

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1

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Introduction and Background

What we're going to do for the next several sessions is work through the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Probably no book in the history of Christianity has been so misunderstood, ignored and neglected as the very last book of the Bible. It's interesting when you study the history of the book it even had a little bit of a problem getting into the New Testament canon because of some of the reasons that we'll discuss. When we approach a book of Revelation it's helpful to put it in its proper perspective and to realize that we stand in a long tradition of the church's attempt to try to read and make sense of the book of Revelation. So it's helpful to understand some of their mis-starts, their misunderstandings, and some of the mistakes to avoid, but also to understand how they read it and positively to understand how we can appropriate some of the church's insights.

Two Mistaken Approaches: Obsession and Neglect

As you study the history of the church's reception and understanding of the book of Revelation, most people realize that the church has basically been characterized by two approaches to Revelation. Number one is what I simply label "obsession;" that is, some Christians, some churches, some periods of church history up until the modern day have treated Revelation with what I think is a rather unhealthy obsession. That is, acting almost as if the book of Revelation were the only book in the entire Bible and everything else leading up to it can be ignored. As some of you may know and you can probably think of certain well-known persons whose entire ministries have been devoted to interpreting and unpacking the book of Revelation for the church. All you have to do is Google "Revelation" or "apocalypse" and it's amazing all the websites that pop up that attempt to understand Revelation, usually by trying to help us make sense of how Revelation is actually predicting events in our own day and how those events are unfolding and already being fulfilled.

One of the assumptions behind this is we actually now have the key to reading Revelation. Presumably every other century except our own were in the dark and now when we look out at the world we can see all these things happening and all of a sudden we have the key to unlocking the mysteries and the secrets of the book of Revelation.

One of the most recent examples or literary demonstrations of this was the well-known “Left Behind” series. Although the series is fictional, and meant to be fictional, at the same time it’s meant to portray in fictional format what the authors literally thought, or how the authors literally thought Revelation and other prophetic texts in the Old and New Testament would be fulfilled and how they would unfold. So what it does, it correlates the images and the visions of the book of Revelation with events that they think are reflected in our own modern day in the 21st century and demonstrate in fictional form how those events correlate and line-up with the book of Revelation. So the assumption is John was actually predicting events that would transpire in the 21st century, and so he writes this down. As one author said it’s as if John was a time traveler and he traveled into the 21st century and saw all these events and now he goes back to his first century writers, writes these down presumably in some format that they would have never guessed and never been able to understand. But now in the 20th century, in our 21st century, technological, political age and environment, now we all of a sudden have the key to understanding to how the book of Revelation actually is being fulfilled.

So that’s one approach that characterizes numerous periods of church history, an obsession with the book, an infatuation with the book of Revelation, which usually is an attempt to explain how Revelation is actually predicting events that are unfolding in the 4th century or 15th century or 20th or now the 21st century.

The kind of opposite approach of that is a complete neglect of the book. That is for most people, when they read the rather fantastic images in the book of Revelation and some of the strange imagery and symbolism, they’re not really sure what to make of it. So the simplest solution is to neglect it and to retreat to the safer grounds of Paul’s letters or the more familiar stories in the Gospels or something like that. So, for example, when you open your Bibles to Revelation chapter nine, you read this strange description of

these locusts that swarm and fly out and when you read it they are like no other locust that you've ever encountered and sound more like something out of a science-fiction horror movie or something like that. So starting at verse two of chapter nine, the author of Revelation says, "When he opened the Abyss, smoke came out of it as smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke came locusts down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plants or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months."

And I'll skip down a couple of verses where the author begins to describe these locusts. "These locusts look like horses prepared for battle." So now you have these locusts coming out of this abyss from smoke but now the author says they actually look like horses prepared for battles. Then he says, "On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, their teeth were like the teeth of the lions. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails that stung like scorpions and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months." I'll stop right there; we'll look at that text later.

But, notice the rather strange combination of animal-like features and insect-like features and then human-like features and animal features as well all combined into this almost grotesque image that is more suitable for a science-fiction horror movie or something like that. People read this and the response is usually to become so bewildered with the book that it's safer to neglect it. Maybe some people become so put off by those that have been obsessed with the book of Revelation that again it's much easier to simply bypass Revelation and again retreat to the more safer books of Paul's letters or the Gospels. Revelation to many is still a book with seven seals, despite the fact that Revelation claims to be unsealed, for many the book of Revelation is still sealed.

