throne in heaven, the true heavenly throne upon that is seated God who is sovereign over all of the earth.

However, it doesn't stop here. Chapter five goes on and introduces us to another figure. It's still the same throne scene, the same scene of the heavenly throne room that John is now privileged to enter and catch a glimpse of.

But now John sees another figure. And that is in chapter five, there is a scroll this person says that God is seated on the throne, and the one who is seated on the throne is holding a scroll, which probably contains God's plan to bring salvation and judgment throughout the whole earth. It's his plan to eventually establish his kingdom in his sovereignty over all earth.

How's he going to do that? And the problem is in chapter five, John says he couldn't find anybody there. He was by visionary experience. He's now in heaven, but he looks in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

There is no one who can open the scroll. And so, John weeps because again, this scroll contains in it is contained God's plan to establish his kingdom and his sovereignty throughout the entire creation. But now John can't find anyone who is even fit or close to being worthy enough to open it and to divulge its contents and set it in motion.

But alas, John is introduced to someone who can open it. And in chapter five, we are introduced to the lamb. John now sees a lamb.

Again, notice the symbolic nature of this vision. It's interesting. Jesus is described as both a lion and a lamb.

Obviously, he can't be both unless you have this strange picture of Jesus kind of undergoing a metamorphosis back and forth between a lion and a lamb. But that's not the point. Again, it's referring to Jesus, but Jesus is described in this visionary depiction in this highly symbolic language of a lamb.

The slain, the slain lamb. So, what it's saying is through Jesus' death, there is someone who can take the scroll and who can open it and divulge its contents and begin to set it into motion. And that person is none less than Jesus, the lamb who was slain.

So, through his death, Jesus is now able to enact the contents of this scroll. So basically what the rest of Revelation is about is how does this vision in chapters four

and five, how does this vision of God and the lamb seated on the throne where all of the heaven surrounds them and worships them and acknowledges their sovereignty, how will that eventually get enacted on earth? How will God's sovereignty and his kingdom and the worship be given to God and the lamb, how will that eventually permeate the entire creation? The rest of Revelation is precisely about that. The rest of revelation describes how chapter four and five, the heavenly reality, how that becomes a reality on earth.

In a sense, revelation is an expanded commentary on the Lord's prayer. From Matthew chapter five, remember we talked a little bit about the Sermon on the Mount, and in the Sermon on the Mount, we read the Lord's prayer, our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Chapters four and five in Revelation depict God's will being done in heaven.

God is on his throne, the lamb is on the throne, all heaven encircles the throne and worships the lamb and God and acknowledges their sovereignty. God's will is done in heaven, but now according to the Lord's prayer, God's will that is done in heaven needs to be done on earth as well. So, revelation then is about how God's will is being done in heaven in chapters four and five, and how that eventually transpires on earth.

How all of the earth eventually comes to acknowledge God's sovereignty and how God's kingdom and rule basically or eventually extend to replace Rome's rule and eventually extend to embrace the entire creation. So, in that sense, Revelation chapters four and five have often been described as the fulcrum of the entire book of Revelation. Because again, the rest of Revelation is kind of a working out of chapters four and five.

We'll see revelation ends kind of where chapters four and five begin. The next section that I want to look at briefly is actually three sections, and that is the seals, trumpets, and bowls. After chapters four and five, much of Revelation is structured around three sections of seven, and that is seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls.

Those sections kind of occur right after each other throughout the book of Revelation. So again, after chapters four and five, we read much of the rest of the book is structured around, kind of revolves around these seven seals that are unsealed, then seven trumpets are blown, and then seven bowls are poured out. And then once that's done, you get the final judgment, coming of Christ, the final judgment, the millennium, and then the new heavens and new earth.

But what are we to make of these three series of sevens, these seals, trumpets, and bowls? First of all, I want to talk a little bit about how we understand symbolism. And

that is mainly wrapped up, I think, with understanding, once again, the Old Testament background. Where does John get the idea, or, where does he get the symbols for these trumpets and these bowls, especially? Because what happens as each seal is unsealed, as each trumpet is blown, as each bowl is poured out, something happens on the earth.

