Revelation

Okay, your last New Testament class. No cheering please. I do need to let you out at a quarter till three, because I have a plane to Colorado to catch so about a quarter till so we’ll wrap up and what I want to do though is talk some about the book of Revelation briefly in regard to just two or three core passages, if you're interested. If this is not enough I am offering it in the May term. This technically is my last class, and I am offering a May term class and on interpreting the book of Revelation. So if you're interested.

But I want to just review briefly what we talked about in regard to what Revelation is doing, what it's about and then to illustrate that by looking at a handful of texts this Monday, in this classroom same time same place will be your exam number four. I will not be here. My former TA will be monitoring the exam during that time than you’re off until final exam. What time is the final? Wednesday 2:30 to 4:30. Wednesday of final exam week as you might check your schedule to be sure.

But alright let's open with prayer and then we’ll look at the book of Revelation for a few minutes. Father, thank you for bringing us at this point and sustaining us and giving us strength and energy. We pray that you will continue to sustain us as we face finals and final projects and begin to wrap things up. Lord we ask for your help and enablement to do that work. Now as we think about the book of Revelation that we’ll learn to think sensibly about it and understand how it continues to function as the authoritative, as your authoritative word to your people today. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

As I suggested to you the book of Revelation was primarily written to address Christians who were living in primarily in Western Asia minor or modern-day Turkey. The main problem that they faced was not particularly persecution, although some had been persecuted, one person had died because of his witness to Jesus Christ. The larger problem facing the church was not persecution but more accommodation to Roman Empire. That is
we, we looked briefly at the system of Emperor worship that permeated much of the Western cities of what's Western Asia Minor. Many of them would've had temples constructed in honor of the emperors and most of the pressure would've come at a local level. Remember we set up a little when we think about persecution and suffering in the first centuries was. So we shouldn't necessarily think of the Emperor himself sanctioning an official vendetta against Christians to drag them on the street, behead them and things like that. Although that did happen later and at times but most of the persecution and suffering was rather sporadic and local. It would have been local authorities who were keen to keep favor with Rome and to show honor, allegiance, and gratitude to Rome because of all they provided. That it is what John is addressing. The temptation of some Christians think that they could render allegiance to Jesus Christ yet still render allegiance to the Emperor sitting on the throne and to the Roman Empire as well for all that it had offered, and often it became an issue of worship and allegiance and exclusive loyalty who was the true God. Who was truly seated on the throne was it God himself or was it Caesar? Who should they render their loyalty to? So what Revelation primarily does then is Revelation is not so much a prediction of what's going to happen in the future, it's an attempt to prophetically expose the true nature of Rome. Again remember empirically as the people look out in the first century they see this grand empire that Caesar’s on the throne and it keeps growing and expanding. It offers peace and all kinds of benefits and wealth to those who come under its rule. But what John wants to do is expose its true colors. Remember Revelation as apocalyptic means it unveils, it it pulls back the curtain behind history to allow them to see the true nature of things.

So what Revelation does is the primary purpose of the book or one of the primary purposes is to expose the true nature of Roman rule. It's not the beneficence or the wonderful empire that it seems to be. Instead Revelation exposes the pretensions of Rome, it exposes Rome as arrogant and prideful. It exposes Rome as oppressive of the poor and murderous to God's people. It exposes Rome and has been accumulating importing especially where it portrays Rome as a bloodthirsty beasts that feast on Christians and
anyone else that resists. So what John is trying to do is the same thing the Old Testament prophets do. And that's why John often utilizes a lot of imagery and language from the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah because those prophets critique cities and empires in their day that were also anti-God and that were also arrogant, pretentious and proud and oppressed God's people and accumulated wealth etc.

Now John confronts a similar situation in the first century except this time it's not a historical Babylon or Egypt or some other city. Now it's the city of Rome. Revelation is trying to expose the true nature of Rome. So that Christians will not be tempted to give into it and so that those who are suffering will be encouraged to persevere. But because John does indeed show where history is headed, where it's going to end up. There is eschatology, and “not yet” in it, but it again it is written they can see their first century situation in a new light. They can see Rome for what it really is. And therefore to resist it and and not give in to at the Empire.