As some of you probably know, well-known John Calvin, as brilliant as a thinker as he was, and although he wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament,

did not write one on the book of Revelation. Probably some writers in Revelation would have done better to follow his lead. So at best, we neglect the book and we would rather leave it in the hands of scholars or those who are better suited to try to make sense of this rather strange book. So it seems to me when you study church history, either we become obsessed with the book and trying to make sense of it and gearing entire ministries around the book, usually trying to read it in light of events going on in our own day, or we neglect it. It's so odd and strange we're not used to it, we haven't seen anything like this that it's easier to neglect it and leave it in the hands of the specialist to try to make sense of it.

Even outside of the church, the book of Revelation has gotten a reaction. Usually it is one of suspicion, because of the some of the violent imagery, Revelation has often been seen by those outside of the church as something to be treated with suspicion and even outright rejection of it as having any value at all for anyone. For example, it was Friedrich Nietzsche, the German thinker who said, "Revelation is the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all of recorded history." And George Bernard Shaw said that Revelation was a curious record of the visions of a drug addict; that's how he explained the book of Revelation. So even outside of the church people still aren't quite sure what to do with this book. It is treated with extreme suspicion and often seen as the source of all kinds of evil, woes and ills of society, etc.

But, the book of Revelation at the same time even outside of the church is often the source and inspiration for many of our movies and movie titles "The Apocalypse" or movies that have themes that come right out of the book of Revelation. So even outside the church, the book of Revelation has had an impact in our society.

Apocalyptic Nature of Revelation

So given the ambivalence with which the book of Revelation is treated in our church and outside of our church, it seems to me that it is necessary to take a look at the book again. If we believe that the book of Revelation is God's word and belongs in the canon of Scripture as part of God's word and his Revelation to his people then it seems that we need to stop again and perhaps reorient ourselves to the book and take another

look at it. That's exactly what I want to do in this course. I want to hopefully begin to take out some of the fear and some of the suspicion in reading the book of Revelation and also avoid some of the obsession and irresponsible ways the book of Revelation has been treated as well. In fact ironically the book of Revelation, the very title Revelation comes from a Greek word "apocalypse" or "apocalypses" that means "an unveiling" or "an uncovering."

Revelation then is primarily meant not to conceal its message and hide it as something so mysterious and secretive that no one couldn't possibly understand it, but actually at the very beginning Revelation as an unveiling or uncovering, it is actually meant to reveal God's truth and reveal God's word to his people and to his church. It is not meant to obscure and hide its meaning but to unveil it and to reveal it. The key to doing this though is asking ourselves what kind of book is Revelation and how does it uncover and reveal its meaning? As a British scholar Richard Bochim said part of the problem in the church's history with understanding Revelation and many of the misinterpretations have begun by failing to conceive of what type of book Revelation actually is. So the first thing that I want to do then is ask how should we read the book of Revelation; what kind of book is this? And why was it written in the first place?

Occasion and Nature of Revelation

So I want to do two things sort of in the introductory sections, leading up to actually looking at the book itself in more detail, and that is, to examine two questions: Number one why was the book of Revelation written in the first place? What were the circumstances that surrounded the production of the book and the writing of the book of Revelation? Why did John have these visions in the first place? What was going on historically and what were the circumstances that surrounded the writing of this book? And then second, along with that to ask the question: what kind of book is this? What is a scholars say the literary genre the literary type that this book belongs to? Since that is what's going to help us to begin to understand what is this book all about. What is it trying to do? What was God trying to say and reveal to his people by producing and inspiring this rather strange, at least to us, rather unique book.

Why was the book written?

So what I want to do is start first of all by asking the question: Why was this book written? Or, that is, to read the book in light of its historical background and circumstances. It is interesting when we read the rest of the New Testament and the Old Testament as well, when we read those books we're usually taught to read those books first of all in light of the historical circumstances to which those books were responses. So when you read the book of Galatians, for example in the New Testament, you are taught to read that in the light of the crisis, the problem, or situation that Paul was addressing. He was addressing a group that we often label Judaizers who were trying to get Gentile Christians to submit to the Law of Moses as a sign that they were truly God's people. So we read Galatians in light of its historical background and historical circumstances that Paul was addressing before we try to make sense of it in our own lives. In the Old Testament if you go back to the prophet Isaiah and you begin to read the book, one of the things you must do is to understand what was going on that causes Isaiah to write the book in the first place. You need to understand the situation leading up to exile as the nation was about ready to be carted off into captivity and exile and some of circumstances leading up to that in order to better understand the book, and why the author wrote it in the first place.

