

Revelation — Lesson 2

A Question About Matthew 24

Last week we discussed language from Matthew 24 that sounds like the end of the world. But we saw that it could not be describing the end of the world because verse 34 tells us that what that language was describing came to pass during that first century generation. In fact, that “end of world” language was actually describing the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans.

But wait, you say. My Bible (probably an NIV or NASV version) has a footnote that tells me the word “generation” in verse 34 can mean “race.” That footnote tells you a lot more about the translation you are using than it does about Matthew 24! The word for “generation” in verse 34 is the same word that is used in Matthew 1:17 to describe the generations from Abraham to Christ (“*genea*,” from which we get *genealogy*). There is a Greek word for race and we find it in 1 Peter 2:9 where the church is called a chosen race (“*ghenos*,” from which we get *genocide*). That is not the word used in Matthew 24:34. (That footnote is dishonest, and it is a classic example of how modern versions are driven by the theologies of their translators.)

Why Was Revelation Written?

Revelation was written to provide hope, comfort, and encouragement to first century Christians who were suffering severe persecution at the hands of the Romans.

Why was Rome such a problem?

In most of the other books of the New Testament, Rome is seen in largely neutral terms and sometimes even positive terms. We think, for example, of Paul’s use of his own Roman citizenship in the book of Acts.

But in Revelation there is nothing but blazing hatred for Rome. Rome is a Babylon, the mother of harlots, drunk on the blood of the saints. John hopes for nothing but her total destruction. The explanation for this change in attitude from what we see for example in Acts lies in the wide development of Caesar worship and its accompanying persecution, which together form the background for Revelation and help explain why Revelation was written.

By the time of Revelation, Caesar worship was the one religion that covered the whole Roman empire, and it was because of their refusal to conform to its demands that Christians were persecuted and killed. Its essence was that the reigning Roman emperor as embodying the spirit of Rome was divine.

Once a year everyone in the empire had to appear before the magistrates to burn a pinch of incense to the godhead of Caesar and to say "Caesar is Lord." After he had done that, a man might go away and worship any god he liked so long as that worship did not infringe decency and good order, but he must go through this ceremony in which he acknowledged the emperor's divinity.

The reason was very simple. Rome had a vast heterogeneous empire stretching from one end of the known world to the other. It had in it many tongues, races, and traditions. The problem was how to weld this varied mass into a unity. Rome knew there is no unifying force like that of a common religion. But none of the national religions known to Rome could conceivably have become universal. Caesar worship could. (Constantine later discovered the universal aspect of Christianity!)

Caesar worship was the one common act and belief that turned the empire into a unity. To refuse to burn the pinch of incense and to say Caesar is Lord was not an act of irreligion, but was an act of political disloyalty. That is why the Romans responded with the utmost severity with the man who would not say Caesar is Lord, and no Christian could give that title to any other than Jesus Christ.

One of the very worst Roman emperors in this regard was Domitian. Barclay writes that he was a devil, the worst of all things, a cold blood-

ed persecutor. With the exception of Caligula, he was the first emperor to take his divinity seriously and to demand Caesar worship. The difference between Caligula and Domitian, was that Caligula was an insane devil while Domitian was a sane devil, which is much more terrifying. (And yet Suetonius tells us that Domitian “used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catching flies and stabbing them with a keenly-sharpened stylus”!)

Domitian launched hatred against the Jews and against the Christians. He informed all provincial governors that government announcements and proclamations must begin with the phrase “Our Lord and God Domitian commands.” Everyone who addressed him must begin Lord and God. All over the empire men and women must call Domitian god or die. All must say Caesar is Lord. There was no escape.

What were the Christians to do? What hope had they? They were confronted with the choice — Caesar or Christ. **It was to encourage men in such times that the book of Revelation was written.** The book of Revelation comes from one of the most heroic ages in church history. The book of Revelation is a call to be faithful unto death in order to win the crown of life. Revelation is the most difficult book in the Bible, but it is infinitely rewarding.

