

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 3, Hermeneutics – Interpreting Revelation

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 3 on the hermeneutics or principles for interpreting the book of Revelation.

So, we've talked a little bit about the literary nature of Revelation as far as belonging to three types of literary genres, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter.

Now we want to consider how that affects the way we interpret the book. As E.D. Hirsch reminded us, meaning is genre-bound. That is meaning, genre communicates meaning.

Genre makes a difference in the way that a piece of literature communicates meaning. So, what does revelation mean? How does it communicate meaning in light of the literary types? Or what we're going to do now is ask what principles should guide us in the way we read and interpret the book. First of all, I'll at times correlate these principles with the specific literary genres, not always, but sometimes I will.

Hopefully most of the time they'll be evident from our discussion of the literary type. But first of all, we must interpret Revelation symbolically and not literally. And again, this comes right out, especially this comes out of its nature as an apocalypse.

We said part of the literary genre of apocalypse is John saw his vision in symbolic form and then wrote using symbols and images that as closely as possible resemble what it was he saw. So, we need to interpret Revelation symbolically and not literally. When I was growing up in the church context in which I was raised, I was taught not so much by my parents, but from the church context and tradition, I was raised in, which had a profound enthusiasm for and a profound interest, if not quite obsession, in the book of Revelation.

I was taught that you must read Revelation literally and interpret it literally unless there is really good reason not to, unless there's good reason to interpret it symbolically. I would suggest we need to turn that principle on its head and say we need to interpret Revelation symbolically unless there's good reason in the text to interpret it in any other way, for example, literally. There are literal features of Revelation, sometimes in chapters 4 through 22, kind of the visionary or apocalyptic heart of John's work, the visionary segment of it.

You often find references to nations and people that obviously, I think should be taken literally, but unless there's a good reason not to, I think we should interpret John's symbols seriously and interpret them symbolically, not literally. We've seen

though that in interpreting Revelation, the symbols refer to actual persons and places and events, but like a political cartoon, it describes those events in a highly imaginative, highly symbolic, highly metaphorical way, not literally. It describes it in that way so that you get the point.

So, to take one example, to kind of jump ahead a little bit, we'll talk in more detail about some of the things that I'll refer to briefly in the next hour or so, but for example, when you read Revelation chapter 13, the very first several verses you are introduced to a beast, a seven-headed beast, and he's described as the color red and he's described in a rather hideous and strange looking imagery. And we said apocalypse often does that. It sometimes combines language in ways that are strange and sometimes bizarre, at least to us.

And in chapter 13, you're introduced to this seven-headed beast with crowns on his head and a rather strange-looking character indeed. If I'm a first-century reader, what most likely am I going to associate that with? I'm convinced that the first readers would have associated that beast with Rome or the Roman empire, or perhaps even the emperor himself would have been represented by that beast or symbolized by the beast. So, John, the point is not that John expects or has seen a beast that literally looks like this.

And that's why I find it problematic. Even those who claim to interpret Revelation literally stumble in a text like chapter 13 is they don't think there's actually going to be a beast that looks like that. They think it represents a human being.

Even if they think it's a future antichrist or something like that, they still expect a human figure, not a literal actual beast in the same way that when I read a political cartoon and I see as an American citizen and a United States citizen, I read a political cartoon and I see an elephant or a donkey. I don't expect to go to the nation's capital in Washington DC and see a literal donkey or a literal elephant walking around Congress. I understand that those are images or symbols of political parties.

And in the same way, the beast, I'm convinced the readers would have associated it with the Roman empire or perhaps the emperor himself. Revelation chapter one, verse 20, I think actually provides us the key. And I don't know if John intentionally did this, but when you look at it, it provides the key, I think, to how we're to the rest of the book and how we're to read the rest of the images.

In chapter one, which we'll look at later on, in chapter one, John has an inaugural vision of the son of man starting in verse nine. And he describes in some detail starting in verse 12. In chapter one, in verse 12, John says, I turn to see the voice.

So, John, here's a voice speaking to him in the first few verses. Then in verse 12, he says, I turn to see this voice. When I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands.

So, keep that in mind. And then he says, and among the lampstands was someone that looked like a son of man. He was dressed in a robe, reaching down to his feet, and had a golden sash around his chest.

