Today we will want to start into looking at the book of Revelation, the very last book of the New Testament. The book of Revelation presents a number of challenges for the interpreter and the reader, mainly because we really have no modern-day analogies, or close analogies as to what Revelation is. Most of us are familiar with writing and reading letters, and reading narrative, and we’re familiar with stories, and how they work, and poetry, but, when it comes in the book of Revelation, we really have nothing to compare it to that would allow an inroad into the book. So, I want to take a little bit of time, and try to unpack the book of Revelation as we have with other New Testament books, looking at the historical background of the book, looking at the literary type, and how that influences the way we read the book.

Now, first of all, it's helpful to look at how the book of Revelation has been treated in the history of Christianity. The way Revelation has been dealt with, or treated, can be divided into two broad categories. First of all  in your notes under, “What has the Church done with the Book of Revelation,” first of all, many have chosen to ignore it. Although, Revelation claims to be a book that has been unsealed for many, it's still a book with seven seals. We find it too mysterious, and too problematic, and again because we have no parallels or analogies in our day, we’re not certain how to read it. It just appears too confusing, and we start looking at it, and there's all kinds of different ways to read it and approach it. So, we would rather bypass and retreat to the safer ground of the Gospels that are grounded in the historical Jesus, or we retreat to Paul's epistles where we find perhaps more straightforward communication, and we’ll leave Revelation to someone else or some other time. Even a brilliant theologian as John Calvin who wrote commentaries on every book of the New Testament, yet he didn't write one on the book of Revelation, and many other commentators would've been better off to follow his example, perhaps. But, even Calvin didn’t write a commentary on Revelation, because he
wasn't sure what to do with it. So, that’s one approach is to ignore it, and to retreat to the safer grounds of the Gospels or the Epistles.

The opposite extreme is to become so obsessed and infatuated with it that all we do is focus on the book of Revelation, and try to figure out exactly how it's going to be fulfilled. We try to figure out how Revelation matches up with current events that are occurring in our own day. When you go to the computer if you Google “Revelation” or “Apocalypse,” you'll note that the entire websites are devoted to trying to decode the book of Revelation. They are trying to figure out how its visions, and prophecies are being fulfilled today. They read events going on in the Middle East in light of Revelation. So, all kinds of ministries, websites, and persons, devote their entire energy, and focus to try to figure out the book of Revelation. They become obsessed with it. The *Left Behind* series is a good example of a series of books, although it is fictional, it still is attempting to portray realistically how the authors think that Revelation is actually going to be fulfilled in the future. So, those are two very common approaches to trying to figure out Revelation: either to ignore it as too hard to figure out, and because we don't know what to do with it; or at the opposite extreme, become obsessed with it, pouring all our energy into trying to figure it out especially in light of how it fits with modern-day events. Revelation, in that respect, becomes like a crystal ball that we look into to try to figure out what's going to happen in the future.

I would suggest to you that the way to approach Revelation is to avoid both of those extremes. We don't want to reject it, because it is part of God's word. Revelation opens, by promising a blessing for the one who reads it, listens to it, and takes it to heart. So, because it's God's word, we can't afford to reject it, but neither can we become so obsessed with it that we ignore the rest of the Bible, or we come up with these fanciful interpretations that the author could never have possibly intended, and the readers never could've possibly grasped. So, I would suggest the starting point is like any other New Testament book. We need to, first of all, put Revelation back in its original context, and as we've done with Paul's letters, as we’ve done with the Gospels, as we've done with the
other general epistles. It's necessary to first ask, what did this letter mean in its original historical context? What was the author trying to do? What was the author trying to communicate? How would the first readers most likely have understood and grasped it? So, that’s what we want to do. It's interesting that while many people would advocate approaching the other New Testament books that way, by reconstructing historical background, asking what the author intended, and how the readers most likely would've grasped it, it's intriguing to me that we abandon that approach when we come to the book of Revelation. Yet, in my opinion, that's where it's needed the most! So, let’s start by asking a series of questions related to the historical background of Revelation. Why was it written? Who was the author? Who were the readers? What situation were they facing? What crisis or problem precipitated the book of Revelation?

First of all, the author and date of the book. When it comes to the authorship of Revelation, there's some uncertainty. We know that the author's name is John, he tells us that in the book. The problem is in the early years of church history, and early Christianity, some of the church fathers mentioned a few different John's that could be responsible for the authorship of the book of Revelation. I don't want to go into detail as to who those John’s were, and could be. You can read in your textbook, *Introducing the New Testament*, regarding some of the options. The main, the primary option, or one of the most popular options, is that the author of Revelation was the same author as the fourth gospel, John, that is the apostle John. Many have held to that view, and there's good evidence for John as the author of the book of Revelation. But, again, there are other possibilities, other church leaders in the first century, a couple others named John that could be responsible for the book, and the interesting thing, the main thing I want to point out is: whatever the case, whoever this John was he was well known to the churches. When you read the first chapter of Revelation, he identifies himself as someone who is a fellow participant in their sufferings, and he appears to know the churches fairly well. So whoever this John is, whether he's the apostle, or another well-known John, a prophet in the first century, he was well-known to the churches. Second, it’s interesting,
even if this is the apostle John writing this, and it could be, he doesn't claim apostolic authority. Unlike Paul's letters, where Paul writes, “Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,” that the author does not claim apostolic authority even if he is one.

