

Dr. David L. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1, Introduction and Background 6-Min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're diving into one of the most fascinating, and let's be honest, controversial books in history. Revelation.

It's a book that has sparked both total obsession and complete confusion. So we're going to try and cut through all that noise and get to what it was really trying to say. Alright, let's just get right into it.

For centuries, people have basically approached Revelation in one of two ways. And both are, well, they're pretty extreme. And this really gets to the heart of the matter.

How are we even supposed to read this book responsibly? So, on one side, you have this total obsession. This is the idea that Revelation is some kind of secret code. A predictive map just for our time.

You see this everywhere, right? In pop culture, like the Left Behind books, or all over the internet with people trying to connect its symbols to today's news headlines. The idea is that we're the special ones who can finally crack the code. And then you've got the complete opposite reaction.

Just neglect. For a lot of people, the book is just too bizarre, too violent. It's way easier to just stick to the more familiar parts of the Bible and leave this one on the shelf, you know? Treat it like it's sealed, and we're not meant to understand it.

And you can totally see why people might choose to just ignore it. I mean, listen to this. The text describes locusts that look like warhorses, but with human faces and lion's teeth.

The source material we're looking at says it sounds like something out of a sci-fi horror movie. And yeah, that's a pretty good description. It's just bewildering stuff.

And look, this isn't just some internal debate inside the church. Thinkers on the outside have been just as baffled and, frankly, suspicious. You've got Friedrich Nietzsche calling it the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness, and then George Bernard Shaw just writes it off as the visions of a drug addict.

I mean, clearly, this is a book that gets a strong reaction out of people. So how do we get past these extremes? Well, the solution is to actually shift our whole perspective. We need to stop trying to read Revelation as a book written about us and start reading it as a book written to its original audience.

The key isn't about when everything is happening. It's about to whom it was first written. This is the number one rule for understanding any ancient text, right? It doesn't matter if it's a letter from Paul or a prophecy from Isaiah.

You have to try and put yourself in the shoes of the very first people who read it and understand the specific situation the author was talking about. Revelation is no different. So let's do that.

Let's travel back to the first century. Revelation wasn't some broadcast to the future. It was a letter written around 95 AD to seven real flesh-and-blood churches in what we now call modern-day Turkey.

And where were they? They were living right in the heart of the most powerful entity on the planet, the Roman Empire. And Rome had an incredible PR machine. It had a very specific image it wanted to project to the world.

Its own propaganda, really. It presented itself as this great global benefactor, the one that brought the famous Pax Romana, or Roman peace. It promised everyone prosperity and justice, and it claimed it all happened because it had the favor of the gods.

But there's always a catch, isn't there? This whole package of Roman benefits came with a mandatory subscription. Just being loyal wasn't enough. The system demanded you participate in what we call the emperor cult.

This meant you had to publicly acknowledge the divine status of Rome and often the emperor himself through all sorts of festivals and offerings. And this right here sets up the central gut-wrenching dilemma for the first-century Christians who got this letter. Their entire world — their jobs, their social lives, their safety — it was all completely tangled up in this Roman system.

So they had a really stark choice to make. What do you do? Option one. Compromise.

Do you just play along? Do you show up to the festivals, make the token offering at your trade guild meeting, and just keep your head down so you can keep your job and your standing in the community? Or is it option two? Resist. Do you refuse to say Caesar is a divine lord, knowing that it could mean losing your business, being totally cut off from your community, and even facing persecution for being, in Rome's eyes, ungrateful and rebellious? And make no mistake, this wasn't just some theoretical classroom debate. The messages to those seven churches in Revelation show that five of them, five, were already compromising with Roman culture.

Only two were actually holding firm and suffering because of it. The pressure to just conform was absolutely huge, and most of them were cavemen. So this brings us to Revelation's answer to this dilemma.

And the key to its whole purpose has been hiding in plain sight this entire time, right in its title. We just have to understand what that word actually meant to the people who first heard it. You see, when we hear the word apocalypse, our minds immediately go to world-ending catastrophes, right? Fire, brimstone, the whole thing.

But the original Greek word means an unveiling or an uncovering. So the great irony is that the whole point of the book isn't to hide its meaning for some future generation, but to reveal something, to pull back the curtain for its first-century readers. So what was it unveiling? It was pulling back the curtain on the Roman Empire.

It was a prophetic critique, designed to expose Rome for what it really was. To show that, despite all its talk of peace and prosperity, it was a corrupt, violent, and idolatrous system that was demanding the total allegiance that belongs only to God. Okay, so once you have that first-century context locked in your mind, it opens up this much richer, much deeper way of reading Revelation.

It takes us way beyond that simple little summary you so often hear. You know, people often say, oh, I don't need to read Revelation. I know what it's about.

God wins in the end. And well, yeah, that's true, but it kind of misses the entire point. The book isn't just that God wins.

It's how God wins. It's not with overwhelming power like Rome. It's paradoxically through a sacrificed lamb.

And it's about how the church wins, not by conquering, but by being a faithful witness, even if it leads to suffering. So to really read Revelation well, you've got to hold these three keys in your mind at the same time. It's an apocalypse because it unveils God's perspective on what's really going on.

It's also prophecy because it speaks truth to the powers of its day. And at its core, it's a letter written to real people going through a real crisis. It's a mix of all three.

And that, that right there is what makes this book so powerful, even for us today. By showing this epic clash between the empire of Rome and the kingdom of God, Revelation pushes past all the strange imagery and asks every single one of its readers in every century one single piercing question. Who or what is truly worthy of your ultimate allegiance?