So we've learned that one of the most important hermeneutical principles in understanding biblical books is to understand them in light of their original historical context. Who the author was, what his situation, why was he writing this in the first place? Who were his readers and what was the problem or what were the issues that the author was trying to address? In other words, we realize that New Testament documents were not written in a vacuum but were written as sort of pastoral responses to different crises and situations. Now, the reason why I've spent a little bit of amount of time talking about this is, its intriguing that we ignore this when it comes to interpreting the book of Revelation. But why do we ignore this principle when it comes to reading a book like the book of Revelation? So again we either ignore the book or the other approach is we jump right to modern day parallels which again, historically, seems to have happened right

from the second century AD literally after Revelation was written. But then we begin to read Revelation in analogy to modern day events and things going on in our own day and we draw immediate correspondences and connections between the two as if Revelation was actually predicting whatever is going on in our own twenty-first century political environment and technological and historical situation.

Occasion of Its Writing

I want to begin by suggesting that we need to treat Revelation like we do any other book in the New Testament and the Old Testament and that is, to read it in light of first of all in light of its own historical background. We need to read it as a response to specific historical situations. We need to read it as something written first of all to a group of readers in the first century, we'll see a group of churches in the first century who were facing a series of issues, problems and crises. What I want to do is spend little bit of time trying to unpack a little bit what might have been going on in the first century that caused John to write this book. Again, in my opinion, John didn't just sit down and have this vision in a vacuum out of thin air, but was actually responding to a specific series of issues and problems in a group of churches in the first century living in the culture and the environment and the empire that was yielding authority and control in that day.

Seven Churches of Revelation

Now the starting point for this I think is with the book of Revelation itself. Revelation tells us itself quite a bit about the situation it was actually addressing. It does so in chapters two and three and we'll look at those chapters in more detail when we begin to actually work through the book. But in chapters two and three we find that the book of Revelation is actually written to seven historical churches that existed in Western Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. Those churches were actual known historical churches and were facing a series of issues and problems. A church existing in the city of Ephesus, a church in the city called Smyrna, one in a city called Pergamum, one in the city called Laodicea and a couple of others. But the starting point is to understand that Revelation is written to seven actual churches that existed historically and were facing a

series of issues given the environment and the context in which they found themselves.

Roman Empire

The main issue is these churches, all seven of these churches, and many more like them in the region, were situated right at the heart of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was the political, religious, economic, and military power house of the day. It actually followed a number of other important empires such as the rule of the Greek Empire from Alexander and the Persian Empire etc. all the way back to the Babylonian Empire. But the Roman Empire eclipses all of those and emerges as the political, religious, military and economic powerhouse of the day. And these seven churches found themselves living right in the heart of Roman rule. Now, the Roman Empire expanded its borders beyond any known empire or any known kingdom up until that time. The Roman Empire divided its rule as it spread out, as its hegemony grew over all the land, the way that it maintained its rule over this large and widespread kingdom was to divide it up into provinces, sort of a little bit like states. Over these provinces would be rulers and this was a way that Rome kept control over its vast and growing empire. These seven churches were all situated in one of those provinces right at the heart of Roman rule and the Roman Empire.

Pax Romana

Now, I'll sketch very very quickly a little bit about Rome so that you kind of understand what these seven churches and many more like them were up against in the first century. Rome, at least in the world's view and in Rome's own view, had brought peace and prosperity to the entire empire. In other words, its growing hegemony, its spread over all the land was seen basically as a positive thing. Yes, Rome had its own critics and there were people that were not happy with Rome's spread, its rule, and how it did things; but generally especially from inside Rome itself, it was seen as and Rome portrayed itself as a benefactor to the entire world. Rome had brought peace to the entire empire. It brought prosperity. Everyone who was under Rome's rule experienced its blessings and therefore it actually owed a debt of gratitude to Rome because Rome was responsible for all the blessings that all its citizens enjoyed and all those under its rule. Its

military might was responsible for helping it to spread its rule by conquering rebellious and harmful countries and peoples and one of the so called myths that Rome was based on the phrase “Pax Romana,” that is, the peace of Rome. Rome was known for bringing about peace. Part of that was through its military power it was able to subdue rebellion and to keep things under control and make sure that peace reigned throughout the empire. It was also responsible for economic prosperity as we already said. Rome was known for ushering in a golden era or a golden age. Rome also was known for bringing justice and righteousness to the entire world.