Instead, he claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet. He writes as one who comes at the conclusion of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, and over and over, he draws on Old Testament prophetic forms in his work. He claims to write, and with the authority of a prophet. He claims to have similar experiences as a prophet as Isaiah and Ezekiel, and some of the great prophets in the Old Testament. So, whoever this John is, he primarily writes as one who writes at the climax of the prophetic tradition, and writes with the authority of a prophet. In fact, there's a lot of debate as to whether the New Testament authors thought they were writing Scripture. We've already looked at some of Paul's letters, and whether he thinks he's writing Scripture or not, he does seem to think at times, he's writing something that is authoritative, on par with Old Testament Scripture that's to be listened to and obeyed, and has the authority of God’s Spirit behind it. Other books, like the book of Luke, when you read chapters 1 through 4, Luke doesn't seem to realize that he's writing anything other than a typical first century biography about the life of Jesus. But, John, in the book of Revelation, does seem to think, in my opinion, he is writing something that carries the authority of Old Testament prophetic literature, and Old Testament prophetic Scripture. Maybe John didn't think he was writing something that would conclude the entire canon, or he, at this point, he did not, perhaps, have the perception of a New Testament canon that would stand alongside the Old Testament, nor is it clear if he thought his book should be included in the Old Testament canon. That's not the point, but the point is he does seem to think, or is conscious of writing something that should be taken with the same authority as Old Testament prophetic texts, and Old Testament Scripture.

As far as the date of writing, there have been a number of proposals, and once again, I don't want to go through all of them. You can read your textbook to find out some of the options. But, there are two most common dates. One is: during the reign of
Nero. If you turn to the very back of your notebook, you will note a list, you'll see a list of emperors. If you locate Nero, who ruled in the mid-60s A.D., some suggest that the book of Revelation was written during the time of Nero. Nero, as we saw way back at the beginning of the semester, was known at times for his cruel treatment of Christians. As tradition has it he accused them for the burning of Rome, and some would suggest that the visions and the mentions of persecution in Revelation fit what took place during the reign of Nero. And so, some would date it in the mid-60s A.D., and that's a possibility, during or just shortly after Nero's reign.

However, probably the most common approach to the dating of Revelation is to date it towards the very end of the first century. Again, if you look at that list of emperors in your notes, you'll note that an Emperor named Domitian was ruling Rome towards the end of the first century. Some early church fathers, in the earliest days of Christianity, date or attach Revelation to the reign of Domitian, and that has become probably the most common view among scholars today, that Revelation was written during the reign of the Emperor Domitian towards the end of the first century. If that's the case, Revelation may have been the very last book written of the New Testament. Although, again, it comes at the end of the Canon, not because it was the last book written. Remember, the New Testament is not arranged chronologically, but there other reasons why it comes at the end of the New Testament. So, without presenting a lot of argumentation, again, read your textbook, I'm going to assume that Revelation was written towards the end of the first century, roughly 95/96 A.D., and, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian.

Now, when you read the book of Revelation, the most characteristic thing, actually you’ll find one of them mentioned in your notes, but I want to mention two characteristic features of the book of Revelation, and they go together. One of them is probably the most characteristic feature of Revelation, its symbolism. Nearly every verse of the book is packed with a rather strange, at times bizarre symbols. You read one chapter where John sees this vision of locusts, yet they have the hair, the head of a human being, the hair of a woman, the teeth of a lion, and they have crowns on their heads, and they have
tails like scorpions. I mean, in what kind of vision is that, what in the world is John seeing? Here you have a book full of dragons and serpents. You have a book full of smoke, sulfur, fire and brimstone, and thundering, and all kinds of strange creatures, and all kinds of strange symbols, dominating the pages of the of the book of Revelation. So, we’ll return to the symbols of Revelation, but that should tell us that one of the things we need to be alert for is: where did John get these symbols? Why does he communicate in symbols? What's he trying to do?

The second characteristic feature of Revelation related to that, is the use of the Old Testament. Most of the symbols, John puts his own spin on them, and even if at times he may draw on the broader Greco-Roman world for some of his symbols. A lot of John’s symbols come right out of the Old Testament. Virtually every verse has some kind of a reference to the Old Testament, even though John never quotes it, such as you find in Matthew, “this took place to fulfill what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet,” or sometimes Paul will say, “just as it was written” and then he’ll quote an Old Testament text. You never find that in Revelation. In Revelation the author simply weaves the images, and the language of the Old Testament, especially the prophetic books, into his own vision. So, it's important to understand the Old Testament background, and understand where John gets some of his language. Often, the meaning of some of John’s symbols and languages depend on what they meant in their Old Testament background, where John gets them.