His head and hands, or I'm sorry, his head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were blazing with fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace.

And his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. Now listen to this. In his right hand, he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. And then John says in verse 17, when I saw this, I fell down at his feet as though dead, which interestingly, was a common response to an apocalyptic vision that the seer would become weak, almost sick. And here John falls down in his face, again, demonstrating John's connection with apocalyptic visions.

But what I want you to look at in verses 19 and 20, especially 20, we'll focus on verse 20, the last verse of chapter one. John hears a voice, which is probably Jesus Christ, now the risen Lord that he's just described, speaking to him. And notice what happens in verse 20.

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and of the seven golden lampstands is this, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. So, do you see what this voice has done? Or do you see what John has done in verse 20? He's demonstrated that the lampstands and the stars were actually symbolic of something else. And I take it that's the way we should read the rest of Revelation, to ask, what are these things symbolizing? We'll talk a little bit more about that in a moment.

But I want to back up also, and just notice the description of Christ again. John sees this vision of the Son of Man in verses 12 through 17, and he describes him as wearing a robe, having hair on his head that's white like snow, his eyes like blazing fire, his feet like glowing bronze, and his voice sounds like thunderous rushing water. In his right hand are seven stars, and out of his mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword.

That's not the Jesus I want to see, and not the Jesus you read about in the Gospels. The point is, that John is not literally describing Jesus. He's using images and symbols to say something about Jesus.

Later on, we'll see that the sword coming out of his mouth most likely is a symbol of Jesus' judgment. He simply speaks by his word. He judges nations and people and

wicked humanity, and even his church when they refuse to obey him and give him exclusive allegiance.

So, the first chapter, I think, provides a context on how we're to read the rest of John's apocalypse and the rest of his vision by taking the symbols and images seriously, not literally, but as symbols and metaphorical depictions of certain places and events. We'll talk a little bit more about that. The difficulty is, that John doesn't do this for us anywhere else.

There is one other place in chapter 17 where some of the symbols get interpreted, but it doesn't help us a whole lot. We'll see when we get to chapter 17. But, in Revelation chapter 1, John gives us a clue as to how to interpret a couple of the symbols that provide a model for interpreting the rest of them, but the problem is John doesn't do this elsewhere.

So, how can we figure out the meaning of these symbols, and how can we figure out what they actually might refer to? What persons, places, and events? The first thing is, I think, is to come to grips with the historical background and circumstances of Revelation, which is why we spent some time at the very beginning talking a little bit about the Roman Empire, and the Emperor, and the challenges that created for Christians. That can help us to understand, again, perhaps why the beast most likely represents Rome or the Roman Empire for first-century Christians reading this thing. Elsewhere in Revelation, I think most of our help will come from realizing where John gets these images.

Most of them, as we've already said, come right out of the Old Testament. As is very well known, and at times we'll spend a little bit of time doing this. At other times, we can only go rather quickly.

But, as is very well known, John never quotes the Old Testament like you find, for example, in Matthew as it is written, or thus says the prophet, or just as was written or predicted in the prophet Isaiah, or something like that. Instead, John takes language and images from the Old Testament and weaves them into his own discourse. And so, by going back and understanding the Old Testament background and source of these images, we're often able better to understand their meaning, and also sometimes exactly what they might be referring to.

But the other source is, I'm convinced also that a lot of John's images would have resonated with the Greco-Roman background. That is, some of the literature, some of the language, some of the images that would have been familiar to the writers in the Greco-Roman world, and from Greco-Roman literature, John may use those images to describe what he saw as well. In fact, I'm convinced a lot of times, and we'll see this, a lot of times John may use images because they're evocative of more than one background.

He may choose to use an image to describe what he saw or a symbol because not only does it come out of the Old Testament and resonates with the Old Testament Jewish background, but it also has parallels with and resonates with the Old Testament background or the Greco-Roman background as well. So, readers who are probably familiar with the Old Testament, but well ensconced in the Roman Empire and Greco-Roman society, would have been able to draw connections perhaps both ways. So, I wonder if at times John did not deliberately choose some of his symbols and images because they were evocative of more than one background.