We said too that the closest modern day analogy that we might have to Revelation would be the political cartoon. I suggested to you that while, while political cartoon refers to actual events politically or historically or things are actually happening, it does not describe them scientifically or literally. It describes them in highly symbolic language to the point of the cartoon is not that you could go somewhere and find this actually happening. The point is what it says about an actual situation. That in the ridiculous rise of gas prices, the faltering economy it helps you see it in the new light. The author could have just given me a little paragraph and told me what he thought about the situation about the rising gas prices, but by using the vehicle of the political cartoon he's able to evoke your emotions and get you to respond and see the situation in new light.

In a sense Revelation is a long political cartoon in that it gets the readers to see Imperial Rome and their first century situation in a brand-new light. So Revelation is like a political cartoon. Revelation uses graphics, sometimes exaggerated symbolism, that's not to be taken literally although it does refer to actual events that are taking place in first century Rome, and will take place in the future.
It describes those events with highly symbolic language. Often coming right out of the Old Testament. But let's look at a number of texts in Revelation that perhaps illustrate how this works. The first one I want to look at is the plagues and Revelation. Revelation actually revolves around three sets of seven plagues: seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. As each of the seven seals are unsealed, as each of the seven trumpets are blown and as each of the seven bowls are poured out something happens. And when you add them all up, especially the trumpets and the bowls you find that what they share in common is in the trumpets and bowls you have water turning into the blood and you have people breaking out with sores on their bodies. You have darkness covering a third or half or more all of the time. When you get to the bowls the entire earth is dark with young locusts. Again those weird locust that had heads like human beings and long hair like a female and teeth like a lion and a tail like a scorpion. You are still clearly locusts then you have a reference to frogs. Now when you hear this one what does it evoke in your mind? Where you heard these things before? The Exodus, remember the plagues from the Exodus where the water turns the blood, the Egyptians break out in sores, darkness covers the land, there is a locust plague and the frogs plague comes out of the water.

So what John is doing but basically he’s simply modeling the judgment that he describes that's going to happen. He models it on the Exodus. It's as if John wants to say in the same way that God judges the evil empire Egypt so he will also judge Rome. I wonder if a lot of these plagues and revelation are meant to be an attack on Imperial Rome. Again just to show that God judged the wicked empire in the past in the Exodus, so God will judge empires that resist God and oppress his people and arrogantly set themselves up over God. God will judge them as well in the same way that he did in the Exodus. Now I take it that these plagues should be understood symbolically the problem is I'm not sure what they're symbolizing are they symbolizing actual physical occurrences or are they more spiritual plagues or perhaps a combination of the two is the best option. But again it doesn't seem that John is interested in telling you exactly what things are going to look like he's more interested that you recall Exodus the main point of the plagues that the sevens in the
seals, in the trumpets and in the bowls is not for you to figure out exactly how God's going
to judge, the main thing is that you will recall that just as God judged in the day of the
Exodus so he will judge Rome as well. The author does that over and over. He appeals back
to the Old Testament to show that in the same way God was at work with his people in the
Old Testament and the same way he judged evil empires in the Old Testament now he is
about to judge another evil Empire, and that is, Imperial Rome. So again the plagues are
built on are modeled after the Exodus and the point is not to figure out what each plague is
but to catch that the main point is to demonstrate that God is going to judge in the same way
he had in the Exodus.

Another significant portion of Revelation is the numbers. I’m going to skip a couple
sections in your notes for time sake. But let me just say something briefly about the
numbers. I have given you a series of numbers in your notes and I don't intend to talk about
all of them individually, but the number, 3 1/2 years, the number 666, the number 12, the
number thousand, and the number 10, the number four and number seven all those numbers
are significant in Revelation but again in my opinion they all must be understood
symbolically. That the main importance of the number is not their mathematical value,
but the main significance is their symbolic value. So for example a very easy one is why
would John have seven plagues. One wonders before their seven seals, seven trumpets,
and seven bowls, why the number seven? Is it because if you sat there the calculator you
could total up seven exact plagues? Why would he use the number seven? The earth was
created in seven days which may be modeled in that idea was that in the number seven
suggests completeness or perfection. By going back to that probably reflected in the seven
days of creation. So this is starting with the 7 days of creation in the number seven takes on
a significant symbolic significance of perfection or completeness. So when you read about
seven plagues or seven seals the point is not that there'll be seven actual ones that follow
each other. The point is seven signifies completion or perfection. The complete number of
judgment or the perfected completed judgment of God upon his enemies in behalf of his
people.
The number 12 probably goes back to the 12 tribes of Israel wherever you see 12 or its multiples in Revelation like 144 is 12x12. The significance of that is 12 goes back to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. 12 is symbolic of the people of God.