Now, why was Revelation written? Again, often when we think of the book of Revelation, I'm afraid we often treat it like going to have our palm read, or go to have tarot card reading or if we look into a crystal ball. The primary purpose is to figure out what the future holds. And yes, Revelation does talk about the future, but there's far more going on than just predicting the future. In fact, I would suggest that is a rather minor feature in the book, or least not the most important feature of the book of Revelation. It's not primarily to predict and forecast the future. So what was it doing?

First of all, Revelation was a response to Roman domination and emperor worship. As we've already seen, way back in the beginning of the semester, during this
time, Rome was the dominant world power. It just continued to grow and eat up broader and broader sections of the earth. It was the dominant world rule of the day that replaced other world rules like Persia, Assyria, and Babylon. Now comes Rome, and it basically has spread all over, and its influence can be felt over much of the inhabited world. You couldn’t go anywhere in the Mediterranean area without being affected by Roman rule. Moreover, Rome was known for providing peace, prosperity, and well-being for all those that fell under its influence, and all those that would show allegiance to it. At this time, also though, the Roman emperor emerged as, in some respects, the savior of the world, the one who was responsible for the well-being, the great kind of patron of all people. At this time also, most of the cities in the Greco-Roman world, had established temples in honor of the emperor, and there was a vibrant emperor cult going on, where members of the society were at times required, or at least encouraged, to be involved in. Emperor worship was often tied in with commerce, and doing trade, and often whatever job you had in the first century was tied into emperor worship, and in opportunities for emperor worship, whether in feasts or festivals held in honor of the emperor. So emperor worship had permeated much of society, and many Christians, then, were living in this kind of context, in the midst of a situation where they may be compelled to show allegiance to the Roman Empire. They would be involved in opportunities, and occasions to render allegiance, to even worship to the emperor, which as we said at this time was probably the Emperor Domitian, towards the end of the first century. So, it would have been, in a sense, an affront to the Roman society to not show gratitude to the emperor for all the emperor had provided for you. In my opinion, Revelation is a response to that situation. Again, everywhere you would've gone, in some of the first century cities, there would have been visible reminders in the forms of statues, architecture, and even inscriptions of the debt of gratitude that you owed the Emperor. The emperors that at this time tended to be divinized, or treated as deity, and so you can begin to see the problem this would cause for many Christians living in that situation. “Should I resist this, and worship Jesus Christ as Lord, but should I resist Roman rule in these occasions to worship the emperor,
or can I go ahead, and be involved in these as a rather harmless activity, especially if it means losing my job, or suffering some other kind of disadvantage, or persecution?”

That last word is “persecution.” Some have suggested, Revelation was primarily meant to address Christians who were being persecuted in the first century under the Roman Empire. When you read the book of Revelation, persecution does appear to be a primary thing. You read over and over again of how God's people are beheaded on behalf of the testimony of Jesus Christ. How God's people suffer at the hands of the beast in the Roman Empire, and some have suggested Revelation is primarily a book of comfort. It's meant to comfort Christians who are suffering persecution at the hand of imperial Rome, and there’s probably some truth to that.

But, remember, we said a couple things. Number one is that at this point, most persecution would have been primarily local, and sporadic. There was not yet anything like this officially sanctioned empire wide persecution of Christians. There was no official vendetta out from the emperor on Christians, whether sending Roman armies through the towns and dragging Christians out into the streets. That's not happening at this point. Instead, most of the persecution does not come from Rome, it comes from the local authorities who are keen to curry favor with Rome, and to remain in good stead with Rome. Again, they would've seen it as an affront not to be involved in these various occasions to show gratitude towards Rome, and to be involved in emperor worship. And for Christians to resist this, then, may have resulted in different levels of, and different types of persecution. So, the first thing to remember is any persecution taking place at this time, and it probably did, would have been mainly local and sporadic.

The second thing is when you read Revelation, at least one person, a man named Antipas, has died for his witness to Jesus Christ. Antipas is from Pergamum. Other than that, we’re not told if anyone else has, but we know at least one person has. But again, this seems for John, to be only the beginning of a conflict that could escalate, but at this time, any persecution is primarily sporadic and local, and there is no officially sanctioned, widespread persecution going on.
When you look at the cities of Asia Minor, if you go to Asia Minor, being of our modern-day Turkey where the seven cities of Revelation were located, when you go back to Revelation 2 and 3, you read about those cities. Revelation 2 and 3 mentioned seven cities, specific cities in modern-day Turkey or Asia Minor, western Asia Minor, to which the book of Revelation is addressed. When you read these letters to these seven churches, there’s a couple of interesting things.