One of the keys, and I think this is inescapable, is one of the ways to understand and unpack some of John's symbols and images is here, if ever, you just need to use good commentaries. I would recommend the commentaries by Greg Beale and David Aune and Grant Osborne and even the older one by George Caird and some of the work by Richard Bauckham all provide highly reliable guides for unpacking the background of some of the images and their meaning also what they refer to. That last one is the most difficult.

Sometimes it's very difficult to determine exactly who or what the images and symbols are referring to. I wonder if sometimes that is because we need to focus more on the meaning of the symbols rather than on exactly what they're referring to or exactly what they're depicting. Whether the beast refers exactly to or whether we can be confident that it refers to Rome or the Roman Empire or we're not sure which, at the same time we can still understand the meaning of the beast.

The image of a beast, as we'll see, actually had a fairly long history going all the way back to the Old Testament, where the Old Testament text, you find this in the Psalms, you find this in the prophetic literature, where a beast or dragon type figure or serpent type figure was often used, not only in Genesis 3 to depict Satan, but throughout the history of God's people was often depicted, used to depict oppressive, godless, idolatrous foreign nations or rulers. And so, John has used an image that actually has a long history of meaning that it brings with it. John doesn't just pull it out of thin air, but John uses an image that has a long history of describing wicked, godless rulers and oppressive nations.

So at the very least, when we read this, we should understand that the beast represents a nation, a ruler, a kingdom that is violent and oppressive and godless and idolatrous and opposed to God and his people. But again, I think with the historical background, perhaps we can fill out in a little more detail and understand most likely, given the context in which Revelation was written, it's hard for me to think that the first readers would not have read Revelation 12, 13 and the beast as representing or referring to the Roman empire or the emperor himself, especially since it has a history of, in the Old Testament, of referring to nations and rulers as well that oppose God's people. But other than that, sometimes I think we need to focus more

on the meaning and theological significance of those images rather than getting too caught up with exactly what they refer to and exactly what person or event or what precisely those are pointing to and referring to.

And sometimes that's the tricky one. I remember one time, I like to tell this to describe the story, at least as a partial analogy to describing the struggle that we face when we interpret Revelation's images and symbols. One time when I was living in Montana, a rancher called me one day and asked if I would help him dismantle a log cabin.

It was a log cabin that had been built back in the 1930s or so. Some of the logs, had been abandoned for years, but some of the logs are still very good, in good shape. And the rancher wanted to keep those to build his own cabin.

And so, with the help of a couple of implements or machines and our bare hands, we were going to dismantle this cabin and keep the good logs. As we were doing that, I began to notice that between the logs, probably stuffed in there to fill holes and cracks to keep out the cold Montana winds, I found newspapers. And I pulled a couple out and looked at them.

They were dated from the 40s and 50s, quite early. And one of the things that caught my attention was the political cartoons. And I looked at a couple of them and I began to realize that I had no idea what they were talking about.

Number one, although some of the symbols I recognized, there are some symbols I simply wasn't familiar with. And second, my 1940s or 1950s political and historical knowledge escaped me at that point. And I wasn't sure exactly what was going on in the United States and in the world that these images and symbols in the political cartoon were probably referring to.

That's kind of what we're up against when we're reading the book of Revelation. Number one, some of the images and symbols are unfamiliar to us that would have been familiar to John and his first readers. And second, we're not entirely certain as to exactly all the things that were going on and exactly the events and persons and things that John was predicting or talking about or referring to or describing.

And so, that's why I say I think we need to rely on some of the better commentaries and pay attention to the Old Testament, know as much as we can about the Greco-Roman world to try to come up as best as possible with what most likely did these symbols and images mean. Theologically, what meaning were they trying to convey? And then again, what might they refer to? Persons, places, and events in the modern day of the readers, but also in the future as well. So, that is the first principle in interpreting Revelation.

We must interpret it symbolically, not literally. I like to say Revelation is more like walking through an art gallery and seeing different artistic depictions sometimes of the same event and situation. It's more like that than it is watching a CNN news flash or documentary that were to read as a more literal, straightforward, historical description.

Revelation is more artistic, yes, it refers to actual events, persons, and places, but describes them more artistically in the language of symbol and metaphor. And to take Revelation seriously, not literally, but seriously, we must take seriously its symbols and images. The second principle in interpreting Revelation is to realize that Revelation as an apocalypse, as a prophecy, and as a letter is probably going to be about both the present and the future.