666 I always tell the story when I love anyone goes the Soul Fest that some of you been the Soul Fest in New Hampshire and I encourage you to go there. It's been advertised around Gordon. But we had something similar when I lived in Minnesota called “Spirit Fest” is a similar thing, a Christian band of arts Festival and we had a little tag on our arms and I got my tag that and the last three numbers on my tag were 666. Of course, I kept it on. I wasn't about to take it off. But as some people would've been surprised that I would do that but perhaps they never asked questions that I wonder if that's only because the person before me got 665, and the person after me got 667. So it was just a coincidental thing. But often we take that number 666 and we make a big deal out of those actual numbers.

But again when you think about it, there's a number of ways to consider 666. 666 would correspond to one short of the of the number 777. The number 666 probably also had reference to the name “Nero” who was a Roman Emperor several years before Revelation was written who was known for being a particularly awful Emperor in the way he treated Christians. So maybe John wanted them to recall Nero and how he treated people and that is the true spirit and that the true color of Roman rule. So the point of 666 is not anywhere we find those literal numbers or barcodes or on credit cards or licenses, or phone numbers… that’s not the point. That’s just coincidental. What is significant about that number is what it symbolizes. It symbolizes Satanic opposition to God's people. It symbolizes the first century readers that Rome is in opposition to God and his people, and that which stood for a pretentious arrogant display of human power in the first century. And 666 signifies probably again as embodied in Nero.

So in my opinion all the numbers and Revelation are not to be added up or calculated to come up with the dates or times or specific numbers but instead they are important for their symbolic value.

Another text is Revelation chapter 12 to 13. Revelation 12-13 is a story of a Dragon
who attempts to devour a child who's about to be born but he does not succeed. Then the
Dragon goes and calls to friends to help, two beasts: a beast from the land, and a beast from
the sea. Their main task is to seduce the world to worship them but also to oppress anybody
that refuses, especially Christians who obey God's word and keep the testimony of Jesus
Christ.

Is it okay thinking in terms of the first century that the Dragon in chapter 12 is easy
to figure out because John comes out and tells us it's the serpent of old. It's Satan from
Genesis chapters one, two and three. So John tells us who the Dragon is. But then the
Dragon goes and calls on his cohorts the two beasts. The beast from the sea and a beast
from the land to help him. Again the two had the job to basically get everyone to worship
them and worship the Dragon and to persecute anyone who refuses to comply. Now
thinking in terms of the first readers who would they most likely have identified with these
beasts. What would be your guess? Given that situation John's addressing if you were a
first century Christian living in the Roman Empire and you read this chapter and you read
the story of these beasts, who are out to get God's people and who are trying to to set
themselves up as sovereign over all the earth and to enforce worship who would you
identify those with? Probably the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor. I'm convinced
that when John's readers first read that that's who they would be identified with. So I again
you see what John is doing he's exposing the nature Rome when they empirically look on
the stage of history they see this grand empire that is growing and increasing and offers
peace as well as benefits and protection to anyone that submits to it. It's glamorous and
attractive. Yet John exposes in this apocalyptic critique of Rome exposing them for who
they really are. He's telling the Christians behind that Rome is actually terrifying
bloodthirsty beast that is actually in the service of the Dragon Satan who is the true person
behind the attempts to attack Christians.

So what John is trying to do in chapters 12 and 13 is show Christians and this is
important, the true nature of their conflict. Again, their real struggle is not just with Rome
that it's ultimately the Dragon Satan that lies behind these attempts to exterminate God's
people. As the pressure builds and as things heat up in the relationship to Rome they can understand the true force behind the the temptation to compromise or any persecution the true force behind that is the Dragon himself, that age-old serpent from Genesis who is out to get God's people. So it's meant to help Christians understand and cope with their own situation to get them to see the true nature of their struggle that's the primary message of Revelation 12 and 13. Here's what's up. The true nature of what you face as you face persecution or temptations to compromise let me lift the curtain and show you behind-the-scenes of history of the true nature of the struggle. Chapter 12 and 13 is the symbolic portrayal of what Paul said in Ephesians, “Your battle is not with flesh and blood” that is for Revelation not just with the Roman Emperor and Roman authorities but instead it is with the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm. And that is what John intended to do is to expose the true nature of their conflict and the true nature of Roman imperial rule.