When I taught this book in the 1990’s, I had a lesson in which I compared Rome of John’s day with the United States of our day — and there *are* some similarities. But in my notes, written during the Clinton administration, I made the comment that one difference between Rome and the U.S. is that we hardly deify our leaders. In fact, at that time, Clinton was being demonized. But when I read that comment in 2009, I wondered how long that particular item will remain in the “differences” column! A Google search for the two terms “Obama” and “Messiah” returns 3.3 million hits!

Can We Understand Revelation?

Yes! (But it will be challenging!) One problem with studying Revelation is that it is difficult to say what anything means until one has decided in a sense what everything means.

But despite its many challenges, the book is meant to be understood. Chapter 1, verse 3, provides a blessing to those who read and understand the book. Also, the very name of the book indicates that the message is *revealed*.

Some might argue that Revelation falls into the category of items dealt with by Deuteronomy 29:29 (“The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”) But Revelation is not a secret thing! Revelation has been revealed! We were meant to understand it, and we can understand it.

Why is Revelation So Different?

Even with the confidence that we can understand Revelation, we must all agree that Revelation is difficult to understand because it is so very different from anything we find in the New Testament and in almost all of the Old Testament. What makes it so different? The main reason it is different is that it is written in what has become known as *apocalyptic language*.

What is Apocalyptic Language?

Revelation is called *Apokalupsis* in Greek, and it is from that word that we get the word apocalyptic, which means unveiled, uncovered, or revealed.

Apocalyptic language is composed of symbols that are often lurid in color, violent in tone, and easily remembered. They strike the imagination and grab hold of the mind. In addition to Revelation, such language can be found in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and even in the gospels and epistles.

Apocalyptic language is almost always used to denote conflict and victory. It is used when God judges and smites an oppressor and vindicates his people. It is used to describe times of crisis and judgment.

All apocalyptic literature deals with these events: the sin of the present age, the terror of the time between, and the blessings of the time to come. It sees the present world as beyond mending. It looks forward to a new world after this present one has been shattered by the avenging wrath of God. It is continually attempting to describe the indescribable, to say the unsayable, to paint the unpaintable.

Why Does God Use Apocalyptic Language?

Some think it was used in Revelation to shield the church from Roman retaliation. But that explanation has never appealed much to me. If we can understand the book 2000 years after it was written, then surely Rome could understand the symbols at the time it was written.

I think the reason it was used is that God wanted to use it! This book is an oil painting from God. Numbers 12:8 reminds us that God does not always speak clearly, but sometimes uses dark language, and perhaps such language is reserved for times of conflict and judgment.

But Shouldn't We Always Interpret the Bible Literally?

The usual approach to interpreting the Bible is that we understand a passage literally unless forced to do otherwise. (For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us that if our right hand offends us, we should cut it off. We understand that is not to be understood literally.)

This usual approach is reversed for apocalyptic language—we should understand apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise. Why? Because apocalyptic language by its very nature uses vivid and dramatic symbols to describe vivid and dramatic events. How do we know that? We know that because explanations of what the symbols mean are sometimes given in the text itself. We will see that in Revelation, and it occurs in Daniel, also. Also, we

know that because in many and perhaps even most cases, it is not possible to understand what we read literally.

But shouldn't all prophecies be taken literally? No, and I don't know anyone who does. Think about the first Messianic prophecy in Genesis 3:15. Is that just a prophecy about enmity between snakes and humans? Hosea told Israel that they were going into Egyptian captivity when in reality they went into Assyrian captivity. (Hosea knew that to a Jew, Egypt meant oppression and captivity, so he used that symbol.) To literalize Isaiah 11:6–10 is to deny that Paul applied it correctly to the first century in Romans 15:10–12. To literalize Ezekiel 16:53–55 would require the resurrection of the inhabitants of Sodom to their former prosperity despite what we read in Jude 7. To literalize Ezekiel 37:22–25 would require that David and not Jesus be Israel's eternal king.

