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Session 36 - Excursus: Revelation #1

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Alright, welcome to the Explainer. You know, there are some books that are just famous. And today, we are tackling one of the most fascinating and, let's be honest, misunderstood books in all of history, the Book of Revelation.

Yeah, let's just jump right in. Revelation is a book everyone's heard of, right? But as Dr. Mathewson puts it, for so many of us, it's still a book with seven seals. I mean, with all those strange symbols and wild visions, it can feel totally sealed shut like we just don't have a key.

And you know, that confusion, it usually leads us to one of two places, these two extremes. On one side, we just ignore it altogether. I mean, think about this.

The famous theologian John Calvin wrote commentaries on almost every single book in the New Testament, but he completely skipped Revelation. That's how intimidating it can be. And then you've got the other extreme.

We obsess over it. We treat it like some kind of secret code, trying to match every beast and prophecy to today's headlines. Okay, so let's just tackle that biggest myth head-on, shall we? This idea that Revelation is basically a crystal ball for predicting our future? You see, this crystal ball idea, I mean, it sold a ton of books and launched a million websites for sure.

But it turns the book into this super confusing puzzle about the 21st century. And it forces us to ask a really, really important question. How on earth could the original audience back in the first century have possibly understood a message that was really about events happening 2,000 years in their future? I mean, when you think about it like that, it just doesn't really add up, does it? So what if the key to unlocking this whole thing isn't buried somewhere in our future, but actually lies in its past? I'm going to suggest that to really get what this book is about, we have to avoid both of those extremes- ignoring it and obsessing over it- and instead do what we do with any other ancient text.

Put it back where it came from. Put it in its original context. All right, so let's do that.

Let's travel back in time and put this book right back in its original setting. The author, our prophet we know as John, wasn't writing to us. No, he was writing a very specific message to seven very real Christian communities living in what we'd now call modern-day Turkey, smack dab in the middle of the Roman Empire.

So most scholars believe Revelation was written around 95 AD. Now, you've got to picture this time. This was during the reign of Emperor Domitian, and the Roman Empire wasn't just a power.

It was the undisputed global superpower. Its culture, its military, its influence. It was literally everywhere.

Now, this created a massive problem for the Christians living in these cities. See, the Roman Emperor was more and more being treated like a god, and participating in what was called the Emperor cult wasn't just some fringe thing. It was tied to everything.

Your job, your membership in a trade guild, your social standing, your whole life was wrapped up in it. And this right here, this is the key. While there was definitely a real risk of persecution, the book itself mentions a man named Antipas who was actually martyred.

The bigger, more common everyday danger for most people wasn't a sword hanging over their heads. It was the subtle daily pressure to just compromise, to just blend in, mix their faith with the worship of the empire, you know, just to get by. Okay, okay.

So what about all the weird stuff? The dragons, the multi-headed beasts, the locusts with human faces? What is that all about? Well, to make any sense of it, first we have to understand what kind of book this is. We have to talk about its genre. Right.

So Revelation belongs to a very specific type of ancient writing called an apocalypse. Now I know what you're thinking. We hear that word, and we immediately think end of the world, right? Fire and brimstone.

But that's not what it originally meant. It literally means an unveiling. The whole point is to pull back the curtain on the world to show you what's really going on behind the scenes.

And this, this illustrates the point perfectly. Think of history like a giant stage play. Out on the main stage, what did everyone see? The magnificent Roman Empire, peace, prosperity, power.

It looked amazing. But Revelation gives its first readers and us a backstage pass. It pulls back that curtain to unveil the hidden reality that this same glorious empire was from God's perspective, a corrupt, arrogant, and beastly system.

So you see, Revelation is this amazing literary blend. It's an apocalypse using these wild symbols to unveil what's really happening. It's also a prophecy, but in the old school, Old Testament sense, not predicting the future, but critiquing a corrupt empire.

And maybe most importantly, it's a letter, a real letter written to solve a very real world problem for seven specific groups of people. So when you put all that together, the history, the literary style, suddenly the book's main message snaps into focus. It becomes incredibly clear and super powerful.

See, it's not really about predicting the future at all. It's a passionate, urgent wake-up call that boils down to one fundamental question for its readers. The whole entire book is basically one long symbolic argument designed to convince its readers of one thing and one thing only: that Jesus Christ, who's portrayed as the slain but victorious lamb, is the only one worthy of their ultimate worship, not the Roman Empire, which is portrayed as this monstrous beast, not any earthly power that demands your total unquestioning allegiance.

And that's the bottom line. You can't have it both ways. In the author John's view, you simply cannot serve two masters.

You have to choose where your ultimate loyalty, your ultimate worship, really lies. It's a choice. OK, so you might be thinking, if this whole book was about the Roman Empire, what does that mean for us today? Does that just make it an interesting historical document? Is it irrelevant now? No way.

Absolutely not. In fact, seeing it this way makes the book even more powerful for us. It transforms it from this confusing, frustrating roadmap for decoding future headlines into a timeless manual for how to live with wisdom and faithfulness.

At its heart, it really becomes a guide for how to live with integrity when you're surrounded by any powerful culture or system or ideology that demands your total allegiance, whether that's a political party, an economic system, or social pressure. The principles are the same. And that leaves us with this final, really provocative thought.

The whole point of Revelation was to unveil, to unmask the true nature of the Roman Empire for its first-century readers. But that challenge, that challenge is timeless. It confronts every generation, including ours, and asks us to look critically at the world around us.

It challenges us to ask the same tough question. What powerful systems, what big ideas, what institutions in our own time need to be unmasked?