Now to do that John is doing something very interesting. If you recall back to the book of Genesis after Adam and Eve sinned God issues a curse on humanity but also on Satan himself and remember he tells Satan that you will eat from the dust of the ground and crawl on the ground on your belly. And he also tells him that you will be in conflict with the woman, and you will bruise the woman, he says, you will be in conflict, your seed and her seed that is that the serpent Satan's offspring and the woman's offspring will be in conflict. Then he says, and Satan's seed will bruise his heel but the woman's seed will crush your head and actually destroy you. That's all the way back in Genesis chapter 3 now notice when you get to Genesis 12 and 13 first of all John identifies the serpent John identifies Satan as the serpent in chapter 12, 3 and 9 and even calls him “the serpent of old.” This is Satan, this serpent that seduced and tempted Adam and Eve to sin. Now John says the Dragon in Revelation 12 is nothing less than the same serpent rearing his ugly head again.

The woman and the seed, notice how many times in Revelation these are referred to. Notice how many times there are references to the woman and her offspring in Revelation chapter 12. The people of God are portrayed as a woman and her offspring. Which again
goes back to Genesis chapter 3 verses 14 through 16. The fact that part of the curse back in
Genesis 3 is that the woman would have pain in childbirth. Here in Revelation chapter 13
the woman who symbolizes the people of God is portrayed as being in having birth pangs
or being in pain as she is about to give birth. She gives birth to a son which is clearly a
reference to Jesus Christ. He will crush the serpent’s head. Interestingly again remember
part of the promise, promised in Genesis 3 is that one of the woman's offspring will crush
the serpent’s head. In Revelation chapter 13 one of the beast appears as if his head was
crushed or slain.

And other one is the reference to his son Jesus Christ. The woman in this chapter 12
gives birth to a son, her first offspring, which is clearly a reference to Christ. But you see
what's going on all these references to me suggests that John has in mind Genesis chapter 3
and ended with the reference to the curse, where again God told the serpent that you and the
woman will be in conflict and enmity between you and her. There'll be enmity between
your seed offspring and her offspring and her offspring will crush your head even though
you bruise her offspring’s heel, her offspring will actually crush your head. She will have
pain in childbirth. All those elements occur in Revelation chapters 12 and 13. So what
John doing? Basically he's telling his readers let what you face as you struggle with Roman
rule what you're actually going through is nothing less than this age-old conflict that goes
all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. So again you shouldn't be surprised by or be
shocked. Now they can see it in a new light. What they face in trying to deal with Imperial
Rome is just Genesis chapter 3 resurfacing again. It is just part of that age-old conflict that
goes back to creation and now it's resurfacing in the Christians conflict with Rome. So it’s
just another way of helping the Christians see their conflict with Rome in a new light to
help them deal with it and to resist Rome, to maintain their witness to Jesus Christ, to
understand the true nature of the conflict, that it is just the part of the age-old conflict that
goes all the way back to the beginning of creation. So I think John intentionally had
Genesis chapter 3 verses 14 through 16 in mind as he composes it to help his readers cope
with Imperial Rome.
One other Section I will look at briefly is the very last two chapters of Revelation chapter 21 and 22, where the author compares and contrasts a bride or new Jerusalem. That was common in the Old Testament very frequently Jerusalem and its people were compared to God’s bride. Now John uses that imagery again referring to a new Jerusalem. So that bride new Jerusalem is contrasted with the prostitute Babylon, and again John uses imagery right out of the Old Testament. Once again stop and think with me what if you were a first century reader reading Revelation what are you going to identify Babylon with. Babylon was a historical city in the Old Testament a city that captured God's people, you can read about it in the book of Daniel. But again if you're a first century reader hearing the book rather listening to or reading Revelation, what most likely are you going to identify Babylon with? Probably Rome. And again do you see what God is doing in the same way. God judged evil empires in the past like Babylon and Egypt etc. So God will judge Rome as well, and indeed he did a couple 300 years after this book was written. And God did bring Rome to its end. But the point is if Rome is going to be destroyed and John does not want his readers to have any part of it, not that they can't live in it physically, but he does not want them to buy into their arrogance, their wealth, their anti-God way of thinking. Then they must have a city they must have similar to, belong to it if they are not part of Babylon, they must have somewhere to go. And so the book ends with a bride new Jerusalem for those who are faithful, for John's readers, and I would say for Christians today who faithfully believe and resist the temptation to give it into Roman Imperial rule. All its blessings, its arrogance, its pride and its pretentious display of its of sovereign power. If they give up that and refuse and resist then John says you have somewhere to go and you have someone to belong to. And that is the bride--the new Jerusalem.