Emperor Cult

Now, behind all of this lies the fact that Rome thought that it had been chosen by the gods to rule over the land and to bring peace and prosperity. Rome saw itself, and its rulers, and the emperors as the saviors of the world. Even the emperor himself began to be seen as an agent of the will of the gods. All the gods such as Zeus and others some of the famous Greek and Roman gods, the emperor was basically seen to do the will of the gods. Soon the emperor himself came to actually be at times treated as a god, especially after the emperors died. It seems even later living emperors could be treated as a god and they were seen as worthy of devotion and allegiance and one’s worship. Even the title “warden god” could be applied apparently to some of the emperors. The way that this was enforced, the way that recognition of the divine status of Rome and the gods behind it and even the emperor himself was through what is known as the emperor cult. That is the emperor cult was simply a system or ways of fostering worship and allegiance to Rome and to its emperor. Usually if you would go through a typical Greco-Roman city or a Roman city in one of the provinces, in Asia Minor and in the Roman Empire, you would see temples erected in dedication not only of foreign gods, but also in honor of the emperor himself. You would see images of the emperors, images and statues, even inscriptions on some of the walls and other visual reminders of the divine status of Rome and even the emperor and all that the emperor had done for you. So these reminders were meant to sort of enforce and encourage demonstrating allegiance and even worship of the emperor.

Some of these towns that John addresses in the seven churches in Revelations 2 and 3 also had what was known as “a temple warden.” That is someone who is responsible for maintaining and even enforcing the functioning of the emperor cult. It is a sort of system of acknowledging the debt of gratitude that you owed Rome and the Roman Empire for all the blessings they had provided you. There were even all kinds of festivals that took place in honor of the emperor that you could participate in.

It’s also important to recognize a couple of these cities actually the emperor himself, early on, and Rome was ruled by a series of emperors, but early on some of the emperors actually sanctioned the building of temples in a couple of these cities. Some of the other cities, it was simply the people themselves who decided in honor of the emperor to build a temple in the emperor’s name. But, all of the seven cities of Revelation 2 and 3 or all of the churches in the seven cities of Revelation 2 and 3 had an active emperor cult and many of them with temples in honor of the emperor as well in the honor of the other gods within those cities.

Emperor Cult and the Economic Setting

Now to make matters more interesting is that the emperor cult, or the system that maintained and enforced worship of the emperors and the gods of Rome this whole emperor cult and system of worship and its festivals, and celebrations and its temples and statues were integrated into the political but also the economic life of many of these cities. For example, if you held down a certain job, whether it was a commercial activity or something else in a first century city in the Roman empire often that was associated with opportunities and times where you would actually engage in worshipping the emperor and worshipping the gods. Many of the trade guilds that existed in some of the cities would have patron deities and it would be unthinkable that you would belong to one of these guilds or that you would carry out a certain job within one of these cities and not show your gratitude in the form of showing allegiance and participating in some of these festival events in honor of the gods or in honor of the emperor who is responsible for the blessing financially that you attained through your work. So, who was responsible for the peace that reigned throughout the empire? Who was responsible for the blessing

materially and otherwise? Who was responsible for your prosperity and well-being? Who was responsible for justice, et cetera.?

It would have been a sign of extreme ingratitude even rebellion to refuse to acknowledge ultimately Rome and its emperor for what they had done. Especially in a society that valued patronage and valued honor/shame it would be a serious breach to refuse to show honor.

So the political, the economic, the religious life of the Roman Empire was closely integrated. To many countries today such as the United States of America this is a rather foreign concept and I don't think we understand how integrated and closely associated the economic, political and religious life of Roman Empire was.

