

# Introduction to Revelation: Historical Context, Literary Genre, and Hermeneutics

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## Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson introduces the Book of Revelation by examining its historical context, literary features, and major interpretive traditions within Christian history. Rather than viewing Revelation as an uninterpretable puzzle or a predictive crystal ball for modern events, Mathewson positions the text as a prophetic and apocalyptic letter addressing first-century Christians under Roman rule. By examining the twin crises of local persecution and widespread pressure to compromise via emperor worship, he demonstrates how John uses vivid Old Testament symbolism to lift the curtain on earthly reality and reveal God as alone worthy of supreme worship. Ultimately, he advocates for an integrative interpretive framework combining preterist, idealist, and futurist insights grounded in historical contextualization and hermeneutical humility.

## Outline

### I. Introduction and Common Church Approaches to Revelation

- A. Unique challenges of interpreting Revelation due to lack of modern literary analogies
- B. Two extreme historical approaches in the church
  - 1. Ignoring the book due to mystery and confusion (e.g., John Calvin)
  - 2. Obsessing over decoding the book for modern predictions (e.g., Left Behind series)
- C. Proposed balanced approach
  - 1. Avoiding both extremes: accepting Revelation as authoritative Scripture with a promised blessing
  - 2. Employing standard historical-grammatical contextualization methods

### II. Historical Background and Setting

- A. Authorship and church context
  - 1. Identified as John, well-known to the seven churches of Asia Minor
  - 2. Does not explicitly claim apostolic authority, contrasting with Paul's epistles
  - 3. Associated historically with John the Apostle, though other first-century leaders named John exist

#### B. Date and historical situation

1. Minor proposal: Reign of Nero (mid-60s AD) following the Great Fire of Rome
2. Dominant scholarly view: Reign of Domitian (c. 95–96 AD) towards the end of the first century

#### C. Core characteristics of the text

1. Dominance of vivid, unconventional symbolism
2. Pervasive implicit use of Old Testament imagery and prophetic language without direct quotation

### III. The Purpose of Revelation: Response to Roman Imperial Power

#### A. The reality of Roman domination and the imperial cult

1. Dominant global power providing civic order, trade, and social benefits
2. Requirement and social expectation of rendering allegiance and worship to the emperor

#### B. The dual plight of first-century Christians in Asia Minor

1. Localized, sporadic persecution (e.g., the martyrdom of Antipas at Pergamum)
2. Widespread temptation toward cultural compromise, complacency, and participation in imperial worship

#### C. Central theme and prophetic function

1. Affirming that God and Jesus Christ alone are worthy of worship
2. Serving as a prophetic unmasking and unveiling of the pretension, arrogance, and idolatry of imperial Rome

### IV. Literary Genre of Revelation

#### A. Combination of three distinct literary forms

#### B. Apocalypse

1. Unveiling the transcendent heavenly reality and future behind visible earthly events
2. Lifting the curtain on history to reframe the first-century Christian perspective

#### C. Prophecy

1. Critiquing ungodly socio-political systems and warning against divine judgment
2. Calling believers to endurance and spiritual fidelity

#### D. Letter

1. Structured with first-century epistolary greetings and conclusions (e.g., Revelation 1:4)
2. Addressed directly to seven specific historic churches in Asia Minor

### V. Hermeneutical Principles for Reading Revelation

- A. Interpret the text symbolically rather than strictly literally
- B. Restrict valid interpretations to what original first-century readers could reasonably understand
- C. Maintain a holistic reading focused on central themes rather than getting lost in minute details
- D. Recognize the overarching practical purpose: exhortation to holy living under pressure
- E. Approach difficult symbolic and eschatological details with theological humility

### VI. Overview of Historical Interpretive Approaches

- A. Preterist view: All or most prophecies were fulfilled in the first-century Roman context
- B. Historical view: Revelation maps sequentially onto major events across church history
- C. Idealist view: Symbolic representation of the ongoing timeless battle between God and evil
- D. Futurist view: Primary focus on unfulfilled end-times events accompanying Christ's return
- E. Integrated approach: Combining preterist, idealist, and futurist dimensions for a faithful reading