

Revelation: Hermeneutics – Interpreting Revelation

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson presents five foundational principles for interpreting the Book of Revelation based on its literary character as an apocalypse, prophecy, and letter. He argues that Revelation must be interpreted symbolically rather than literally, emphasizing that its vivid apocalyptic imagery and symbolic numbers were designed to convey theological truth to first-century readers living under Roman rule. Rather than functioning as a modern timeline for predicting end-time events, the text operates through progressive parallelism to encourage suffering believers and exhort compromising churches toward uncompromised worship of Christ. Ultimately, Mathewson calls for a posture of hermeneutical humility, urging interpreters to rely on sound historical context and scholarly research rather than dogmatic speculation.

Outline

I. Introduction to Hermeneutical Principles

A. Literary Genre Foundation

1. Revelation encompasses three distinct genres: Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Epistolary Letter.
2. Literary genre governs meaning and determines appropriate interpretive principles (E.D. Hirsch).

B. Core Objective

1. Establish principles grounded in the text's original literary and historical design.

II. Principle 1: Interpret Revelation Symbolically and Not Literally

A. Symbolic Nature of Apocalyptic Vision

1. John received visions in symbolic form and communicated them using metaphorical language.
2. Traditional rule reversed: Interpret symbolically unless the text explicitly mandates literal reading.
3. Literal features remain (e.g., specific nations and peoples), but visionary core is symbolic.

B. Metaphorical Function of Apocalyptic Imagery

1. Symbols depict real persons, places, and historical events, but in imaginative ways.
2. Political Cartoon Analogy: Images depict entities (e.g., 7-headed beast in Rev 13 represents the Roman Empire/Emperor) without implying literal monsters.

C. Key Textual Model in Revelation 1:20

1. Christ's vision provides an explicit interpretive key (lampstands = 7 churches; stars = angels).
2. Description of Son of Man (Rev 1:12–17) uses symbolic attributes (sword from mouth = divine word of judgment).

D. Hermeneutical Tools for Decoding Symbols

1. Reconstruct first-century historical and social background under Roman imperial power.
2. Identify Old Testament background: John weaves Old Testament language into discourse without formal quotations.
3. Recognize Greco-Roman literary and cultural resonance.
4. Utilize reliable historical commentaries (Beale, Aune, Osborne, Caird, Bauckham).

E. Prioritizing Theological Meaning over Identification

1. Log Cabin Analogy: Historical distance obscures exact referents, yet core message remains clear.
2. Art Gallery Analogy: Revelation resembles an art gallery of symbolic portraits rather than a literal CNN news report.

III. Principle 2: Recognize Revelation as Addressing the Present, Future, and Past

A. Primary Emphasis on the First-Century Present

1. Unveils heavenly reality to help first-century readers navigate existence under Roman oppression.

B. Authentic Future Dimension

1. Projects present struggle onto God's ultimate plan for consummation (Rev 19–22).
2. Anticipates Christ's Second Coming, final judgment, and new creation.

C. Retrospective / Past Dimension

1. Revelation 12:1–8 depicts the birth of Christ and dragon's opposition as a past historical event.

D. Cyclical Structure (Progressive Parallelism / Recapitulation)

1. Revelation does not move in a strict linear chronological timeline.
2. Repeatedly cycles from 1st-century present struggles to the end of history, then resets.
3. Textual examples of reaching the end before restarting:
 - a. Sixth Seal (Rev 6:12–17) describes final cosmic judgment.
 - b. Seventh Chapter (Rev 7:9–17) depicts final eschatological salvation.
 - c. Seventh Trumpet (Rev 11:15–19) proclaims eternal reign of God.
 - d. Harvest Vision (Rev 14:14–20) portrays final harvest and winepress of wrath.
4. Purpose of cycling: Whets reader's appetite for complete disclosure in Revelation 19–22.

IV. Principle 3: Align Interpretations with Authorial Intent and Original Reader Comprehension

A. Rejection of Modern "Newspaper Exegesis"

1. Rejects speculative assumptions that Revelation was incomprehensible until the 20th/21st century.
2. Original readers understood the message; modern readers must work to bridge the historical gap.

B. Epistolary Purpose and Open Prophecy

1. As a pastoral letter, Revelation conveyed intelligible instruction to seven contemporary churches.
2. Revelation 22:10 explicitly commands "Do not seal up the words," contrasting Daniel's sealed book.

C. Transcultural Applicability

1. Though rooted in 1st-century realities, symbols transcend time to speak to churches across history.

V. Principle 4: Read Revelation as an Encouragement and Exhortation to God's People

A. Dual Pastoral Function

1. Encouragement: Comforts suffering, persecuted believers enduring hardship for Christ.
2. Exhortation: Warns compromising, complacent believers against assimilation into worldliness.

B. Primary Purpose: Ethical and Spiritual Fidelity

1. Calls believers to exclusive worship of God and unreserved allegiance to the Lamb.
2. Focuses on holiness and radical discipleship ("following the Lamb wherever he goes") rather than apocalyptic curiosity.

VI. Principle 5: Approach Interpretation with a Posture of Humility

A. Avoidance of Dogmatism

1. Dogmatic certainty on precise end-time details is incompatible with apocalyptic symbolism.
2. Acknowledge historical diversity of interpretation across church history.

B. Dependence on Scholarly Guidance

1. Engage faithful commentary literature to guide interpretation responsibly.

VII. Excursus: Interpreting Numerical Symbolism in Revelation

A. Application of Symbolic Principle to Numbers

1. Numbers function symbolically rather than as precise mathematical or literal quantities.

B. Specific Numerical Meanings

1. Three and a Half ($3\frac{1}{2}$ years, 1260 days, times/time/half a time): Half of 7; signifies a severe period of trial cut short.
2. Four: Represents the entire created order / global earth (4 corners, 4 living creatures).
3. Six: Signifies imperfection, falling short of divine completeness.
4. Seven: Signifies divine perfection, fullness, and completion (based on Genesis creation week).
5. Ten (and multiples): Represents completeness, wholeness, and round totals.

6. Twelve (and multiples: 24, 144, 144,000): Represents the unified people of God (12 tribes, 12 apostles).

7. Fractions ($1/4$, $1/3$, $1/2$): Signify partial, limited, or restricted scope of judgment.

VIII. Conclusion and Hermeneutical Application

A. Summary of Foundational Rules

1. Symbolic reading, present/future focus, first-century grounding, pastoral purpose, and humility.

B. Methodological Transition

1. Sets the stage for sequential text-by-text analysis beginning in Revelation Chapter 1.