And the key is to try to figure out what, and when these things happen on the earth, John describes them in symbolic language, as you would expect in an apocalypse. The key is trying to figure out what are these symbols suggesting. What is John seeing? When he sees these seals unsealed and these things happening, when he hears these trumpets blown and certain things happen on earth, when he sees the bowls poured out and certain things happen, what is John envisioning? How should we understand this? Again, I think the key is to go back to the Old Testament. But first of all, let me just read briefly, this is an account of the seals.

John says, when the Lamb opened the seven, I'm sorry, this is the account of the trumpets that are blown. And again, as each trumpet is blown, something happened. John says, another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar.

He was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense with the prayer of the saints rose before God from the hand of the angel. Again, notice all the symbolism, the symbolic language, the image, and the emotions that this is to evoke.

Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and he threw it on the earth. And there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

So now we're going to hear seven trumpets blown and as each one is blown, something happens. The first angel blew his trumpet and there came hail and fire mixed with blood. And they were hurled to the earth.

A third of the earth was burned up. I'll abbreviate some of these as I read through them, but I just want you to get a sense of what is in each of these trumpets. The second angel blew his trumpet and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea.

A third of the sea became blood. The third angel blew his trumpet. A great star fell from heaven blazing like a torch and it fell on a third of the rivers and on springs of water.

The name of the stars Wormwood. A third of the waters became Wormwood or bitter and many died from it. The fourth angel blew his trumpet and a third of the sun was struck.

A third of the moon and the third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened and a third of the day was kept from shining. Then I looked and heard an eagle flying, crying with a loud voice as it flew in midheaven, whoa, whoa, whoa, to the inhabitants of the earth at the blast of the other trumpets that the three angels were about to blow. And the fifth angel blew his trumpet.

I saw a star that fell from heaven and he was given a key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft and out of it rose smoke of a great furnace and the sun was darkened with a smoke. Then from the smoke came locusts upon the earth.

And this is where you get the description of the locusts with tails like a scorpion and head like a human being, hair like a woman, crown in their heads, teeth like a lion, etc. I'll stop there, but you kind of get the idea. And when you get to the bowls, these were the trumpets, when you get to the bowls you find much of the same.

The sky is darkened, the moon and sun do not give light, the whole earth is darkened. There you read not of locusts but of frogs coming out and water turning to blood. And if I were to ask you, what do these plagues recall in your mind, in your canonical memories, that is thinking about the Old and New Testament, what other plagues does this recall? It should recall the Exodus plagues from the book of Exodus.

When God's people were in bondage to Egypt, God brought the plagues upon Egypt as a form of judgment prior to releasing and saving His people. So, what is going on here is I'm convinced what John wants you to recall is the Exodus from Egypt. If I could summarize what he's saying is, in the same way, that God judged Egypt prior to redeeming His people, God will once again judge wicked humanity for their arrogance, for refusing God, and for oppressing God's people, much as He did the Egyptians.

Now if you ask, what is John describing? I'm not entirely sure. Again remember, these are not literal descriptions. John is not describing the fact that a literal sky is going to fall someday into the ocean and literally it will turn to blood, nor is he describing a literal darkening of the sun and the solar system someday.

Again, these are symbolic depictions of actual judgments and actual events, but I have to confess, I don't think we can be sure exactly what John is describing in the first century, what may have been happening in the first century or in the future. Instead, I think more important is for us to understand the meaning of those, not to speculate about what they might look like, but to understand their meaning. Again,

the meaning is, God is going to judge, is judging and will judge wicked humanity, including the Roman Empire, in the same way that He did Egypt during the time of the Exodus.

So, the primary thing John wants us to do is not figure out what these all refer to, but he wants us to recall the Exodus. He wants to say something about God's judgment. Again, I would guess that perhaps these plagues are a combination of physical and spiritual judgment upon the people.

I wonder too, if in the same way that the plagues in Egypt were meant to be a judgment upon the Egyptians, upon their commerce and their lives and their well-being, I wonder if, in a sense, these plagues and revelation and the seals and bowls and trumpets are not meant to be a judgment on Rome, on their commerce, on their values, on their whole economic system. This is a depiction of God's judgment upon Rome and any other empire that would act like and follow in the footsteps of Rome. So that's one way of understanding, or I think perhaps at least the starting point of trying to understand these three series of three sets of sevens, the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, was primarily meant to think about the Exodus, not to speculate as to what these might look like.