Now let me say just a couple of things about this text. I wish I had more time to talk about it but let me emphasize two things number 1. the new Jerusalem imagery in chapter 21 and 22 I think is symbolic of the people themselves. In other words, I don't think John is particularly describing a literal city. Not that there won't be one or several in the new creation, but primarily what John is describing when he describes the new Jerusalem he is
describing the people themselves--the perfected people of God in the new creation. That is very important John is not describing an actual literal city. I've seen some people try to draw it as if John's giving you an architectural depiction of what it's going to look like--her blueprints. That's not what he's doing. John's not describing some literal city, he's describing the people themselves. When you read chapter 21 and 22 all the measurements of the city noticed are all multiples of 12, the number of the of the people of God. So what the new Jerusalem symbolizes is the perfected people of God in the new creation in God's presence.

The second important thing about the new Jerusalem vision is that it portrays our final destiny as a very physical earthly one. Again we talked about this before but the final destiny of God's people is not some disembodied gnostic type existence. Revelation ends with God's land and his people on a new earth in a sense heaven and earth become one in Revelation 21 and 22. And God's people live out the rest of their eternity in their existence in a new creation. Not floating around in clouds with white robes and things like that. But instead they live out their eternity in a very earthly physical existence because that's what God has created us for. However different it may be from this earth, it certainly is going to be similar in many ways. There is both continuity and discontinuity. But again that's what God created us for. Think about it, to me that's a future hope worth sacrificing for. Think about what you enjoy what you love about this creation in this earth in your life, and think about what it would be like stripped of all the effects of sin, and all the sadness, and all the sickness, and all the disappointment, and all the pain, and all the war. Everything that makes this life miserable and plagues of this life in the midst of all the good things and the beauty will be completely stripped of sin. That to me is worth sacrificing Babylon in the present for something in the future. I don't know that it is really worth sacrificing it if all I’m going to do is float around as some disembodied spirit. But the fact that God is going to re-create all things and the destiny that he has in store for God's people is a very physical earthly one, that to me is worth sacrificing for in the present. Because that's the intended goal from Genesis chapter 1 and 2. Since the sin of humanity the goal of God's primary
intention has been to restore humanity to live on the earth with God dwelling in their midst, and that's exactly what you find in Revelation 21 and 22. It even uses Garden of Eden imagery. Read chapter 22 and of the first five verses it refers back to the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, and a reference of the River of life to which are reflected in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 in the description of the garden.

One last thing: the message of Revelation, Revelation is more than just about end times and eschatology, instead Revelation is a call for God's people to worship God and the lamb no matter what the cost. It's a call for first century Christians, it was a call to expose Rome for what it truly was to resist Rome. To us it's a call to expose and resist the same anti-godly pretentious, arrogant, boasting in one's sovereign rule. The same that was present in Rome. God calls us to resist that today wherever it may be found including in the United States of America. But Revelation is a call to worship God and the Lamb and no other human being or object no matter what the cost. Second, Revelation is also a call to endure. God will vindicate his suffering people.

Good that's all I wanted to say about Revelation. Any questions quickly? Before I head off to be inaugurated in the new creation of Colorado. I can't promise you that but I'm trying to get a review session for the final. Hopefully you'll know by Monday. If so it'll probably be next Wednesday or Thursday. Again I don't want to promise you I'm working on it. So hopefully with that there will be a study guide up after your exam next week. I will get a study guide up for you to look at after the final. If you didn't get the test you can e-mail me as I will not be in my office all next week, but if you e-mail me, I'll be glad to attach copies of your old exams. Make sure when you take exam number four on Monday you're welcome to keep the copy to study for the final.