And even at times, perhaps the past. I would say primarily, and at least I would say of the greatest importance would be the present element. That is, Revelation is trying to help.

Remember, it's trying to help the readers make sense of their present situation. As an apocalypse, it's trying to unveil reality so that they can see behind the empirical world in which they live. There's a whole new reality that lies behind it and somehow influences it, but will help the readers make more sense of their situation.

So, I would say that much of Revelation is probably an apocalyptic description and prophetic description and critique and evaluation of the reader's first-century situation living under the Roman Empire, which again is another reason we spent some time trying to unpack the historical situation behind Revelation. But much of Revelation probably describes present persons and events of the first century, even though we can't always be sure exactly what those are. And sometimes we're the ones in the dark about that.

Revelation seems to, most importantly, help its first readers come to grips with and understand how they should respond in light of their present situation. But clearly, Revelation does include future events, especially when you get to chapters 19 and 22. You're clearly in the future at what theologians call the Second Coming of Christ, where we find history coming to its conclusion with Christ arriving or breaking into history and arriving on the scene of history to now set up his kingdom.

Revelation as a prophecy and as an apocalypse is and does project the present onto the broader screen of God's intention for all of world history. And it does depict future judgment and future salvation, just as Old Testament prophets did. So, there are, clear references of the future throughout Revelation, but usually, Revelation does that by placing its present circumstances against the screen or against the backdrop of the broader screen of God's intention to bring history to its conclusion.

Again, that's part of helping the readers make better sense of their present situation. But there is at least one, I think, at least one example of Revelation, especially in chapters 4 through 22, the prophetic apocalyptic proper section, we might say, of Revelation. In chapter 12, 1 through 8, let me read this.

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. And if you doubt Revelation is symbolic, where have you ever seen a woman like that with twelve stars and the moon under her feet and clothed with the sun? Clearly, John is, whatever he's referring to, he's describing it in highly symbolic language. Verse 2, she was pregnant and she cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.

Then another sign appeared in heaven, an enormous red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns. Again, clearly, we're in the realm of symbolism and visionary material. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.

The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter, an allusion to Psalm chapter 2. And her child was snatched up to God and to the throne. It's almost impossible not to read this without thinking of and seeing this as a reference to the birth of Christ.

And almost every commentary I have read reads it that way. So here, at least, if John is writing in, even if he's writing in the 60s, if he is writing in the mid-90s AD, John is referring to an event that occurred almost 90 years earlier. That is, he's referring to the birth of Christ itself.

Clearly, a past event from the perspective of John writing much later. So, at least in chapter 12, we find a reference to an event not in the future, but in the past. So, Revelation probably should be read as a combination of events and persons and places and depicting events that take place in the present, but also in the future.

And perhaps occasionally events that have already transpired in the past. Now, what this means is an important feature of Revelation, still talking about principle number two, Revelation is about the present and the future and also at times perhaps the past, is in regards to that an important principle for understanding Revelation is Revelation, although there is a logic to it and a kind of a, literarily at least, a linear progression. It does appear that Revelation temporarily seems to cycle.

It seems to act more like a cycle. That is, over and over again, Revelation will begin by describing events, I think in the first century, the days of the reader in their contemporary situation to help make sense of it. And then it will end by referring to

the end of history, to the future, or again, what theologians call the second coming of Christ.

And then it will back up and do it again. It will describe the present and that will lead right into the future salvation and judgment. Then the author will back up again.

So, it kind of goes cyclically as far as the time period that refers to. So, once again, it will start by describing the present and then place that against the backdrop of God's intention to bring history to its conclusion. So, for example, in chapter six, I'll just use a couple of examples, but in chapter six, at the very end of chapter six, we read this.

Starting of verse 12, this is chapter six, records the seals, the seven seals that get broken. And as each seal is unsealed, something happens. And this is where you have the four horsemen.

We'll talk more about that. But the very last seal in chapter six, is described, seal number six. John says, I watch as he opens the sixth seal, there was a great earthquake.

