

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 37 - Excursus: Revelation #2

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, today we're tackling what might just be the most fascinating, and maybe the most misunderstood text ever written, the book of Revelation. You know the one. It's the very last book of the Bible, and for a lot of people it's just this confusing jumble of weird prophecies and really bizarre visions.

So let's dive in, shall we? Let's see if we can crack this thing open. Right off the bat, Revelation just throws you into this flood of strange and honestly pretty unsettling images. If you're a modern reader, it can feel like you're reading someone's fever dream.

It just seems completely disconnected from anything we know. I mean, we're talking about multi-headed dragons, monstrous beasts literally climbing out of the sea, locusts with human faces, even armies of the undead. It is intense, it's super symbolic, and yeah, it's really, really strange.

You can totally see why it just grabs people's imagination, right? And then, of course, there's this number, which just adds to the whole mystery. It's probably the most famous part of the entire book. 666 has become this cultural shorthand for evil, and it's sparked endless conspiracy theories about, you know, everything from barcodes to computer chips.

So this all brings us to the big question, right? Is Revelation just a random collection of nightmares? Or is there actually a key that unlocks what it all means? Well, it turns out, there is. And it has everything to do with the world in which it was first written. So here's the secret.

The key to really understanding Revelation is to stop thinking of it as some literal roadmap to the future and start seeing it for what it actually is: a really powerful piece of political commentary delivered in a very specific ancient style. You see, the book's genre is what's called apocalypse. Now, that word today makes us think of the end of the world, but that's not what it means.

The original Greek word simply means an unveiling. So the author, John, is lifting a veil to show his readers what's really going on behind the curtains of the mighty Roman Empire. And probably the best way for us to get our heads around this today is to think of Revelation as a giant book-length political cartoon.

Seriously, this one analogy is the key to the whole thing. Just think about the parallels for a second. A political cartoon, right? It takes real people, real events, and uses these wild, exaggerated symbols to make a point.

And if you don't know the context, you're not going to get the joke. Well, Revelation works the exact same way. It's talking about the very real Roman Empire, but it uses symbols, beasts, dragons, and numbers to expose just how corrupt it really is.

If you don't have that first-century context, you're just completely lost. This is a perfect modern example. When you see a donkey or an elephant in a political cartoon, you don't think, oh, a literal animal is running for office.

No way. You know they represent political parties. In the exact same way, John's seven-headed beast isn't some literal monster he saw.

It's a symbol, and it's representing the brutal, godlike power of the Roman Empire. Okay, so now that we have our political cartoon key, let's use it to unlock one of the most important visions in the whole book: the scene in the heavenly throne room. Now, for John's original readers, the ultimate seat of power on planet Earth was Caesar's throne in Rome, period.

But John unveils a completely different reality. He shows them a heavenly throne, and it's not occupied by Caesar. It's occupied by God.

This vision is a direct political challenge. It's basically saying, Rome's power is temporary. It's fake.

But God's power? That's the true, ultimate reality. And get this. Who's the hero in this heavenly court? It's not some mighty warrior.

It's a slain lamb, which is a clear symbol for the crucified Jesus. I mean, what a stunning reversal. John is saying that true power doesn't come from brute force, like Rome.

It comes from self-sacrificial love. Alright, let's keep using this same way of thinking and apply it to another really famous part of the book — all those terrifying judgments and the symbolic numbers. So, Revelation describes these judgments falling on the Earth in three sets of seven.

And the imagery John uses is so intentional. You've got water turning to blood, darkness, painful sores. This is a direct callback to the plagues God sent on Egypt back in the Old Testament.

The message is crystal clear. Just like God judged the oppressive Egyptian empire, he's going to judge the oppressive Roman empire too. Which brings us all the way back to that infamous number.

Look, if Revelation is a first-century document, written for a first-century audience, then any interpretation they couldn't possibly have understood, like barcodes or microchips, is almost certainly not what John was talking about. So, what did it mean to them? Well, there are two really strong possibilities here. First, in Jewish thinking, the number 7 is all about perfection.

It's completeness. So 6, being just short of that, is the number of imperfection. So what's 666? It's basically saying imperfect, imperfect, imperfect.

A total failure. The second idea involves something called gematria. It's this practice where letters also have a number value.

And it just so happens that if you spell out Nero Caesar in Hebrew, the letters add up to, you guessed it, 666. And Nero? He was a notoriously evil emperor. Basically the poster child for Rome's wickedness.

And this symbolic use of numbers is just everywhere in the book. 7 means perfection or completeness. 12 represents the people of God.

Three and a half years, which is half of a perfect 7, is a symbol for a short, intense time of trouble that will eventually be cut short. These are artistic symbols, not figures for a calculator. So now that we've decoded some of the symbols and we get the historical context, what's the ultimate punchline of this grand epic political cartoon? The whole point was to pull back the curtain on the Roman Empire.

Rome was projecting this image of being the source of peace, order, and even divinity. But John's cartoon was meant to reveal its true nature. A violent, greedy, idolatrous system that was completely opposed to God.

So for those first-century Christians reading this, the message was a powerful call to hang in there, to resist. It was a message of hope, telling them, "Do not compromise with the corrupt values of the empire. It was an assurance that, despite how things looked, Caesar was not the ultimate power in the universe.

God was. And that kind of leaves us with one last big thought. You see, by acting like a political cartoon, Revelation gave its first readers a brand new, critical way to see the world they lived in.

And so it challenges us to ask the same kind of questions. What are the empires or systems of power in our own time that demand our total allegiance? And what kind of unveiling do we need to see them for what they truly are?