And the main point is God will judge his wicked humanity and a society such as Rome in the same way that he did Egypt, prior to delivering his people from the oppression of the Egyptians. As far as the relationship between the seals, you'll note in your notes I've given you three possible models, and I don't want to go into any details. The primary question is, do the seals follow each other sequentially, the seals, trumpets, and bowls, so that the seven seals happen when they're all done, then the seven trumpets happen, and when they're all finished, then the seven bowls happen.

That's one possibility. The other possibility is that these overlap. When you read, especially when you read the trumpets and the bowls, you'll note that some of the plagues are the same.

So, some have suggested that all three of these, the seals, trumpets, and bowls, actually they overlap. They're just different ways of describing the judgment. It's as if John describes the judgment from the standpoint of the seals, and then he backs up and says, let me describe it again.

So, he describes it in terms of seven bowls. And then he says, I really want you to get the picture, so he goes back and he describes the same judgments again in the form of seven bowls. That's possible as well.

But all I want you to realize is there are possible ways of understanding the relationship between the seals and bowls and I don't think John's point is to get us to speculate as to how many of these are taking place now or in the future, or when

they'll take place, or exactly what they'll look like. Again, John's primary point is to evoke the imagery of the Exodus, to say, that just as God judged a wicked pagan society that oppressed God's people, that arrogantly set itself up in the place of God, God is going to do that again. And so, again, it's a warning for the readers.

Don't give in to Roman rule. Don't participate in their idolatrous evil system, but instead resist it, because God is going to judge it one day. The next section that I want to look at is just briefly to talk about some of the numbers in Revelation.

Revelation is a book full of numbers, and probably the most well-known one is the number seven, but no one can think of Revelation without thinking about the number 666, and we'll talk a little bit about those numbers. But the main thing I want to say about the numbers in Revelation is, first of all, that the numbers must also be interpreted symbolically. Like all the other images in Revelation, the beasts, the animals, the lightning and thunder, and the locusts, et cetera, et cetera, water turning into blood, stars falling from the earth, and then bittering, making the sea and the water bitter, and making it burn up, and all the vegetation.

All of this is symbolically portraying God's judgment on the earth. In the same way, the numbers are meant to be interpreted symbolically. They are not to be taken with mathematical precision, as if you could add them up and come up with some timeline or some chart where we can chart our existence in relationship to the end or something like that.

These are not the numbers of a mathematician. They are the numbers of an artist or someone who is writing symbolically. So, in my opinion, all the numbers in Revelation must be taken symbolically.

Again, the church context I grew up in, I learned that the numbers in Revelation, unless there's really good reason not to, and usually there was not a good reason found, but unless there's really good reason not to, we should take the numbers literally. I would turn that on its head and say, unless you can really provide convincing evidence not to, we should take the numbers symbolically. Most of the numbers have symbolic value that probably many of us could figure out, or at least we could understand the rationale for.

But again, I just want to touch on a number of them. What about the number 666, which is probably the most well-known number in Revelation? Again, I was raised in the context where this number was taken with literalness and seriousness so that you avoided this number at all costs. I remember one day when I was a teenager hearing a famous prophecy speaker in our church, and he had a stack of papers, computer printouts from Caterpillar Tractor Company, and some invoices of a bunch of their products, and in the middle, he found the number 666.

He was convinced that the 666, the mark of the beast, was already making inroads into our economy and even things like Caterpillar Tractor Company. I wonder why he never asked the question of why the number before it was 665 and the number after it was 667. Perhaps that was just a coincidence.

But do you see that the number 666 was taken with extreme literalness so that wherever you found it, it was to be avoided? I remember when I was at a Christian music festival in Minnesota several years back, we had to have a name tag to get in, and all the name tags had a number, and the last three numbers were the ones that identified, were the ones that changed. My last three numbers were 666.

Being the rebel that I was, I decided to keep it on, and I wasn't about to take that off. But again, the reason was that the person before me had 665 and the person after me had 667. So, what I'm saying is often the number 666 is just coincidental, and when you read Revelation, there's nothing coincidental about this number.

It's not just because it inconspicuously appears in sequences of numbers from time to time. There's something intentional about this number in Revelation. I often have heard it equated with credit cards and computer chips and you name it, the number 666 has been identified.