The sun turned black like sackcloth, made of goat hair. The whole moon turned blood red and the stars and sky fell to earth as late figs dropped from the fig tree. Again, principle number one, authors use highly symbolic language.

We'll talk about this later. Like a fig tree when shaken by the strong wind, the sky receded like a scroll rolling up and every mountain island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes and generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks and the mountains.

They called to the mountains and the rocks, to fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb for the great day of the wrath has come and who can stand. We'll see later on that John actually draws on Old Testament text for all this language of stars falling and moons like blood red and mountains falling and people hiding in caves. This comes out of the Old Testament.

But clearly, John is referring at this point to the final judgment. This is the second coming of Christ. This is the end of history.

So, chapter six has already brought us to the end. But as you realize, we still have 16 chapters more to go in Revelation. And so, we're not done.

Chapter seven. Again, I won't read this, but chapter seven ends with God's people standing before the throne of God and celebrating their final salvation, their eschatological salvation. Yet again, we still have 15 more chapters to go.

Or chapter 11. Chapter 11 also ends with this. Verse 15.

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet. This is at the end of the series of trumpets now after the seals. The seventh angel sounded his trumpet.

There were loud voices in heaven who said, the kingdom of the world has now become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ and he will reign forever and ever. And then one of the 24 elders seated on the throne before God fell at their face and worshiped God, et cetera, et cetera. Clearly, again, we are at the end where the kingdom has now become God's kingdom and he will now reign forever and ever.

Clearly, we're at the end of history again. Yet we still have 11 more chapters to go in Revelation. Chapter 14 gives images of both final salvation and final judgment.

Yet we still have several more chapters to go before we get to the end of the book. So, Revelation over and over again brings you up to the brink, to the end, only to start over and give you another run to bring you to the end and to start over. So, you kind of have this pattern of John's cycling where again, he'll describe using images and symbols.

He'll describe what's going on in the situation of his readers, what's going on in the first century, only then to move to the end of history to show how those events relate to or how the future relates to those events. Then he'll back up and do it again and he'll back up and do it again. But it's as if he's exploring the meaning of the reader's situation by using different images and different symbols to help them again, come to grips with what it is they are experiencing.

And these different perspectives are meant to help them get the picture. Now, again, this has another effect. The fact that the author brings you to the end only to back up again, it's as if he's whetting your appetite.

You get to the end of chapter six and that description of the end is sort of vague and kind of cryptic. It doesn't tell you a lot. And over and over again, the author brings you to the end only to start over again and go back to the first century and describe the events going on in his reader's day.

It's as if the author's whetting your appetite for a fuller disclosure of future judgment and salvation. And the reader is not disappointed. When you get to chapters 19 and 22, the writer pulls out all the stops and gives you a full, what you've been waiting for, a full disclosure, a full description of the second coming of Christ, the grand finale of what will happen when Christ does return to set up his kingdom and to inaugurate a new creation, to reward his people with salvation, but to bring judgment at his coming on evil, wicked humanity.

So, first of all, treat Revelation symbolically, and interpret it symbolically, not literally. Take it seriously, but not literally. It refers to actual persons, events, and places, but it describes them in highly symbolic and metaphorical language.

Second is, to understand that Revelation is about the present and future, and most importantly, probably the present, trying to help the readers make sense of their present situation, but about the future as well, and sometimes the past. And then third, a third principle is, and I think this is very important. Interpretations of Revelation must be something that John could have intended and his first-century readers could have understood.

Let me say that again. Interpretations of Revelation must be consistent with what John could have intended and what his first-century readers could have understood. If not, I think any interpretation that John couldn't have possibly intended and his first-century readers living in the pre-technological age, living in a political situation very different from our own, any interpretation they could not have possibly understood should be rejected, in my opinion.

I was raised in an environment, also in a church environment, that understood Revelation. I think going back to the very beginning of our discussion of Revelation, where church histories often had an obsession with the book of Revelation. I was raised in an environment similar to the Left Behind series, where basically the assumption seemed to be, though it wasn't clearly stated, that nobody really understood Revelation until today, until the 20th or 21st century.

Now we have the key. Now we can look around and see all these events being fulfilled and taking place. Now we have the key to interpreting Revelation.

