

New Testament Literature: Lecture 34 - The Book of Revelation

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson presents the Book of Revelation as a first-century pastoral letter and apocalyptic work addressing Christians facing Roman imperial pressure and religious compromise. Rather than functioning as a predictive roadmap for modern technology or political events, the text employs vivid apocalyptic symbolism and political cartoon-like imagery to convey a heavenly perspective on divine sovereignty. Mathewson details the historical context of emperor worship under Emperor Domitian, highlights the central dilemma between persecution and cultural compromise, and evaluates four major interpretive frameworks: preterist, historical, idealist, and futurist. Ultimately, Revelation serves as both a stern warning against compromise and a profound motivation toward holy living, endurance, and exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Outline

I. Course Announcements and Preliminary Remarks

- A. Review session details for upcoming section exam
- B. Availability of previous exams for student review and study
- C. Scope and coverage of final exam material across the semester

II. General Approaches to the Book of Revelation

- A. Historical patterns of reader response
 - 1. Neglect and avoidance due to peculiar imagery and symbolism
 - 2. Obsession and hyper-focus treating the text as a modern timetable
- B. Core methodological principle
 - 1. Treating Revelation like any other first-century New Testament letter
 - 2. Priority of historical-grammatical context and original audience intent

III. Historical Background and Setting

- A. Author and authority
 - 1. Self-identification as John
 - 2. Claim to Old Testament prophetic authority rather than apostolic title
- B. Date and provenance

1. Composition around 95–96 AD during the reign of Emperor Domitian
2. Setting in Western Asia Minor under dominant Roman imperial rule
- C. Primary socio-religious conflict
 1. Prominence of imperial cult and emperor worship in Asia Minor
 2. Localized harassment versus wide-scale state-sponsored execution
 3. Pastoral dilemma: persecution of faithful believers vs. temptation toward compromise

IV. Literary Genre and Characteristics

- A. Symbolic nature of apocalyptic literature
 1. Non-literal interpretation of graphic apocalyptic visions and symbols
 2. Engagement of both cognitive understanding and emotional response
- B. Tripartite hybrid genre
 1. Apocalypse: pulling back the curtain to reveal heavenly reality and ultimate goal
 2. Letter: contextual address to seven specific historical churches in Asia Minor
 3. Prophecy: divine communication standing in the Old Testament prophetic tradition
- C. Modern literary analogy
 1. Function as an ancient political cartoon
 2. Use of exaggerated imagery to interpret political and spiritual realities

V. Hermeneutical Principles for Interpretation

- A. Primacy of authorial intent and original audience comprehension
- B. Avoidance of reading modern technology or 21st-century events into the text
- C. Focusing on central theological themes rather than getting lost in details
- D. Primary purpose: motivation toward holy living, endurance, and faithful witness
- E. Necessity of hermeneutical humility and open-mindedness

VI. Major Historical Interpretive Frameworks

- A. Preterist approach: fulfillment primarily within the first-century Roman context
- B. Historical approach: continuous forecast of church history throughout the ages
- C. Idealist approach: timeless symbolic portrayal of the struggle between God and evil
- D. Futurist approach: prediction of end-time events immediately preceding Christ's return
- E. Balanced synthesis: recognizing first-century grounding, symbolic resonance, and future cosmic hope