666 being identified as the mark of the beast in Revelation has been identified with all kinds of things in our modern-day world. But again, a couple of things to think about. Number one, remember any interpretation John could not have intended and his readers could not have possibly understood should be treated with suspicion.

Could John have known of computer chips and our barcodes and the way we use numbers today? Probably not. But second, remember the numbers are symbolic. What John is concerned about is not the three digits 666, although again sometimes they can be used in that way and should be avoided.

But John's main concern is not with the appearance of those three exact numbers, but what they symbolize, the symbolic value of 666. Now there's a couple ways to understand this. Perhaps the number 6 is to be seen simply as one short of the number 7, which as we know, a number 7 as most of us know, going back to creation, we'll look at that next in your notes.

The 7 is the number of perfection. Some suggest then that 666 mentioned in Revelation 13, is the only place it's mentioned as the mark of the beast, that 666 would then just be short of the number of 7 three times. That is, it's the number of imperfections.

It's the number of humanity. It's the number that falls short of the perfect number 7. So perhaps 666 is just saying something about the Roman Empire. It falls short of perfection.

It does not measure up to the number of perfection. It falls short of it. It's imperfect.

Also, another possibility is, that there's no reason to limit or to rule out any of these. Sometimes I'm convinced John uses imagery because it is rich in meaning. It may evoke more than one thing.

So, there's no need to perhaps limit ourselves to only one explanation. So in addition to 6 being the number of imperfections short of the perfect number 7, is the number 666 may also have suggested the name Nero. When the numerical value of the letters that make up the name of Nero, when they're added up in certain spellings of the name, you come up with the number 666.

So, some have suggested 666 would have reminded the first readers of Emperor Nero. Now, if John is writing later on under Domitian, maybe Nero was long gone by them. Maybe what John wants to do is get them to recall Nero.

In other words, Nero was kind of the embodiment and the model of evil and wickedness. And now by using 666, a number that recalls Nero's name, it's as if John may want to say, you remember Nero, that evil beastly ruler? Now he, present Rome is simply an embodiment again of what Nero was and what Nero was doing. It's almost as if this is Nero resurrected in a sense.

The spirit of Nero is now emerging and still present in Rome. And so, it's just another powerful way of getting the readers to see the true nature of Rome by reminding them perhaps of Nero, a past, truly wicked, evil ruler. And now he wants to remind them as if to say again, Nero in a sense, the spirit and the power and force behind the emperor when Nero ruled is now at work again.

But there's no need to rule out either of those. Probably it refers to 6 being the number short of perfection, the perfect number 7. But 666 no doubt would have reminded of and evoked the image of Nero and probably refers back to Nero to again, just remind the readers of the true nature of Roman rule and the Roman empire that they face. So, 666 again is not meant to, John is not predicting or referring to things in the 21st century such as certain persons or certain events or certain technological wonders, but 666 must be understood in light of its first-century context, in light of its symbolic value.

The number 7 also, as we've already said, has symbolic value. The number 7 which probably goes back to the 7 days of creation now becomes a number of perfection. So whenever you see the number 7, it suggests completeness, and perfection.

So again, regarding the 7 plagues and 7 seals and bowls that we just talked about, the main idea is not that there are literally 7 of them that occur in a row, but by describing 7, by using 7, symbolically John is conveying completeness or perfection. So, the 7 bowls and plagues and seals suggest the complete and perfect number of God's judgment upon the world. Or any multiple of 7. So, when you get to Revelation chapter 7, John sees a vision of 144,000.

What that is is simply 7 times 7 or it's simply a multiple of 7 times 1,000. So that eventually, you get 144,000. So again, what John is trying to do is not, actually that's the number 12.

What John is trying to do is not communicate a numerical mathematical value, but with, for example, 144,000 which is a multiple of 12, the author is trying to say something about the symbolic value of that number. So, 7, wherever it occurs, is the number of perfection. $3 \frac{1}{2}$, the next one, $3 \frac{1}{2}$ is half of 7. So what that suggests is only half off, or again, falling short of perfection.

So, several times, John refers to the persecution of God's people as taking place in $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years. Now I know it's common to take the $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years and add it up to another reference of $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years and you come up with 7 and that's the time of the Great Tribulation or whatever. But again, I'm not convinced that John is speaking in strict temporal or mathematical terms.