And so, at least the corollary to that would seem to be no one else has understood it. The first-century readers had no idea what was going on. A church history from the 2nd to the 20th century had no idea what was going on.

And now all of a sudden, in the environment that I was taught to read Revelation, we have the key to making sense of Revelation. We can look around and see all these things taking place, and we can read them, and now we can actually see what John was referring to and predicting and trying to make sense of. Obviously, that kind of reading depends on, I think, misunderstanding what an apocalypse is, and what a prophecy was.

They were meant to speak to the first century, not just predict the future. But this type of reading depends almost solely on reading Revelation as a future prediction, not just a few years into the future, but centuries far, far past what the first readers and what John could have ever conceived of. But again, I think that needs to be turned on its head.

The principle was, apparently, that we now have the key to reading Revelation. It was a complete mystery to the first-century readers. That should be flipped on its head.

I think the first-century readers understood very well what was going on. And we're the ones that are in the dark. We're the ones who need to do the hard work of trying to figure out what John intends to communicate to these readers. What most likely would they have understood? Again, recall that John, one of the interesting features of all the literary types of Revelation, an apocalypse, a prophecy, a letter, they were all meant to communicate something to the contemporaries of the author.

They were meant to say something about the present situation of the readers, not to predict some events far, far into the future. But they were meant at least, yes, they did refer to future events, but at the same time, they were meant to describe and to explain and to provide a perspective on the present situation of the readers. And so, we should read Revelation then as addressing specific issues and specific problems of the first-century readers, not some shot in the dark, way down, centuries later, down the historical tunnel of the perspective of the readers.

For example, beyond the fact that John chose to write in three literary genres that addressed the reader's own situation, it's interesting, number one, we already said a letter. As a letter, John was trying to communicate information that would actually address the needs of the first-century readers, like any of Paul's letters. And so, presumably then, as a letter, Revelation is communicating information that was meant to be understood by the first readers, not something that was incomprehensible and only taking place far beyond in the future, far beyond the horizons of the first-century readers.

Furthermore, it's interesting to know how John ends his book. One of the references that I read earlier to the book of Revelation is a prophecy. In chapter 22 and verse 10, John hears a voice again, probably clearly an angel who is addressing him from back up in verses 6 and following of chapter 22.

Now in verse 10, here's what the angel says to him. Then he, the angel told me, do not seal up the words of this prophecy of this book because the time is near. It's interesting that this is the direct opposite strategy of what you find in the book of Daniel.

In the book of Daniel, Daniel is told to seal up the prophecy because it's for a later time. Now John, and I think some other apocalypses also use this theme of sealing up the book. Now John is told just the opposite, don't seal it up.

Why? Because it's not for some future time. The time of fulfillment is already here. This is for you.

This is speaking to your own situation. This is not information for a distant future. This is not referring to events that will take place in the 20th or 21st century or however long history goes on.

Do not seal up the words of this prophecy because it's not for a later time and generation. Do not seal them up because it's directly relevant to the life of the first-century readers. So therefore, again, any interpretation, whether it's one that we come up with or one that we read, any interpretation that John could not have intended or his first readers living in a pre-technological age, living in the first century, a specific political and religious and economic situation, anything they could not have intended or understood should probably be rejected.

Any interpretation must be consistent with what John could have intended and what his readers would have grasped. Again, it's interesting. That's not a new principle when we think in terms of other New Testament books.

Again, we're taught to read Paul's letters in light of what most likely was a situation Paul was addressing and what was he saying to his readers. We should read Revelation in the same way. And I'm not saying it's only referring to first-century events and it's only relevant to the first century.

We'll see later on that many of its images and symbols have the power and ability to even transcend the first-century situation and continue to speak to God's peoples throughout the century, leading up to whenever Christ brings history to a close. But at the end of the day, we must begin with what John probably intended to do for his first readers and what they most likely would have understood and picked up on. A fourth principle is we must read Revelation as intended to encourage and exhort God's people.

It provided encouragement to a suffering persecuted church, but even more so, it provided exhortation to a compromising and complacent church. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not focus or read it primarily as intended to persuade its readers to a certain course of action, to provide comfort for those who are suffering because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ, but exhorts and warns those who are compromising their faithfulness to Christ or who are so complacent in their surroundings that they're blind to what they're doing. Any reading of Revelation that just sees it as a prediction of the future or just uses it to fuel enthusiasm about what's happening in the political situation in the 21st century or the nearness of Christ's return has completely missed the point of Revelation.