First of all, is all of these cities are clearly ensconced in imperial Roman rule. All of these cities are situated at the heart of imperial Rome, emperor worship, and Roman rule. Most of the cities had at least one temple erected in the honor of the Roman emperor. They also had other temples in honor of other gods, and deities, but along with that, would have been temples dedicated to certain emperor's. We note, for example in Ephesus, the first city addressed in Revelation did have a temple dedicated to worship of Domitian, the Roman Emperor probably ruling when Revelation was written. But, most of these cities had temples, again not only dedicated to the gods and other Greco-Roman deities, but to the emperor as well. So, to belong to these cities would have placed you in a situation where you would have been compelled and put into circumstances where you would have found it necessary to render allegiance to, or even participate in events that could involve you rendering worship, and showing allegiance to the Emperor, to the Roman Emperor, and showing your support of Roman ideology, Roman society, and Roman rule.

Again, in most of these cities, your trade and commerce, even your job was wrapped up with Roman ideology and Roman rule. So, this created a plight for Christians, and there were two possible responses. There may have been more but, two general possibilities, or responses if you are a Christian living during this time. First of all, you can choose to resist, because you know that Jesus Christ is the true Lord, and Savior of the world. Because you know even as Jesus said you can't serve two masters, so you know that Jesus alone is worthy of your worship, and obedience. Now you have the Roman Emperor claiming that he is the savior of the world, who is now asking for,
calling for your obedience, allegiance, and worship, or least local officials are compelling you to do that. Now, you're facing that situation, and refusal to do so could have serious ramifications for your work, for your family, and for your physical safety. How are you going to respond?

So, one possibility was to resist, and that could bring about various forms of persecution, and has brought the death of at least one person, Antipas. So, that's one possibility. The other one is, and this appears to be the main problem that Revelation is addressing, it appears that a far more serious problem than persecution, is that most Christians were tempted to go ahead, and compromise. It is, perhaps, for the sake of retaining their place in society, or not wanting to suffer persecution, or for whatever reason, some Christians were willing to give in to Rome, to Roman ideology, and Roman rule. They were willing to worship the emperor. They thought that they could render allegiance and worship to Jesus Christ, and that it was harmless, perhaps, to do so with the Roman Empire as well. So, they wanted to have it both ways. They were more complacent, and willing to compromise. Interestingly, when you read the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, only two of those churches appear to be undergoing any type of persecution. The main problem with the other five is their involvement, their willingness, to become involved in Roman rule, and in emperor worship, and to give their allegiance to the Roman Empire and to Roman rule.

So, the most significant issue in Revelation, I think, is not so much persecution, it's compromise and complacency. Giving in to or buying in to Roman rule, and Emperor worship. So in light of that, what is the main theme of Revelation? In my opinion, it's kind of difficult to isolate a main theme. Yes, persecution, the suffering people of God, is certainly a theme. Again, you can’t ignore the theme of suffering, and persecution that John sees as the ultimate destiny of his people, if they do resist Roman rule. But, it seems to me, that one of the things that that could lay claim to being the primary theme of Revelation is the question: Who is worthy of our worship? Who is truly worthy of our worship? Is it Jesus Christ, or is it the Roman emperor, or any other human being, or
human institution?” And, in my opinion, one of the things Revelation does is try to convince the readers, that only Jesus Christ is worthy of their worship, and their allegiance and devotion. No other human being, no other human institution or entity is worthy of worship. That is idolatry. John tells his readers it, so they can't have it both ways. So, Revelation is more of a wake-up call to Christians, to get them to understand what is going on in their first century context. They are in grave danger of compromising the exclusive worship, and allegiance, that God, in Jesus Christ alone, deserved and, that no other human being, human authority, or institution is worthy of. So, Revelation could be seen as answering the question, “Who is worthy of our worship?” The answer is: That Jesus Christ, and God alone, no other human being, or authority or institution, is worthy of our ultimate worship, and allegiance. To do such is idolatry.