Those who say that they take Revelation literally are never consistent in that regard. They always take some things figuratively. To Hal Lindsey, for example, the 144,000 Jews in 7:4 are literal yet the locusts in 9:3 are Cobra helicopters. To John Walvoord, the 10 days in 2:10 are figurative yet the 1000 years in chapter 20 are literal.

What about the Greek text?

The language of Revelation is unique. The Greek usage and vocabulary in Revelation are so different from that of the other books of the New Testament that it has been necessary for textual scholars to develop a special grammar in order to grapple adequately with the text. The book is written in Hebraic Greek, and some have speculated that it was possible translated into Greek from an Aramaic original form.

There are a number of passages in which the author seems to violate the simplest rules of Greek grammar and to express himself awkwardly. In several examples, these ungrammatical expressions are the unavoidable consequence of attempting to put into Greek a concept that the language cannot easily express, but not always. It is as if the author was thinking in Hebrew or Aramaic while writing in Greek.

J. B. Phillips: Revelation piles word upon word remorselessly, mixes cases and tenses without apparent scruple, and shows at times a complete disregard for normal syntax and grammar. ... And generally speaking, the tumultuous assault of words is not without its effect upon the mind.

Phillips presents a very interesting theory. He says that perhaps John wrote down what he saw DURING the visions. That, Phillips says, would fully account for the seeming incoherence, the strange formations of sentences, the repetition, and the odd juxtaposition of words.

Phillips also notes that once one has absorbed the initial shock of the peculiar Greek, the effect of the language of this books is most powerful. For example, a solitary eagle flying in midheaven, crying out in pity for the inhabitants of the earth, is out of its context bizarre but set as it is it is almost unbearably poignant.

How Can We Understand Revelation?

Now that we know we can understand Revelation, the next question is *how* can we understand Revelation.

We must follow the rules.

We have already mentioned a few of the rules:

- (1) We should use easy to understand verses to help us understand hard to understand verses.**
- (2) We should interpret apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise.**

There are two additional rules that we will use quite a bit:

- (3) Similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. (The same image can be used to depict different objects.)**
- (4) Dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. (Different images can be used to depict the same object.)**

We must investigate the historical context.

The historical context is vital. And we must do more than just *say* the context is important—we must actually pay close attention to it!

Apocalyptic language always has historical significance, so we must study history in order to properly understand the images.

What is the historical context of the book? We have already discussed aspects of it in our earlier discussions about emperor worship.

Christianity upset the Roman cults because it taught that all men were lost without Christ. It was considered politically unsafe because it worshipped a criminal that had been executed by the state. It was considered morally undesirable because the early Christians were accused of incest and cannibalism. Christians would not pray to the king, they refused military service because such service required them to wear idolatrous insignias, they preached universal dominion by Jesus, and they refused to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor.

The persecution of the church by Rome was particularly intense during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. In A.D. 66 a fire destroyed much of Rome. A rumor spread that Nero had set the fire to further his plans to rebuild the city. To dispel the rumors Nero blamed the Christians who, as everyone knew, predicted a fiery end of the world.

Tacitus describes the situation as follows:

To scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First,

then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his circus, mixing with the crowds in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

This fierce persecution was reduced for awhile after the death of Nero but began again with renewed intensity when Domitian came to power. Tertullian called Domitian "a limb of the bloody Nero."

We must see the book from a first century perspective.

If we fail to see the book from the perspective of a first century Christian suffering persecution by the Romans, then it will not be possible for us to understand it.

Many modern commentaries are filled with a sense of urgency that the time is now and the signs of the end have at last appeared. Why then was John so urgent almost 2000 years ago? What was the contemporary meaning of that Revelation to its initial readers — a small, persecuted minority of Christians in a hostile pagan world? To wrench this book from those first century martyrs and to tell them the book has nothing to say to them but everything to say to us is the height of egotism!

We must study the Old Testament.

Revelation is steeped in the Old Testament and we must be also if we are to properly understand it.