The $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years is not significant for its temporal value so if you could have a calendar in front of you, you could mark off $3 \frac{1}{2}$ 360-day years. But instead, again, it's the symbolic value. What does $3 \frac{1}{2}$ symbolize? It symbolizes an intense time of conflict, but it will be cut short.

It won't last for long. In contrast to the number 7 which is wholeness, perfection, and completeness, $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years means incomplete. So what John is saying, by using the $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years to describe the period of the trouble and the persecution and tribulation that the church will experience, by using the number $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years, John is not saying, well, it'll only last if you get your calendars out and count off $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years, that's how long it'll last.

He's saying it will simply be a short, intense period that simply won't last. It'll be cut off. It's half of the number 7. The number 12, I've already referred to the number 144 or 144,000.

Those are multiples of 12. The significance of 12 goes back to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. The number 12, not only in Revelation but throughout the Bible, does signify the people of God based on the 12 tribes of Israel.

So, Israel was revolved around 12 tribes. The church now revolves around 12 apostles. So now the number 12 in Revelation becomes symbolic of the people of God.

So now we can go back to Revelation 7. The vision of 144,000 is a multiple of 12. 12 times 12 is 144, times 1,000. The purpose is not that if you could stand there with a calculator, you would count 144,000 people.

What's important is the symbolic value. 144,000 signifies the complete and perfected number of the people of God. Most likely, it'll be far more than 144,000, but John's point is not the mathematical value of the number.

It's the symbolic value of 12 and all its multiples. 12 times 12, 144. The New Jerusalem is measured in units of 12 because that's the symbolic value of that.

It refers to the people of God. So all the numbers in Revelation, whether it's 666, the number 7, 3 1/2, 12, or the number 1,000, probably again suggests completeness and magnitude. All of those numbers are not there for their mathematical significance and value as if, again, we can add them up and figure out times or exact numbers, but they're important for their symbolic value.

Let's move on to one other section in Revelation chapters 12 and 13. We'll jump back to a specific section. The numbers appear all throughout Revelation, but we'll focus on one section, Revelation chapters 12 and 13.

Revelation chapters 12 and 13 is a vision that John has that includes, again, a number of interesting characters. It revolves around four main characters. I'm sorry, five main characters.

A woman, a child, a dragon, and two beasts. The story starts in chapter 12, this woman is pregnant with a child, and there's a dragon waiting to swallow up this child and devour it as soon as it is born. Yet as soon as the child is born, it is taken up to heaven and preserved, and the dragon is outraged, so he goes after the woman.

But even the woman is preserved, so he ends up going after the woman's offspring. It says the dragon was so outraged, he pursued the offspring or the seed of the woman. Again, we're speaking symbolically, so the woman is not referring to an actual literal woman, but probably at this point refers to the people of God, just as the prophets.

The prophets often referred to the people of God, Israel, as the wife of Yahweh, the wife of God as a woman. So now John's, the woman in chapter 12 is probably a reference to the people of God. But the dragon can't get her, so he goes after her offspring.

And in order to help him out, the dragon enlists the help of two helpers, two beasts, a beast from the sea in chapter 13, and a beast from the land. And they will be the dragon's agents to help him get and destroy the offspring and the children of this woman. So that's kind of what the story is about.

Now, two things I want to say about this. One is we'll look at the function of the section. What is this section doing? Why does John see this vision and relate it to the readers? But first, I want to look at the Old Testament background.

Now remember, you have a number of important figures in this story. You have a woman who is pregnant, and it even says she experienced the pains of childbirth. She is undergoing birth pains, awaiting to give birth to this child.

So, she gives birth to a son, her offspring. But then you also have a dragon who tries to destroy the offspring, and he calls on two draconic-type figures, two beasts that are described much like the dragon in chapter 13, and they are to help the dragon destroy the woman and her offspring. Now, what story does this seem to resonate with from the Old Testament? Well, we have to go all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. Following the creation of humanity, in chapter 3, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to sin by eating the tree that they are forbidden to eat from.

And because of that, then God will now give a word of cursing, utter a word of cursing upon creation. So, here's what the Lord God says. This is the curse that is pronounced upon creation.

The Lord God says to the serpent, because you have done this, cursed are you among all the animals and among all the wild creatures. Upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. Now, listen to this, the next two verses.