One other thing, I’ve already said, Revelation is not primarily a prediction of the future, but needs to be seen more as an unmasking, or an unveiling of the true nature of Roman rule. What John is primarily doing in the book of Revelation, and this is important, he's is not just predicting the future, and telling us what's going to take place in the twentieth or twenty-first-century, or whatever, what John is primarily doing is trying to get his readers to see the true nature of Roman rule. He's trying to unmask the arrogance, and the pretension of the Roman Empire. In other words, John is basically functioning like an Old Testament prophet, he claims the authority of Old Testament prophets. If you go back, if you remember, go back your Old Testament survey course, if you remember some of the prophets, like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, and other Old Testament prophets, what they often had to do is unmask the true nature of human and worldly empires. Whether it was Babylon, Egypt, or Persia, the Old Testament over and over trying to show the true colors of, and expose the pretension, and the arrogance of human rulers in human empires, who would set themselves up as God, who would persecute God's people, who would arrogantly set themselves up as sovereign over all things. What John is doing, is not just predicting the future, he's doing the same thing his prophetic predecessors did.
Now, there is another empire that is emerging, like some of the empires of old, like Babylon, Persia, Egypt or other empires, and other ancient, and wicked, and evil cities. There is now another empire that is surfacing, that is also claiming sovereignty. It's claiming to take the place of God. It arrogantly has set itself up over the world. It is, basically John says, a bloodthirsty beast that’s out to get Christians, and is out to get wealth, no matter what the cost. So, what Revelation is primarily doing is exposing the pretension, the arrogance, the opulence, the wealth, the corrupt ideology of Roman rule and to get Christians to see it's true nature, so that they will not give in to it. Instead, they will be willing to resist, and live in obedience, and worship to Jesus Christ alone. In my opinion, that’s what Revelation is about, not just predicting the future. Yes, it does talk about the future, and we'll see why it does that, but it’s not the primary goal of the book of Revelation. It is for Christians living in the first century, confronted with this awesome empire that keeps growing. John now wants to expose the true nature of, to expose its pretension, its arrogance, as it sets itself up as God. The fact that it's bent on destruction of God's people, and stands for everything that is opposite of what God stands for. Both value, and ideology are anti-godly, and John now wants to expose that, so his Christian readers will not give in to it, but that will be able to resist it.

What kind of book is Revelation? As we said before, one of the challenges that we face, as twenty-first-century Christians is that we really have no close literary analogies to Revelation. Later on, I'll suggest one or two analogies that might be somewhat close, but we really don't have any close analogies. As I said, you read and write letters, you read and some of you write stories, and narratives, you read and some of you write poetry, but when’s the last time you read an apocalypse, besides the book of Revelation? Or, when’s the last time you wrote an apocalypse? You probably haven’t, and part of the problem is we really don't have a close literary analogy to compare Revelation to. What we need to do is try to figure out what kind of book is Revelation? What literary genre, or literary form does Revelation fit into that was probably familiar to the first century readers, that intuitively they may have picked up on, but we don't, because 2000 years
later we’re unfamiliar with this literary form. We’re not sure exactly how to read it, and what to do with it. What was John doing in recording these strange visions of animals with eyes all over them, or a beast with seven heads and seven horns, or locusts that had tails like scorpions and heads like human beings with the hair of a woman, and the teeth of a lion etc. What’s that all about? How do we approach that, and start to read that?

Actually, Revelation is a combination of at least three types of literary forms. The first one is what is known as an apocalypse. Actually the term apocalypse is our title that we use for it. John and first century readers did not necessarily have this idea in their head, and they said, “Oh yeah, John's writing an apocalypse to us.” That’s the term we've given it, but still, Revelation resembles a group of writings that existed from roughly 200 BC to 200 AD. A group of writings that we have labeled an apocalypse. What is it that “apocalypse” engenders various ideas in our minds today? Such an apocalypse usually evokes ideas of a cataclysmic end of the world, or movies that have apocalyptic scenarios of mass destruction, usually by means of nuclear weapons or some other kind of mass destruction, via a war or battle that resolves at the end of the movie. That’s often what we think about when we think about apocalyptic: some kind of destruction on a grand cosmic scale, a cosmic war, or conflict or battle, that the victor emerges as victorious at the end. But, in the first century, I'm convinced, that the writer of Revelation, and his readers, would have identified Revelation with a group of writings that basically is characterized as a work that reveals, or exposes, the true nature of what is going on in the situation of the readers. When the readers look out in their world, what they see empirically, what they see with their eyes, is simply what is going on around them. But, what Revelation, what an apocalypse does is to open that up. It opens up the world, and exposes the true nature of it, by demonstrating that there's more than meets the eye. Behind the empirical world that they see, that they can touch, feel, and see, behind that lies another reality. There is a heavenly world, and also a future, that, in some way determines what is going on in the present. So, an apocalypse, the word “apocalypse,” means “unveiling,” or “uncovering,” and that's what it does. An apocalypse unveils reality. It shows that what
you see physically, what the first-century readers whom John was addressing, what they saw when they looked out at the Roman Empire, what they saw empirically, felt, and touched, the world they lived in, was not all that there was. Behind that world, lies a supernatural heavenly world, and a future that should determine the way they look at, and interact with their present world.