It's not primarily about the prediction of the future. Yes, it does have future elements in it, but it's not primarily about the prediction of the future. It's primarily a book of encouragement and exhortation.

It's to get us to wake up and see what is really at stake. It's to get God's people to worship God and the Lamb no matter what the consequences. It's to remind us that nothing, no one, no entity, no nation, no person, no other thing is worthy of the exclusive worship that belongs only to God and Jesus Christ.

In the words of John, it's trying to get us to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, no matter what the consequences that entails. That's what Revelation is about, not primarily about predicting the future. It's not meant to satisfy our curiosity as to what's going to happen next and where we are situated in relationship to the end, but to help us plot our existence on some chart as far as how close we are to the end.

But anyone that reads Revelation and is not motivated to exclusive obedience to Christ, is not motivated to further holiness, is not motivated to worship God and the Lamb, no matter what the consequences, has not yet heard Revelation accurately and clearly. Finally, and I think perhaps one of the most important ones, interpreting Revelation requires a good dose of humility. We must be willing to admit at times that we could be wrong or we're not sure.

And we must be willing to at least consider and listen to other ways of reading the book of Revelation. Revelation is not the place for dogmatic certainty on end-time events or how things are going to be fulfilled or what exactly things are going to look like when Christ comes to consummate his purposes for history. Dogmatic assertions are simply out of place in reading a book like Revelation.

Instead, not that we cannot be certain about the meaning of the book at any time, not that we should not decide on how we interpret texts and hold to those and even provide reasons why we hold to those interpretations. But at the end of the day, we must approach the book in extreme humility, recognizing some of the difficulties that tend to try to interpret and read the book, and recognizing that the church has largely throughout history has disagreed on many points of interpretation. And here, if ever, again, I would repeat here, if ever, we need to rely, I think, on some of the better commentaries to help us to read Revelation.

Those who have thought about the book, those who have done the research and the work to try to make sense of the book can function as our teachers and our guides through a difficult book like Revelation. So, keep those five principles in mind as you read and interpret Revelation. And as we move through the book, we will refer back to, at times, these principles.

And even if we do not explicitly do so, hopefully, you will be able to draw the connection at times. Again, that number one, Revelation is to be interpreted symbolically and not literally. Yes, it does refer to actual persons, places, and events in the present and the future, but it refers to those symbolically.

So, we must take Revelation's images and symbols seriously, though not literally. Second, it's about the present and the future, most likely, and at times the past. Third, it must be, that any interpretation of Revelation must be something John could have intended and his first-century readers could have grasped and made sense of.

Fourth, Revelation must be read primarily as an encouragement and warning to the people of God. It must be read as an encouragement to those who are suffering but as a warning and a wake-up call to those who are compromising their faith in Jesus Christ. And finally, our interpretations of Revelation and our reading of Revelation must always be tempered with a good dose of humility.

One other feature of Revelation that I want to just describe very briefly, related to number one, this kind of an excursus that goes back to principle number one, we need to interpret the book symbolically and not literally, is the fact that among other images and symbols, and we'll deal with those throughout as we work through the book of Revelation, but one of the interesting things that you find in Revelation is it is a book full of numbers. There are all sorts of different numbers and multiples of numbers or fractions that we find throughout the book, references to different time periods, and different numerical values found throughout the book of Revelation, and obviously, the number seven is probably the one that jumps to your mind immediately. You're actually confronted with the significance of numbers at the very beginning of the book, when in chapter one, in verse 12, in John's vision of the Son of Man, he sees the Son of Man holding seven golden lampstands and seven stars.

So already the number seven plays a key role in the first chapter of Revelation, and the seven churches in chapters two and three, which actually were mentioned already in chapter one, and then the number seven playing a key role in the seven seals, the seven bowls, or the seven trumpets, the seven bowls, and the number seven occurring a couple of other times, the seven spirits of God in chapter one, and also chapter four and five. So the number seven is the most obvious example that plays a key role. And one of the questions is, how should we deal with the numbers in Revelation? Interestingly, I find sometimes that interpreters of Revelation, who are quite willing to interpret it symbolically elsewhere, still insist on taking the numbers with usually a strict literalism.