He's still speaking to the serpent, and then he'll speak to the woman. I will put enmity between you, the serpent, and the woman, and between your offspring, or seed, and hers. He will strike your head.

He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. To the woman, he said, I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children.

Now, notice in those two short verses, which many have seen as kind of a foretaste or kind of a foreshadowing of ultimately what gets embodied in the gospel, is how many of those motifs in those two verses get repeated in Revelation 12 and 13. Notice the serpent and the woman being in enmity is reflected in Revelation 12 and 13 with the conflict between the woman and the dragon. Notice in Revelation 12, that the dragon is clearly identified as the deceiver, the serpent of old, from Genesis

chapter 3. So, John himself takes us back to Genesis 3 by identifying the dragon as the serpent that we just read about in Genesis 3, 15, and 16.

So, first of all, in Genesis 3, 15, and 16, you have the serpent and the woman in enmity. In Revelation 12 and 13, you have the dragon and the woman in a battle, in enmity between them. In Genesis 3:15, and 16, you have a promise that not only the woman and the dragon, but their offspring will be in enmity with each other.

In Revelation chapters 12 and 13, the dragon goes after the woman's offspring, and the dragon's offspring, the two beasts, also go after the woman's offspring. So, in chapters 12 and 13, you have a conflict between the woman's offspring and the dragon's offspring, which is the two beasts. In Genesis 3, 15, and 16, there's a mention of crushing his head.

In chapter 13, one of the beasts is described as if his head was crushed or slain, which is probably a direct reference back to Genesis chapter 3. And then finally, in Genesis chapter 3, the woman is told that she would give birth only through pain, that childbirth would be through pain. In Revelation chapter 12, the woman is seen as undergoing the pain of childbirth in order to give birth to the son. So, do you see what's going on? It's as if Revelation chapters 12 and 13 is a lengthier portrayal of what you find in Genesis 3, 15 through 16, where again, the author says, I will put enmity between you and the woman, the serpent and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.

He will strike or crush your head and you will strike his heel. To the woman, he said, I will increase your pain in childbirth. All of that now occurs in Revelation 12 and 13.

So, why does that take place? What's going on? What's the function of this section? Basically, Revelation chapters 12 and 13 attempt to, again, expose the true nature of the conflict between Christians and Rome in the first century. Again, apocalyptically, it lifts the veil so they can see the true nature of the conflict. What John is saying is, that the true conflict that you face is not with Rome, but is ultimately a conflict that goes all the way back to creation.

So, in other words, they should not be surprised. Furthermore, they should now understand that what they see is not just this, they should not be awestruck by Rome. What they see is not some colossal empire, but what they see ultimately is the struggle that they face with Rome is ultimately the embodiment of the struggle with Satan himself that goes all the way back to creation, to Genesis chapter 12.

So, again, it's helping them to put the situation in a new perspective. It helps them to see the true nature of the conflict that they face, that it's not just with Rome. The true conflict is with Satan, a conflict that originates in creation in the early chapters of Genesis.

And now the same serpent is just rearing his ugly head to try to destroy God's people the same way he did in the past. And now Christians should be able to resist. In a sense, Revelation chapters 12 and 13 are a commentary on something Paul said back in Ephesians.

Remember, we talked briefly about the spiritual armor passage in Ephesians chapter 6, where Paul said, Your battle is not with flesh and blood, but with the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies. He's not saying that any battle you face on the physical front is just an illusion or it's not real. That's not what he's saying.

Yes, it is real, but Paul is speaking apocalyptically. He wants them to see that the true battle you face is not the physical empirical one, but you need to understand the true battle that lies behind that. And that's what John is saying to his readers, that the conflict that you face with Rome is not the whole story.

So, he lifts the veil to enable them to see behind the scenes there is a far greater conflict going on that goes all the way back to creation and Satan's attempt to destroy God's purposes and to destroy his people. But one that would ultimately be defeated by the seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent, which has already taken place with one of these beasts having a head appearing as if it is crushed. So now they can also see that not only do we understand the true nature of the conflict, but the death blow has already been dealt.

The head has already been crushed. And so, all they need to do is resist and not give in to Roman rule. All right.

That's a good place to stop. We have a couple of other passages that we will look at towards the end of Revelation during our next class period.