Away to illustrate that, if you go to a play, and you sit in your seat, and you're watching a play, all you see is what's going on on the stage. You see the actors coming out, and playing their parts, and doing their speeches, and interacting. All you see is what goes on on the stage. What you don't see is what goes on behind the scenes. It is the director, manager, of the play, all the persons responsible for the props, and costumes, and the make-up and everything that makes the play run. You don't see that. It's all behind the curtain, behind the scenes. But, what Revelation does is lift that curtain so you can see there's more to reality than meets the eye. That, for the first-century readers, again, they look out and they see this awesome Roman Empire, growing and devouring territory, and providing all these benefits for the first-century people living in the first-century. That’s all they see. They see the world they live in, that they can touch, feel, and smell. But, what Revelation does is lift the curtain to the stage of history, so that they can see behind the scenes, that there's more than meets the eye. Behind first-century Roman rule, there is an entire heavenly world, and there's also a future. There's a whole different reality that is still real, but effects what happens in the first-century.

So, what Revelation does is give the readers a glimpse. First, it gives John a glimpse. He's the one who has the vision initially. John has a vision that gives him a glimpse, behind the scenes of history, into the heavenly world, into the transcendent reality, into the future, and that allows him to see the present, to see his own world, the first-century Roman world in Asia Minor, in a completely different light. And now, by recording this vision, this apocalypse, for his readers, now his readers can do the same. Now, they can see behind the scenes of history into this heavenly world, into this alternative world, this heavenly reality of the future to help them better understand, and
grasp what is going on in the present. So, hopefully now, they'll be able to respond to Roman rule. Now, they'll be able to live life in the first-century Roman Empire, in Asia Minor, in a completely different light. So, Revelation is an apocalypse, we mean it's an unveiling. It strips away the veil behind the scene of history, so that we can see the reality that lies behind it, the heavenly world and the future. The way John does it, is the other feature of an apocalypse by communicating through graphic symbols.

Symbols have a way of capturing the imagination of the readers. If John just sat down, and in a narrative or a prose paragraph described, here's what Rome’s really like, people may have understood that, but it would not be nearly so compelling as communicating this vision of a hideous seven headed beast, that was bloodthirsty and out to devour God's people. That’s far more compelling. That Revelation, as an apocalypse, is meant not just to affect the intellect, but to effect the imagination, to get them to respond emotionally, as much as intellectually. That’s what an apocalypse does; it's a kind of a graphic, a compelling, imaginative way of getting the readers to see the first-century world in a new light, through this vision of a heavenly world, and a future that lies behind, and beyond the first-century world they live in.

Second, Revelation is also a prophecy. By calling Revelation a prophecy we mean, not primarily that it predicts the future, but like the Old Testament prophets who critiqued the empires, and the ungodly systems of their day, but also who warned God's people about coming judgment. Revelation does the same thing. As a prophecy, it's primarily a prophetic word. It's a word of encouragement, and a warning to the people, like the Old Testament prophets, it exposes the true nature of the world. It exposes the bankruptcy of the evil world system. It exposes the pretension, and arrogance of any nation, or person, that sets itself up as God, and opposes God's kingdom, and his people, and, as a prophecy, Revelation does that.

Finally, Revelation is also a letter. As a letter, Revelation is communicating information that the first-century readers must have understood, and John must've intended. When you read Revelation carefully, and this is often frequently overlooked, it
begins and ends just like one of Paul's letters. It's even possible that due to Paul's authority, from other letters he wrote to churches in Asia Minor, it is possible that John may have deliberately followed the letter format, because of the significance of Paul's letters in that context. But whatever the case, John's book begins, and ends just like a first-century letter. So, notice verse 4 of chapter 1, “John, to the seven churches that are in Asia. Grace to you, and peace from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” John begins his book just like a letter and it ends like one as well. So, the significance of that, again, is that John is writing in the same way Paul wrote, to address a specific problem. John is doing the same thing. Again, this is not a prophecy for twentieth and twenty-first-century Christians, it's a book written primarily, first and foremost, for first-century Christians living in the context of imperial rule, and Roman rule. As a letter, just like Paul, it addresses different problems in his church. Now, John uses the form of a letter, he takes this vision writes it down, puts it down in the form of a letter, to address the specific needs of specific persons living in the first-century. So, that’s why I say one of the most important things with interpreting Revelation, is to do the same thing we do with Paul's letters, is try to reconstruct the background. What was going on? What was happening? What problem or issue was John most likely addressing? And, we've done that. We've looked at the situation of the churches in first-century Asia Minor, and the context of imperial Rome, the problem of emperor worship, the possible threat of persecution and compromise with Roman rule. We've looked at all that, as the context for understanding Revelation. And again, that is supported by understanding that Revelation is not only an apocalypse, and a prophecy, it's also a letter as well.