That is, the numbers mean exactly what they say. If the author talks about seven, there must be exactly seven or something like that. And sometimes they recognize, yes, there's some symbolic value to it, but still, it must be taken as the literal numerical value of that number.

So, the number seven, yes, it may have symbolic connotations, but we should still take it as referring to a literal number seven of whatever it's referring to. I would suggest to you that our interpretive principle number one, interpret it symbolically and not literally, applies to the numbers as well. That the numbers are not in Revelation for their literal value or their literal numerical value, but the numbers are there because of what they symbolically connote and what they suggest at a symbolic level.

So, what I want to do is just discuss very briefly some of the primary numbers that one finds about Revelation and what their symbolic values should be. So, for example, we'll start with the number three and a half that literally in Revelation is times time and half a time, which basically is understood as three and a half years. Probably the number three and a half or three and a half years that you find in chapters 11, 12, and 13, kind of in the center of the book of Revelation, you'll find references to three and a half years.

Again, some of your translations might have times time and half a time. Three and a half years should probably be understood as simply a half of seven. Seven is the number of perfection and completion that we'll see in just a moment.

Seven is the number of perfection and completion, three and a half falls short of that. So probably when the author talks about a period of time that is characterized as three and a half years, he's not talking about three and a half years of 360 days. He's using three and a half symbolically.

It's only half of seven. It falls short of seven. I take it that three and a half means a rather intense period of time that gets cut short.

It falls far short of the perfect number seven. It's only half of that. So again, what three and a half is not there for its literal numerical or temporal value.

The significance of three and a half is not how long the period of time lasts. The significance is what it symbolizes, and what it says about that. However intense that period of time may be, it simply won't last.

It falls short of seven. Another number is four. The number four probably symbolizes the entire earth, similar to what we might say about the four corners of the earth.

So, whenever you see the number four, for example, the four living creatures in Revelation four and five, the four is not significant for there are literally four of them, but symbolically the number four signifies the entire earth. The entire globe is now under consideration. The number six probably signifies again imperfection.

It falls one short of the number seven. The number seven we've already seen symbolizes perfection and completion. So again, the significance is not a literal number of seven times or seven things that take place, but seven symbolically, probably going back to Genesis one and two and the seven days of creation.

The number seven is important for symbolizing completion or perfection. The number 10, the number 10, and its multiples. So, we're not only talking about these numbers by in and of themselves but even their multiples.

The number 10 signifies completion or wholeness. It's a large round number that signifies the wholeness of the 10 and its multiples. Number 12, is another significant number, the number 12, and its multiples like 144 or 144,000 or just the number 12 or even 24 adding 12 and 12.

The number 12 signifies or symbolizes the people of God modeled after the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament, and the 12 apostles in the New Testament. So, when you see 12 or its multiples, again, the significance is not a literal number of 12, but what 12 symbolizes. 12 symbolizes the people of God.

We also find a number of fractions in Revelation, whether one-fourth or one-half or one-third. Again, the fractions are not there for their precise mathematical value, but the fractions symbolize a fragment or what is partial or what is limited. So we'll see, for example, when God pours out the seal judgments and the trumpet judgments, they're often a third of the earth gets harmed or only a fourth of the earth or a fourth of the population.

Again, it's not meant so that we figure out how many people are alive now and then we siphon off a fourth as those subject to judgment. Again, the point is the symbolic value of these numbers. The fragments indicate something that is fragmented, something that is only partial, or something that is limited in its scope.

That's the significance of the fragments. So, I would suggest then that we interpret the numbers in Revelation, not for their literal value, not for their literal mathematical value, or not for their literal temporal value, but we also interpret the numbers for their symbolic value and meaning. So having talked a little bit about the hermeneutical principles that will guide us in interpretation, in the next section, we're going to begin with Revelation chapter one, and we'll begin to work through each section of John's apocalypse, his prophecy, his letter, and be alert to the symbols and images and be alert to the type of literature that we're reading and how that makes a difference in the way we actually interpret the text.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 3 on the hermeneutics or principles for interpreting the book of Revelation.