

# Revelation

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*Session 1: Introduction and Background*

*Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt*

## Keywords

Revelation, Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Emperor Cult, Roman Empire, Apocalypse, Prophecy, Epistle, Compromise, Persecution

## Abstract

This lecture serves as an introduction to the book of Revelation, illustrating how its interpretation has historically oscillated between unhealthy obsession and complete neglect. Dr. Dave Mathewson argues that to understand the text properly, readers must return to its original first-century context under the Roman Empire rather than treating it as a modern-day prophetic timeline. The book was written as a pastoral response to seven historical churches in Asia Minor, serving as a comfort to those suffering persecution for resisting the emperor cult and as a shocking warning to those who had grown complacent and compromised. Ultimately, Revelation uses a blend of three genres—apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle—to unveil Rome's true corrupt nature and call for exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ, the slaughtered Lamb.

## Outline

### I. Introduction to the Reception of Revelation

- A. History of misunderstanding, neglect, and canonization issues
- B. The extreme of "Obsession"
  - 1. Treating Revelation as the only book of the Bible
  - 2. Interpreting images as predicting 21st-century events
  - 3. Example: The Left Behind series and the "time traveler" assumption
- C. The extreme of "Neglect"
  - 1. Overwhelmed by strange, grotesque imagery (e.g., the locusts of Rev 9)
  - 2. Retreating to the Gospels or Paul's letters
  - 3. Historical examples: John Calvin did not write a commentary on Revelation
- D. Outside suspicion and cultural impact
  - 1. Suspicions of Friedrich Nietzsche (called it a "rabid outburst of vindictiveness") and George Bernard Shaw ("visions of a drug addict")
  - 2. Cinematic and secular usage of "apocalyptic" themes

## **II. Crucial Hermeneutical Principles**

- A. Meaning is genre-bound (E.D. Hirsch)
- B. Reading biblical books in light of historical circumstances (e.g., Galatians and Isaiah)
- C. Reorienting to Revelation's first-century historical context

## **III. The Historical Context: The Roman Empire and the Seven Churches**

- A. Written to seven historical churches in Western Asia Minor (modern Turkey)
  - 1. Including Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Laodicea
- B. The dominance of the Roman Empire
  - 1. Political, religious, and economic powerhouse
  - 2. Rome's propaganda of peace ("Pax Romana") and prosperity
  - 3. The Emperor Cult and its enforcement
    - a. Temples, statues, and inscriptions dedicated to the emperor
    - b. "Temple wardens" enforcing compliance
    - c. Trade guilds and economic life integrated with pagan worship
  - 4. Proposed dating of the book
    - a. Late date (95–96 A.D. under Domitian) - most popular
    - b. Early date (mid-60s A.D. under Nero)

## **IV. First-Century Christian Responses to Rome**

- A. Resistance
  - 1. Refusing to participate in the emperor cult or trade guild festivals
  - 2. Standing for the exclusive lordship of Jesus Christ
  - 3. Sporadic, local persecution (e.g., Antipas of Pergamum martyred; John exiled on Patmos)
- B. Compromise and Complacency
  - 1. The negative evaluation of five compromised churches (e.g., Laodicea)
  - 2. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia remain poor and faithful under suffering
  - 3. Deliberate rationalization of dual worship to avoid social and economic consequences

## **V. The Pastoral and Theological Purpose of Revelation**

- A. Dual message of the book
  - 1. Comfort and consolation for the suffering and faithful
  - 2. Shocking warning, exhortation, and call to repent for the compromised
- B. Exposing the true nature of Rome (Revelation as an "unveiling" / apokalipsis)
  - 1. Critiquing Roman propaganda
  - 2. Revealing Rome as a corrupt, godless, and violent system
- C. Correcting the "God wins" truncation

1. Not just that God wins, but how He wins
2. Winning through the suffering and sacrificial witness of the slaughtered Lamb
3. Call for the church to overcome through faithful witness even to death

## **VI. Understanding the Literary Genre of Revelation**

- A. A unique blend of three first-century genres:
  1. Apocalypse (apokalipsis): meaning an uncovering or unveiling to reveal truth, not to hide it
  2. Prophecy
  3. Epistle/Letter: written to actual historical congregations
- B. Intuitive genre recognition (the modern newspaper analogy)
- C. The necessity of starting on the right foot to avoid interpretive missteps