Revelation has more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book. Out of 404 verses, there are 278 Old Testament allusions by one count. One key to choosing a commentary on Revelation is to check how many times the commentator refers to the Old Testament. (It's not fool-proof, but it is a good indicator.)

We are going to have to spend a lot of time in the Old Testament ourselves. Of the 66 books in the Bible, perhaps Revelation above all is dependent upon the rest for its proper interpretation. As one commentator observed, the marginal references in your Bible are often more enlightening than any commentary.

We must pay close attention to numbers.

We need to pay particular attention to numbers and periods of time. They have special meanings that we must carefully deduce from the evidence.

Most of the symbols behind the numbers make perfect sense immediately once you see them. For example, 3 is the number of God, 12 is the number of God's people, 10 is the number of completion, 7 is the number of perfection, 6 is the number of imperfection, 4 is the number of the earth, 2 is the number of confirmation or strength, and 3.5 is a broken 7. Some require a little detective work, such as 1,260, 144,000, and 1,000. (1,260 days, for example, is 3.5 years at 360 days per year.)

How do we know all of this? Why shouldn't we just take all of the numbers in this book literally?

Let's think for a moment about Chapter 7, which is a beautiful chapter that describes the blessings of God's people — no hunger, no thirst, no tears, etc. It was a message that God's people really needed to hear when this book was written and Roman persecution was raging. In that chapter, the number 12 occurs 12 times, and the sum of God's

people is given as 144,000, which is 12 times 12 times 1000. What are we to think of this? Have we ever seen the number 12 used before anywhere in the Bible? Twelve tribes? Twelve apostles? Can we not see how 12 could be used to depict the people of God? Or can we really imagine God turning to the poor persecuted Christian wearing the number 144,001 on his chest and saying “Sorry, but you’re a day late and a dollar short! Better luck next time ... if there were going to be a next time!” At some point, common sense must kick in and tell us that numbers are being used figuratively in this book.

Again, we should try to read this book through first century eyes. We are much more quantitative than they were. It may be difficult for us to see numbers in figurative terms, but it would have been natural for a first century reader to have done so. Graffiti from Pompeii, for example, reads “I love her whose number is 545.”¹

Who is the Villain in Revelation?

Everyone agrees there is an evil villain in this book, but not all agree on the identity of that villain. I will argue that the villain in this book is Rome of the first century, and particularly certain of the emperors of Rome.

How Did Rome Begin?

Rome’s early history is shrouded in legend. According to Roman tradition, the city was founded by the twins Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. Archaeological evidence supports the view that Rome grew from settlements on the Palatine Hill very possibly from the middle of the 8th century BC. The original settlement developed into the capital of the Roman Kingdom (ruled by a succession of seven kings, according to tradition), and then the Roman Republic (from 510 BC, governed by the Senate), and finally the Roman Empire (from 27 BC, ruled by an Emperor).

1. *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism*, p. 95, by Maurice Harry Farbridge.

We should pause here to note that the prophet Daniel lived around 600 BC, and in Daniel 2:40, 44 he wrote the following:

And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. ... And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

That fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 was Rome! That was the kingdom, as strong as iron, that ruled the earth when God's eternal kingdom was established in Acts 2. No one looking at those Roman settlements in 600 BC would ever have predicted that they would someday subdue all other worldly kingdoms, and yet Daniel knew 600 years before it happened!

Rome was part of God's plan in ushering in his kingdom. We know that because Daniel tells us, but we also know that from the historical evidence.

In Galatians 4:4-5, Paul writes, "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." It was not by accident or happenstance that Jesus came into this world when he did. God had been planning for his arrival since the foundation of the world, and those plans had become very specific by the time of Daniel in 600 BC.

When Daniel prophesied that a fourth kingdom as strong as iron would rule the world at the time of Christ, and that three kingdoms would precede it, the history of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome was predetermined for the next 600 years. Daniel and Revelation are bookends between great empires.