Date of the Book: Domitian over Nero

For the book of Revelation, though the date was not crucial to pin down and though there have been a number of options, two or three are highly likely. It seems the most popular option is that the book of Revelation was written probably in 95 or 96 AD, right in the middle of the last decade of the first century when the emperor of Rome at that time was Domitian. The other popular date is in the mid-60's AD when Nero was the emperor. But most scholars today side with and argue for a date of roughly 95 or 96. I'll follow that I think there is good evidence for that. But nothing I say will crucially depend on pinning down the precise date.

So that is a little bit about the historical background and the religious, political and economic situation that reigned over the entire Roman Empire and the situation that would have been prevalent in the provinces, provinces in which the churches found themselves in the first century.

Christian Dilemma: Resist or Compromise

Now as you can perhaps begin to see even given this brief explanation is that Christians would have been faced with a dilemma. There were actually two possible ways, among many others, but two prominent ways that a Christian belonging to one of the churches in the seven cities that Revelation addresses, there are two prominent ways they could respond to such a situation. Some of them could resist. They could refuse to

participate in acknowledging Caesar and the Roman Empire as Lord and God, as divine. They could refuse to participate in the emperor cult; refuse to participate in events such as feasts and other celebrations in honor of worshipping the emperor; refuse to go along with their trade guilds that offered opportunities to acknowledge that their prosperity came from the emperor; refuse to fully immerse themselves in the culture and the economy and the religion of the Roman Empire. They could resist that because for them this simply came into conflict with the fact that there is only one Savior and Lord and that is Jesus Christ. To acknowledge anyone else, to simply involve themselves fully with Greco-Roman culture, would violate that or compromise the exclusive lordship of Jesus Christ. How can they claim Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior when over here the emperor is claiming the same thing.

So because of that many resisted and also faced the consequences which would be some level of ostracism or even persecution. Now it is important to realize that at this point when we talk about persecution there is not yet anything like an empire wide persecution of Christians where we conjure up this picture in our minds of Roman battalions going into towns and going door to door and dragging Christians out into the street and eventually into the amphitheatre to be devoured by wild animals. That did happen later on in the second century or so. But at this point most persecution was more sporadic and local. In other words, it was not so much the emperor himself who was going around officially having a vendetta against Christians. It was more at the local level. Most of the authorities and officials at a local level who were keen to curry favor with the emperor were enforcing this and causing the problems for Christians who refused to compromise. So there is nothing like an empire wide officially sanctioned persecution started by the emperor himself.

In fact, John tells us so far, there could be more, but John tells us he knows of only one person who has died. In chapter 2, verse 13, a man named Antipas has died for his faith. Although when you read Revelation carefully John seems to expect that more will follow and you do have this very strong language of persecution and saints being slaughtered, beheaded and martyred for their faith. So, John does expect more to come

apparently as Rome and the church clash. But at this point he's only aware of one who has died a man named Antipas. John himself is apparently in exile on the island of Patmos because of his testimony and because of preaching the gospel. But there is not yet anything like this widespread persecution although that certainly did come later on.

Compromise and Complacency

However, besides resisting and suffering the consequences, I think there was a greater problem in the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 and that was compromising and complacency. It is interesting when you read the seven letters or seven messages to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 only two of them were suffering any type of persecution and ostracism at the hands of neighbors and officials in the Roman Empire. The other five churches actually get a very negative evaluation by the risen Jesus in the messages in chapters 2 and 3 because they are so compromising with their pagan environment and they are so complacent with their situation especially one church called the church of Laodicea that Jesus has nothing good to say about them at all. The only churches that receive a positive report are two churches: Smyrna and Philadelphia. They are both rather poor and they are suffering because they have taken a stand for their faith in Jesus Christ. They are his faithful witnesses.

The other five churches are so complacent with their surroundings they are so willing to compromise with the situation we just described with the Roman Empire that they seem to be free of any trouble and they actually get a very negative evaluation from Jesus Christ in the seven churches.

Perhaps some of these churches that were more complacent and compromising in character were doing it to avoid persecution, perhaps to avoid losing a job, to avoid ostracism, or to avoid even physical death like Antipas. Many of them were deliberately trying to rationalize that they could worship Jesus Christ but also worship Caesar at the same time. That Jesus Christ was Lord but they could also acknowledge Caesar and in doing so avoid what happened to Antipas or avoid some of the problems that the other churches who were taking a stand were experiencing. It is also possible that simply others did not realize what they were doing, that they had become so complacent in their

environment and their situation that they did not realize the extent to which they had compromised their witness to Jesus by becoming so ensconced in their surroundings and environment, the religious, political and economic life of Rome. They were blind to what was going on.