Now, what does this mean for interpreting Revelation? There are number of things we could say, but I just want to highlight five things. First of all, you’ll note, there are only four in your notes, but I want to add a fifth one. First of all is that given the kind of literature Revelation is, and the background that we've just talked about, Revelation should be interpreted symbolically, and not literally. I was raised in a church context that said unless there's really good reason to interpret it symbolically, you need to interpret
Revelation very literally. However, I'm convinced just the opposite is the case. Given the kind of literature Revelation is, remember it's an apocalypse, it communicates in symbolic language. Perhaps one of the reasons for the symbols is because it is describing a transcendent, heavenly reality, something that lies behind the empirical perception of the readers. That maybe the reason why John uses so much symbolism to communicate this vision of this transcendent heavenly reality, and the future that lies beyond the experience of his readers. So, he uses symbols to communicate that.

But, that means that when we interpret Revelation, we need to interpret it symbolically. We need to realize John is not describing his first-century world or the future in literal language. He’s describing it symbolically. So, when interpreting Revelation, we have to ask what the meanings of these symbols are? What do the symbols convey and communicate, not literally, but what's the symbolic value? The difficulty is trying to figure out what they refer to. We’ll look at some examples of where we can be sure, or little more sure of what they refer to, but, the first question we need to ask is what the symbols mean? What are they trying to convey? What is conveyed by this picture of a seven headed beast? Or what is conveyed by the picture of a locust with the tail the scorpion, the head of the human being, the teeth of a lion, etc.? What meanings does that the kind of image evoke? So, first, we need to understand Revelation is symbolic, and not literal.

Second, is any interpretation that John could not have intended, and his readers could not have understood, is probably suspect. Again, I think we often have this impression that when John wrote this book of Revelation his readers must've been completely baffled by what he wrote. But, now in the twentieth and twenty-first century, and longer, if Christ does not come back soon, all the sudden now we have the key, or we have more understanding as to what John is saying. It's as if, to repeat the language of one very popular treatment of Revelation, as a teacher one those persons obsessed with Revelation, to repeat his language, he said, “it's as if John was transported in time machine to the twenty-first-century, and he saw all these events, and then he goes back,
and he tries to describe them to his readers. But, again, if that's the case, Revelation must've been completely misunderstood at the very least, or worse, must've been completely out of range of what the readers could've understood in the first-century, if it was only about twentieth and twenty-first century events. But, I am convinced, again, that Revelation was, because it was in the form of a letter, Revelation was meant to communicate directly to the first-century readers. Revelation was communicating a message that they could understand. Revelation is communicating something that would meet the crisis, and their situation, of trying to live out life under Roman rule. Revelation has to communicate something to them. So, I am convinced any interpretation that John could not have understood, or intended, and his readers could not have understood must be suspect. Any interpretation must be something that resonates with the first-century context of the readers and the author.

Third, letter C in your notes, don't lose sight of the forest for the trees. In other words, don't get so obsessed with figuring out all the little details, and symbols, that you miss the main message, and the overall focus of the book of Revelation, and the various chapters, and the various parts of the vision. Again, sometimes we need to read Revelation more holistically, and let the entire vision impact us, and not get too obsessed with figuring out what every detail means, and refers to.

Fourth, don't miss the main purpose. Again, Revelation is not primarily about the future, it's not primarily a prediction of the future. It's an exhortation to God's people to live holy lives in the midst of the pagan empire. Finally, a good dose of humility is a prerequisite for reading the book of Revelation. There is no place in Revelation for arrogant and overly confident clinging to our interpretations of Revelation. Yes, I think the main message, and the main focus of the book is fairly clear, but when it comes to some of the details such as what view of the millennium you take from Revelation chapter twenty, we’ll talk about that passage later, when it comes that, we have to hold our interpretations with the fair degree of humility. Yes, we can be sure that Jesus Christ is going to return, and set up his kingdom and judge wickedness, and bring blessing, and
salvation to his people. We can be certain of that, and we cannot fudge on that. But, how that takes place, and all the details surrounding that, and how we understand various details in Revelation. Yes, we need to figure those out, and wrestle with those, and hold to our positions, but, do so with humility. When you look at church history, given the variety of ways Revelation has been treated, and some of the misunderstanding, I think that further points to the need for a fair degree of humility when we approach a book like Revelation.

Now, one last thing to talk to, before we end this class, one last thing to talk about or address is: How has Revelation been read throughout church history? Now, there are a number of things I could say about this. I want to focus on four broad approaches that mainly have to do with how we understand Revelation temporally, as far as when the events will, or have taken place. But, there are a number of ways to interpret Revelation. It's common to interpret Revelation from just a literary standpoint, to look at it as a literary work of art, its literary function, how the characters work, and not even be interested in whether these things are going to actually be fulfilled or not but just read it as literature. It's been common to read Revelation from different ideological perspectives, to see it as speaking to some of the struggles that African-Americans have had, or there’s one commentary that reads Revelation in light of the events of apartheid in South Africa, and there are feminist readings of Revelation, attempts to read Revelation as it relates to different issues, or different ideological issues and approaches. But, I want to focus on, more specifically, on four, when you think of how many evangelical Christians have wrestled with the book and what they've done with it, and how they read Revelation.

