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Session 34 - Revelation

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Welcome to The Explainer. All right, today we are diving into one of the most mysterious and honestly one of the most controversial texts in all of history, the Book of Revelation. You know, for centuries, this one book has really sparked two totally extreme reactions.

On one hand, people think it's just strange, confusing, something you should probably just ignore. But on the other hand, some see it as a secret code, a detailed script that's just waiting to be cracked to predict our future. I mean, its imagery is just so vivid and, let's be honest, often terrifying.

Just think of those famous woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer of the Four Horsemen. Wow. This stuff has captivated and, yeah, confused people for thousands of years.

We're talking seven-headed beasts, locusts with scorpion tails, just these epic scenes of cosmic war. So that's the big question, right? How in the world are we supposed to approach a text like this? Is there a sensible way to even read it? Well, it seems like most people fall into one of two camps. The first camp just ignores it.

I mean, the famous theologian John Calvin wrote a commentary on every single book of the New Testament except Revelation. He just didn't know what to make of it. Then you have the other camp, the ones who obsess over it.

They treat it like a roadmap for the 21st century, you know, trying to match its symbols to the latest headlines. Think of the Left Behind series. That's a perfect example.

But what if both of those approaches are missing the point? What if they're both wrong? The sources we're digging into suggest there's a third way, a path that doesn't treat Revelation like a crystal ball, but instead like a historical document written with a very specific goal for its very first readers. And this is the key. It's all about this simple shift in perspective.

Before we even think about asking what it means for us today, we have to ask a more fundamental question. What was the author, John, actually trying to say to the people he was writing to back in the first century? Okay, so to answer that, we've got to do a little time traveling. We need to step right into the world where Revelation was born, the Roman Empire in the first century.

So the author, this guy named John, he's writing right near the end of the first century. We're talking around the year 95 AD. And that puts him smack in the middle of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian.

Make no mistake, Rome was the superpower of the day, the undisputed champ. Now, what you might picture- this massive empire-wide hunt to wipe out all the Christians- that wasn't really what was happening. Not yet.

The real pressure was way more subtle. It was social. It was economic.

See, the cities were just packed with temples and statues to the emperor, and everyone was expected to join in to show you were a good Roman citizen. That meant showing loyalty to Rome, and yeah, even worshipping the emperor like he was a god. And get this: when you actually read those letters to the seven churches at the start of Revelation, only two of them were dealing with serious harassment.

For the other five, the biggest danger wasn't persecution. It was the temptation to just blend in, to compromise. They're basically asking, hey, what's the big deal? Can't we just worship Jesus and Caesar? So if you're John, how do you deal with that? How do you address this huge temptation to just go with the flow? Well, his answer was to use a really unique style of writing, one that was absolutely packed with powerful symbols.

Okay, so the book's genre is apocalypse. Now, that word probably makes you think of the end of the world, right? But the original Greek word, *apocalypsis*, doesn't mean that at all. It literally means an unveiling.

The entire point is to pull back the curtain on reality and show you what's really going on behind the scenes. Here's a good way to think about it. It's like watching a play.

For the audience back then, all they could see was the stage, their world, where Rome looked totally invincible, and Caesar seemed to be calling all the shots. But John's apocalyptic vision yanks back the curtain. It unveils this deeper, heavenly reality where, surprise, God and Christ are the ones who are truly on the throne, ruling over everything.

And that is why the book reads less like a straightforward news report and way more like you're walking through some kind of surreal art gallery. All that strange symbolic imagery? It's not there for you to decode like it's a math problem. No, it's designed to make you feel the message deep down, to engage your heart and your emotions just as much as your mind.

But here's the thing. Revelation wasn't just this grand symbolic vision. It was also something much more down-to-earth, something practical.

At its core, it was a letter. I mean, it literally begins and ends just like a letter, and it's addressed to seven real churches in what's now modern-day Turkey. And this part is so important because a letter, by its very nature, has to make sense to the people who first read it, right? The message had to connect with the very real crisis they were facing every single day, the pressure of living under Roman rule.

So this forces us to ask a really critical question. If an interpretation of Revelation would have been impossible for the first-century readers to understand- you know, all those theories about barcodes or attack helicopters- then it's probably not what John meant. The message had to make sense to them in their world.

Okay, so when you put all these pieces together, the core message of the book just snaps into focus. It's this powerful, urgent call to its original audience. And it's basically saying, you have to choose who you're going to worship.

You have to resist the temptation to just go along with the Roman Empire and its demands. You have to stay faithful to Jesus no matter what it costs you. So if it's not a literal script for the future, then what is it? What's a good modern-day comparison for what Revelation is actually trying to do? Well, the source material points to an analogy that might sound a little strange at first, but stick with me on this.

One of the closest things we have today is a political cartoon. Now seriously, think about it. What does a political cartoon do? It's highly symbolic, right? It uses exaggerated, sometimes even bizarre imagery, not to give you a literal photograph of what's happening, but to make a sharp, powerful critique of the people in charge.

And here's the kicker. Both Revelation and a political cartoon are almost impossible to truly understand if you don't know the specific historical moment they were created for. When you start seeing Revelation this way as a symbolic, political, and theological critique of the Roman Empire, it just completely reframes the whole book.

It stops being this confusing puzzle about the future, and it turns into something coherent, something powerful, a passionate call to stay faithful, written for its own time. And all this leaves us with one last big question. And this one goes way beyond just the book of Revelation.

It's this. How much does understanding the original context of any text, ancient or modern, change how we should read it and what it means for us today?