So for the book of Revelation, as well as the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, the rest of the book of Revelation is going to be a message first of all of comfort, consolation and encouragement to persevere for those two churches and any other churches like them that resisted and for those churches that are suffering because of their refusal to compromise and because they had maintained “their faithful witness and testimony” which is an important phrase in the book of Revelation. For those churches, those two churches in chapters 2 and 3 and any like them the book of Revelation will be a source of comfort and encouragement to persevere.

But for those who are compromising, for those who have become so complacent with their surrounding environment in the Roman Empire, the book of Revelation will be a source of warning and exhortation. It will serve to shock the readers out of their complacency. It will serve to wake them up, exhort them, to perceive their situation and just to understand the extent to which they have compromised, call them to repent and to turn to exclusive worship, allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ no matter what the consequences that will bring.

Purpose of Revelation to Expose the Roman Empire

So, to summarize the historical background of Revelation and its bearing on interpreting the book, in light of this the purpose of Revelation then to me seems to be to expose the true nature of the Roman Empire. That is, it will offer a counter view or counter evaluation of the Roman Empire to what Rome itself is presenting by its statues and its media and its propaganda as to the character and nature of the Roman Empire and how the world views it at large.

Instead, Revelation will offer a critique, a prophetic critique of and exposes the true nature of the Roman Empire. Remember we said, the title of the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse means an unveiling, an uncovering. Revelation is going to unveil Rome in

its true colors, to expose it for what it really is, to show it for what it really is. It's a corrupt, godless, idolatrous, violent system that opposes God, that absolutizes its own power. It sets itself up as God. It demands the worship of its people and it maintains that by violence. Everything about Rome is contrary to what one finds especially in the Old Testament prophets, but what one finds in the Book of Revelation.

So Revelation is a critique of Rome. Rome is not all it is cracked up to be. Rome is not all that it claims to be. Revelation is a call for their churches in the Roman Empire to look out and see Rome in its true colors, to see it what it really is. So Revelation is at one level an ideological critique of Rome. Again, it uncovers the true nature of Rome as an idolatrous, godless, violent, oppressive rule and an empire that Christians should resist. Therefore, Revelation, because of the nature of the Roman Empire; Revelation is a call to exclusive worship and obedience to God and Jesus Christ no matter what the cost. For Christians, the book of Revelation will be, especially to those who are persecuted, a source of comfort, a source of encouragement to persevere and to continue in their faithful witness no matter what the cost. For the compromising churches, it will be a call to repent, a call to wake up, and a call to resist, lest they also participate in the same fate as the Roman Empire. So according to Revelation then Jesus is Lord, Jesus himself is God and Savior. He is the one who brings peace. He is the one who brings righteousness, not Rome or its emperor.

Now just this understanding of Revelation so far, as a response to its background, I think helps us partly debunk what I still hear as a very common understanding of Revelation. It almost falls into the second category that we described as far as the Church's response of Revelation. The first one was obsession and the second one was neglect, because it's so strange and has so many strange images like those locusts with human features, et cetera, that many reject it.

“God Wins” is an Impoverished Understanding of the Book

But the common explanation of the book of Revelation is, in lieu of that, in lieu of trying to really grapple with the book, we say things like, “I know what the Book of Revelation is about. God wins.” I don't know how many times I've heard that. Just the

other day I was talking to someone that said, her words literally were, “I don’t need to read the book of Revelation. I know what it is about. God wins.” Now, however much truth is in that statement, it is far far too limited and far too truncated to deal with what Revelation is actually about. Yes, Revelation does tell us that God wins, but is that all its about? When you read Revelation, you are going to find that it’s not about “God wins;” it is about “how God wins.” God wins through sending his son Jesus Christ, sending his son as a slaughtered lamb through sacrificial faithful witness to accomplish God’s purposes. God wins almost paradoxically through suffering faithful witness of the Lamb and through the death of his Son Jesus Christ.