First of all, you’ll note in your notes under “pick an approach” the four main approaches are these: First of all is what is known as the Preterist approach to Revelation. The Preterist approach is an approach that says all of Revelation was basically fulfilled in the first-century. In other words, Revelation is simply a commentary on the first-century Christians, and the first-century churches in the Roman Empire. Some of them might say that Revelation, that the last two or three chapters of the millennium and the new heavens
and new earth, some would say that is future, but others would say, no that's still present. The vision of the millennium, and the new heavens and new earth it is just a kind of a highly symbolic way of describing the life of God's people, in the present. So, a Preterist approach would say most of, or virtually all of Revelation was fulfilled in the first-century period. Now like any other book of the Bible it can still be applied to us, but we don't need to see Revelation as a prophecy still remaining to be fulfilled. Basically, Revelation was just a commentary on events in the first-century and that's that. There’s no need to look any further beyond that.

Second is what is known as the historical view. The historical view of Revelation basically says Revelation is sort of a history written in advance. John was forecasting the entire history of the church. And so, what those that approach Revelation from an historical perspective thought you can read Revelation, and line Revelation up sequentially with various events throughout the history of the church, starting in the first-century into the third-century, then basically into the Reformation period, and then into the nineteenth and twentieth-century, and our present day. So, Revelation could be seen as kind of a forecast of, or again, church history written in advance. The problem with that approach is that as history continues to go on, that approach always has to get modified. So, it's no wonder that there aren't very many Christians that hold to the historical approach any longer, because again, it’s had to be modified so many times as history continues to move on, and other significant events occur.

A third approach is known as the idealist approach. The idealist approach to Revelation basically says Revelation is simply a symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil. It doesn't refer to any specific time. It is simply a general ideal, a symbolic portrayal. The symbols are transcendent, they transcend any specific historical situation. So they're just general ideal symbols, just a general picture, symbolic portrayal, of the battle between good and evil. Now that can have different applications. For John and his readers, it applied to the first-century, but it could apply to any century and any situation that fits. Because again, it’s just a kind of a general symbolic portrayal. For John it was
being acted out the first-century, but it will presumably continue to be acted out until
Christ comes back to establish the new heavens and earth, and to set up his kingdom. So,
that’s the idealist approach, kind of a general symbolic ideal portrayal of the battle
between God and evil.

The last approach is what is known as the futurist approach, and all of these
approaches have, so I don’t want to make it sound like these are monolithic, and that
everyone that falls in one these categories are identical, these have various permutations,
and some variety in them, and that's certainly true of the futurist approach. But, the
futurist approach as the name implies basically says Revelation is primarily a prediction
or prophecy of the future. In other words, the visions in Revelation have not been
fulfilled yet. They’re primarily predicting the events that will take place when Jesus
Christ comes back. So, if I can use the “already, but not yet” tension, again, the Preterist
approach would focus on the already, and say Revelation described what already took
place the first-century, the futurist approach would say no, Revelation is about the not
yet. Again, some futurists do think that some parts of Revelation were already being
fulfilled in the first-century, but they would say ultimately the visions of Revelation are
awaiting to be fulfilled in the future, when Jesus Christ comes back. But, there's a variety
of ways that they see that happening, but that's primarily what the futurist approach is.

Now, you may ask, well which approach is correct? Do we have to choose? Well,
I would suggest to you that maybe the best approach is a combination of two or three of
these, because what we've already seen that the Preterist approach does have some
validity in that John is primarily trying to unmask the true nature Roman rule, to get the
readers not to give into it. So there’s certainly is an element of John's book referring to
primarily the first-century, and I take it that that's what primarily is going on. But,
certainly Revelation does have a strong future element. Remember, it tries to make sense
of the present in light of the future. So, Revelation’s visions do frequently move you, and
push you to the future fulfillment, and the future wrap up of history, without telling you
exactly how things are going to take place. It simply, continually, opens up the present to
be understood in light of the future. So, John does talk about the future when Christ comes back, and sets up his kingdom, and the new heavens, and new earth, but that all ultimately is to help the readers make sense of the present.

There's also certainly truth in the idealist view, in that some of the symbols John uses already come to him with meaning. A lot of the symbols he uses already referred to different empires, and different persons, and different events in the Old Testament. So, John is using symbols that, in and of themselves, have the ability to transcend the first-century, that could find application in other times and places then just first-century Rome, and allow us to apply the book. So, in my opinion, probably a combination of two or three of those approaches does the most justice to the kind of literature Revelation is, and what kind of book John is writing.

Now, that's a good place to wrap this up. Next class period, I do want to discuss one possible literary analogy to Revelation that may help us understand it, and then we’ll launch into looking at several sections of Revelation in light of our discussion of the background, and the kind of literature, to see what difference that actually makes interpreting sections of the book of Revelation.