It’s also a book of how the church overcomes. The church also overcomes through its faithful witness, even to the point of death if necessary. The book of Revelation calls for a response. It’s not just about “God wins.” It calls for a response from God’s people. It calls on God’s people to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. The book of Revelation raises the question to us, “Who is really worthy of your worship? Who is truly worthy of your allegiance, your devotion and your worship? Who is truly worthy of your obedience? Is it the emperor or is it any other human ruler? Is it any other human institution or entity or is only God and his Lamb Jesus Christ that should be the exclusive objects of your worship?”

So we need to look beyond only seeing Revelation as a book where “God wins.” There’s some truth in that but it’s far too limited in scope. Revelation again tells us how God wins, through His suffering messiah, through a slaughtered lamb. God conquers almost paradoxically, and certainly unlike the Roman Empire, God conquers through a suffering Lamb who comes and dies for his people. It also is about how God’s people respond. How do God’s people overcome? How do God’s people win? The same way Jesus did, through their faithful witnessing even to the point of death. Revelation is also a call to exclusive obedience and to exclusive worship of God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ showing us that no other person, no other thing is deserving of our exclusive worship and devotion.

What King of Book is Revelation?

Now the second thing to look at in reading Revelation is, not only why was the book written looking at the historical circumstances, the seven churches and their situation in the Roman Empire and the challenges that brought, but then to ask another question, “What kind of book is Revelation? What kind of book are we dealing with? What kind of literature are we reading and how does that require that we actually read it and try to make sense of it? In other words, we simply have to read Revelation in light of the type of literature that John was writing and communicating to his first readers and what he was intending to communicate and how most likely they would have made sense of it as best as we are able to comprehend.

Again, it’s interesting. This is another important step that you are often taught in hermeneutics classes or Bible Study Methods class that you need to understand what kind of literature so we understand that we don’t read a Gospel the same way we do one of Paul’s letters or we don’t read Old Testament poetry the same way we read a prophetic text or a narrative text or something like that. But once again, this is often ignored or misunderstood when it comes to reading and interpreting the book of Revelation. I would suspect that one of the reasons perhaps is that we really don’t have any good models to follow when it comes to reading Revelation and even when Revelation is preached from our pulpits. Again the reaction of the neglect often prevails. Usually you’ll hear sermons on chapters two and three. Once in a while chapter one and sometimes someone will get into chapter four and five but seldom do you find the entire book of Revelation as the subject of a series of sermons. Interestingly, in the Eastern Orthodox lectionary, the book of Revelation does not play a role at all. The texts that do play a role again are chapters two and three are found in some of the hymns or something like that. So first of all, we often don’t have good models on to how to read and interpret Revelation, although I’m finding a lot more really helpful resources in books surfacing now.

Apocalyptic Genre

But second is we simply don’t have any good analogies in our modern day to the book of Revelation. I’ll suggest a couple later on that are fairly close but when’s the last

time you sat down and read an apocalypse or when's the last time you sat down and wrote one. We read letters virtually every day, it's easy now in the form of email sometimes we're used to reading novels and story type of literature. Sometimes we'll even still dabble in poetry, reading or writing it but we really don't have any close analogies in our modern day to the book of Revelation. That can make it tricky when we really have nothing to compare it to help us orientate ourselves to the book.

A well-known, literary critical scholar named E.D. Hirsh said that "reading is genre bound." By that he meant simply that meaning in any given piece of literature is dependent on its literary genre, what kind of literature it is. That is the genre, we often think of meaning as in words and in sentences but the genre itself, the type of literature also carries meaning or suggest meaning and how we are to derive meaning from the text itself.

Now getting the literary genre of Revelation right does not help us solve all the problems, even people who can agree on what kind of literature it is still disagree on how they interpret certain passages in Revelation and even overall in what they do with Revelation. But at the same time understanding the genre of Revelation helps us at least to get off on the right foot and not to get off on the wrong foot. That is it helps us to make a right start and avoid missteps and mis-starts in trying to interpret the book of Revelation. Yes, Revelation still has its own logic, it still has its own unique structure in the way it's put together that we have to pay attention to, that not everyone is going to agree upon but at the same time understanding the literary genre or the literary type in which Revelation was written or in which John wrote will help us to get off on the right foot, to get a right start in interpreting and reading the book of Revelation.

Now, today, obviously we make genre identification ever day we do so intuitively. The easiest example that many people like to point to is when you pick up a morning newspaper. If you pick up your newspaper and start thumbing through the pages you begin to almost unconsciously make genre identifications. You realize that when you turn from the front page to the comic section that you've made a serious switch in literary genre. Hopefully you don't read the comics in the same way or take it with the same

seriousness or find the same information or treat it in the same way that you do the front page headlines. Nor do you treat the comics in the same way that you will a couple pages later in the newspaper, treat for example the classified ads. You realize that this is another type of literature within this one newspaper and it demands that you read it in a different way. But, you do that intuitively, you don't sit down and think, "Okay, now I've moved to a comic and a comic consists of these features and therefore here's a list of principles that I have to follow in interpreting the comics. You don't do that. You do that subconsciously and intuitively.

The problem is when we often deal with ancient literary genres, especially ones that are vastly different from ours or ones that do not have any analogy to our modern day literary genres. How do we wrestle with those, how do we deal with those? That raises the question then, what kind of literature is the book of Revelation? What kind of literary genre should we identify Revelation with? Perhaps more accurately, at least to start, is to ask, what did John intend and what would his first readers most likely identified Revelation as, in terms of literary genre? Presumably John if were to take seriously that John is addressing seven historical churches in the Roman Empire facing a crisis of how they live out their faith and whether its okay to worship Caesar along with Jesus Christ. If we take that seriously, John must have been writing something that they could comprehend to some degree. So what literary genre would the first readers most likely have identified Revelation with?

Three Literary Types: Apocalypse, Prophecy, Letter

As I look at this book, and as I read what others have said about the book and read commentary and other interpreters of Revelation it seems that most have come down to an agreement that Revelation consists of a blend of at least three literary types. And that is three literary genres that would have been well known in the first century. And those genres are simply an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter or an epistle. It is interesting that the last one usually gets overlooked; but an apocalypse, a prophecy and an epistle. Revelation seems to be a blend of at least those three. It is not that John himself necessarily would have thought that he was blending three separate types, its more as

readers of Revelation we can distinguish three types of literature that help us to try and come to grips with what kind of book this is and how it communicates and how that makes a difference in the way we should read it. But the point is these are three literary types.

An apocalypse although we'll see in just a moment an apocalypse is more of a modern day title, it doesn't appear that John or that anybody else used the label "apocalypse" to refer to a certain type of a book. But it's still a useful label because as we see it does helpfully describe a group of writings that seem to share similar features and characteristics. An identifiable type of writing that can be distinguished from other types of literature and writing in the first century. But these three literary types an apocalypse, a prophecy and an epistle or letter were all well known to the first century readers. Much like when you sit down and read a newspaper and you skip from front page headlines to comics, to classified ads without having to think about what type of literature you reading and what principles that you need to activate to understand how to read them. In the same way, the first century readers would have understood and identified what it was they were reading almost intuitively because they probably would have been familiar with these types of works.

Let me begin by just briefly, or end this part of the lecture by just briefly, introducing to you an apocalypse. If I were to ask you what you think of when you think of the term "apocalypse," what comes to your mind? Today we usually use the word "apocalypse" and this may owe itself largely to how it's been used in even especially non-Christian parlance. As I said apocalypse a title that often gets applied to movies. So when we think of apocalypse, we think of the end of the world. Some cataclysmic end of the entire universe. Some worldwide disaster of apocalyptic proportion. So when we think of apocalypse we think of some end time and cataclysmic disaster or event that brings this world or entire universe to an end or something like that. I'm convinced though; in the first century the readers would not have understood it this way. In the first century the word that we call "apocalypse" would have, the terms as we use refers to a type of literature that, the first century readers would have grasped and would have

understood not necessarily as end of world or cataclysmic or end of history. But it refers to a literary type that the first century readers would have understood.

In the next session then I want to take a little bit of time and ask what is an apocalypse? The label “apocalypse” is a modern one that we use. John and first century people did not necessarily use it, but it’s a useful label to use to refer to a type of recognizable unique literature. What would they have understood by this type of literature? What is this kind of literature that we called an apocalypse? How should we read it and interpret it?

Transcribed by Courtney Scott, Taylor Hawks, Jennifer Krystyniak, Dominic Paradis, Abigail Sensing, Drew Sidell, Ted Hildebrandt and edited by Marirose Brown
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt