

The Bible (Unmuted) Transcript
Episode 5
Revelation: The Mistakes We Make, Part 1
March 13, 2023

Teacher: Matthew Halsted

Episode Summary:

In this episode, Matthew talks about one of the most common mistakes people make when they read Revelation. Many people have been taught that Revelation is a play-by-play of future, eschatological events. A lot of people assume that this last book of the New Testament lays out a blueprint for the end times. Is this true? In this episode, Matthew tackles these and other questions. He helps readers see the importance of becoming familiar with Revelation's historical context. He offers an example from Revelation 17 on how knowing historical/cultural context can shed much-needed light on an otherwise enigmatic passage.

If you like this podcast, consider subscribing and sharing with your friends.

+ + +

If you like this podcast, consider becoming a Patreon supporter. You can do so by visiting: <https://www.patreon.com/TheBibleUnmuted>

Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and share it with others!
www.matthewhalsted.com

Transcript:

0:00 Hey everybody! Welcome to the podcast! My name is Matthew Halsted. Thank you for tuning in. This podcast is all about engaging the bible. While every episode is different, the goal is always the same: learn more about scripture and how to interpret it. So sit back, grab your favorite beverage, and enjoy the show.

0:30 Hey everybody. Welcome to another episode of the Bible Unmuted. As of this recording it is the middle of March, and for me that means that we are in the middle of the spring semester. Which in turn, means that I am in the middle of teaching Revelation at my school, Eternity Bible College and so needless to say that Revelation is on my mind. So I thought it would be kind of fun to do an episode on that fascinating part of the New Testament. And this will be a two part series, so this will be part one of a short series on Revelation. So you'll definitely want to listen to the follow up episode which will be dropping in a week or two. As I said in the very first episode, my goal is always to be focused on delivering good content and connecting you with good resource so that you can have all the tools that you need to interpret scripture. And to interpret it well. So part of that is to include interviews with scholars and experts on various topics and scholars on various topics. So I am excited to announce that I have a great, super cool interview coming up with a New Testament scholar about his latest book on Revelation. I can't wait for that episode to drop. It's going to be so much fun. So definitely be on the lookout for that. You'll definitely want to tune in when that comes out.

Let's get to our topic today. I'm calling this short two part series, Revelation: The Mistakes We Make.

2:15 When it comes to reading Revelation there are all sorts of common mistakes that people make. And, admittedly I'm as guilty as anybody. I remember in my younger years I would make it a habit of reading the bible, and I remember listening to bible teachers and preachers preach and teach on Revelation as well as other eschatological texts of scripture. It was very interesting to me. And a lot of the time, I

remember, well looking back – hindsight is always 20/20. I remember that time and as I look back on it, I think to myself, “My goodness, I was so confused.” I was not reaching the proper exegetical conclusions that I should have been reaching. Back then, I was grasping blindly even, for understanding. And, I really don’t recall having much interpretive guidance. By that I mean, I was never taught certain concepts and principals that would help me wade through the passages that I was reading. At least not formed concepts and principals. All that I did know and all that I had been taught, was that a book like Revelation was a play by play account of how things were going to happen in the very near future. I mean, I thought Revelation was some sort of cosmic calendar. Some sort of eschatological blue print for how things were going to transpire right down to the details even. And that was my most basic assumption. And so growing up, little did I know that that assumption was a big source of my own misunderstanding of the primary message and the content of Revelation itself.

So, I suspect that many of you have had the same experience. You cut your own theological teeth by biting down on the idea that Revelation was a play by play account of the end times. You were taught that Revelation was all about the future. Perhaps you were told that some of Revelation’s prophecies were already coming true. With every news story that broke, with every political storm in the Middle East that was brewing, with every blood moon, you were told that those were specific signs of the times. The prophecy books, the documentaries, the sermons, the conferences, they all set the end mistaken narrative that yes indeed, the end was neigh. That you were living in the final generation. That was the message. And so churches were busy getting rapture ready. They were rapture ready so they could escape the coming tribulation, and the coming of the anti-Christ who, by the way, was already on the scene albeit cryptically so and hidden. And a lot of Christians back then, and perhaps you were one of them, they lived in a lot of fear, fear about accidentally receiving the beast. Or, what if you found 666 on your credit card? Or tattoos and microchips and computer processors. Were all of those preludes for the coming mark of the beast? And perhaps you were taught to live very cautiously in this respect. To always be on the lookout. Who would want to accidentally condemn themselves for all eternity? Nobody would want to do that, so you had to be cautious.

But then perhaps you came to a realization. You realized that preachers have been saying these sorts of things for decades and even for several generations. And yet, the end never came. The 1970’s, the 1980’s, they saw a lot of end times speculations. And many sincere Christians, the same ones who thought they would be alive when Jesus returned, many of them have since then fulfilled their days on the earth, they have passed away without ever seeing the return of Jesus – even though some of them were so certain that Jesus would return in their lifetime. And because of this, many have had to revise their speculations and their prophecies. They’ve said to themselves, “Ah, well perhaps we were wrong thinking Jesus would return in the 1980’s, but he most certainly is coming back this decade.” And so the speculation continues, right? But others, however, sadly begin to question their faith. And because they confuse their interpretation of scripture with scripture itself, they begin to question the truth of the bible.

And today, one thing that I’ve noticed is that the same speculation continues. The same sort of eschatological fervor – it’s still around, just in different forms, perhaps. And I suspect, like in previous decades, that fresh wind of eschatological expectation will again lead to anxiety and sadly, it will lead to burn out. And so I ask myself, perhaps is it the case, that there is a need to adopt good hermeneutical interpretive principals? Is that necessary? And the answer, of course, is yes. We need that now more just as ever before. So when it comes to reading Revelation, what sort of things can we do to help us rightly interpret it? Are there helpful tips to keep in mind? And again, the answer is absolutely yes. There are great helpful tips that we need to pay attention to and keep in mind. There are several things in fact that we can do to help us rightly interpret this enigmatic book.

- 7:53 The first thing to keep in mind is that Revelation is not a book. I know that might sound odd, but it’s actually quite true. In the very first chapter of Revelation that the author, John, addresses Revelation to the seven churches of Asia. And so, again, Revelation is not a book. It’s actually a letter. It was written to churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. And in many

ways, it's just like any other New Testament letter. It's similar to Romans in that sense, at least. It's very similar to Ephesians, which you know was a letter written to the church at Ephesus. Revelation as a letter, is like these other letters. In fact, I sometimes tell people that it's so important to get rid of the idea the Revelation is a book that perhaps we need to come up with a new name for it. So instead of calling it Revelation, ummm....perhaps we should call it 2 Ephesians. Or maybe better, we should call it something like The Letter to the Seven Churches. Or, the Letter to Asia Minor. Laughs...I know that sounds silly to our ears, but I think there may be some truth to that. Maybe we should come up with a new name. I don't know...I say that half-jokingly, but there is a big part of me that is very serious here. So, let's ask a question. Why is it important to think of Revelation as a letter and not a book? Does this even matter? Does it help us to interpret Revelation better once we realize it's a letter? The answer to that question is yes, absolutely. It's important...all I'm saying is that it's important because when we call Revelation a book, a whole host of modern assumptions could begin to flood our minds and cover up the true nature of what Revelation is all about.

So, if we call Revelation a book, we might get the wrong impression that John is writing a systematic theology on the end times for a general audience. But in reality, John is doing no such thing. He's writing a letter to a specific audience; namely for first century Christians living in the Roman province of Asia. And that's why John, the writer, uses ancient first century language and ancient first century terms, with which they – ancient first century people – would be very familiar. And if John was writing a play by play account of the future end times, and if he were writing a modern world, a 21st century world, then of course he would have used modern language and terms. But that would not have made sense to his original first century audience, would it? No, it wouldn't. Not at all. They would have in no way understand what he was saying. But in fact, that was never John's intention. He was never writing to modern churches. He was writing to first century churches. A first century audience. And so that's why he uses ancient language, ancient symbols, ancient terms and phrases and so forth. I mean, the reason is obvious – Revelation is a letter to the first century.

11:05 Every letter is by definition situational. In other words, every letter assumes some pre-understanding, some wider context on the side of the letter's writer and the letter's original readers, its recipients. And the moment we realize that Revelation is a letter is the moment we realize that Revelation is situational by definition. So this means that we, modern 21st century interpreters, that means that we have some homework to do. As modern people living in the 21st century, we really need to become familiar with ancient customs, ancient symbols – we need to become very familiar with ancient beliefs; we need to learn about ancient religion. We need ancient Roman politics and so forth. Because doing so, will help us build an interpretive structure on which we can hang our interpretations of Revelation. Let me put it in different words. We need to dig into the ancient context of Revelation so that we can understand the ancient text of Revelation. And the first step in that process is coming to realize that this is a letter. And, I think in doing so we haven't added benefit here. By realizing that Revelation is a letter written to the first century churches of Asia, we realize something very humbling. We realize Revelation is not all about us. And I think this is something we all need to consider.

Some approaches to Revelation can sadly be described as “me” centered. And I certainly don't say that to be dismissive, but it's actually true. A lot of interpretations of Revelation are very self-serving. But by realizing that Revelation was written to the first century churches, it takes us out of the driver's seat – and I actually think that's a good thing. Because if we get out of the driver's seat, we can better observe the scenery, and hopefully find some gold along the road to take home. And I think that's important because...I'm not at all trying to suggest that Revelation cannot speak to the issues of our day – it certainly does have a message, I think, for the 21st century. It has a message for our world. The letter of Revelation might not have been written to us, but it most certainly was written for us. It was written for everyone, for that matter.

And even in the personalized sections of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, where John sends very individualized messages for the churches; in that section there is constant refrain, a reoccurring phrase

that we see in those chapters. And that phrase is, “whoever has ears, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.” I’m sure you are very familiar with that phrase. That means that Revelation is a letter that invites us to eavesdrop. It invites us to listen in. But here’s the thing, our eavesdropping can only be done if we realize first that we are doing just that. That we are eavesdropping on someone else’s conversation. And once we realize that, then and only then can we apply the truths and principals of Revelation to our modern world. We’ve got to get to know the people of Revelation. And that starts by diving deep into the original context, the original situation, the background and so forth. Let me put it like this, we need to get to know the people of Revelation so that we can better apply the principals of Revelation. And maybe you could put it like this, if you want to know the message of Revelation you’ve got to know the context of Revelation. If you want to know the content of Revelation, you’ve got to know the context of it. This is just hermeneutics 101. We’ve got to dive deep into that stuff.

15:01 I thought it would be helpful if I gave an example of how this all works. So let’s dive into Revelation 17. If you start reading that chapter, you will probably come to a section there, some questions in that section, on the surface at least might seem rather confusing. And it might be very confusing in fact. So let me read from Revelation 17:1-10 and then I’ll skip down to 18 at the last verse. It’s not too long... just stick with me. It’ll be good. This comes from the English Standard Version. Revelation 17, verse 1:

1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” 3 And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. 5 And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” 6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

Okay, so let me just stop here. So, he see this vision and this woman was had a marking on her head, or some writing on her head that said Babylon the great. So what’s up with Babylon? What’s up with that term? And the beast that she’s sitting on, has blasphemous names on it. And it has seven heads and ten horns. What’s up with that? What do those mean? Well, let’s read on, looks like verse 6 and 7

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. 7 But the angel said to me, “Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. (MH: and so here John is going to give an interpretation, which is super helpful here.) 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. 9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while.

18 And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

Okay, that’s an interesting passage and we are not going to dive into all the interpretive issue here, but I just want to bring our attention to this beast with seven heads and the woman riding upon it, and this term Babylon that’s associated with her. So even though John here offers readers and interpretation of those things, even the interpretation itself can appear quite confusing. The seven heads represent seven mountains and they represent seven kings. Well, okay but what does *that* mean? The interpretation itself

that's offered causes questions to rise in our head. What does the vision represent? Who or what does the beast and the prostitute symbolize? That's the question.

We could speculate a lot about this, but do we need to? Perhaps not, at least not that much. We would probably have to speculate a lot if we didn't know some of the cultural and religious background of this context. But since we've determined that Revelation is a letter and therefore situational, we know that we need to get to know this background context so that we can understand what is going on in this text. It's all situational, remember – because it's a letter. And because it's situational, we know we've got to dive in and do some homework and do some historical research.

19:45 So let's pretend that we do. Let's pretend that we dive into the historical research and the data of that era. What do we find? Lo and behold, we discover that the seven churches were located in the province of Asia. And that's easy to do, right? Because we just pay attention to Revelation – the very beginning of the letter itself, it tells us this much. It tells us that it's being sent to seven churches of Asia. And we could just grab a map and look at ancient sites and so forth and confirm that quite easily. So looking at our ancient map, we discover this was an official province of the Roman Empire. So then we decide that we need to do some research on the Roman Empire. So, we read all we can about the Roman Empire – we read about Rome's political and cultural practices. And about their beliefs and assumptions. And so along the way as we are doing our research, we come across ancient history books and so forth. We come across Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, which is a collection of little biographies that he did on first century Roman emperors. And we are reading through his biographies of the Caesars, we of course come across his essay or biography of Domitian who was most likely the ruling emperor when Revelation was written in the AD 90's. And in that section on Domitian, we learn from Suetonius that there was something called the Festival of Septimontium, or the Festival of the Seven Hills. And we do a little more research on this and we learn that this was a Roman holiday which was celebrated with feasting and partying. And in fact, we also learn that the city of Rome was also known as the City on Seven Hills. And immediately this strikes a chord, because we just read a text in Revelation about a beast with seven heads that represent seven hills or mountains. So all of this is kind of coming together for us and all we are doing is reading Suetonius and a few other things. Which is pretty cool. So Rome is known, we find out, as the City on Seven Hills. And by modern analogy, this is a lot like how New York City is known as The Big Apple. So if I say The Big Apple, most everyone today would know that I'm talking about New York City. It's sort of a cultural nickname, if you will

So let's get back to Revelation 17. Clearly, given the historical data – the research that we've conducted – clearly, we've determined that John is talking about the city of Rome, specifically the first century city of Rome. That's what the data suggests. It's a reasonable conclusion. John says the beast's seven heads represent seven hills or seven mountains. And he says they also represent seven kings. So what do we do with that part? Well, I guess it would make sense, right? The city of Rome was known not only as the City of Seven Hills, but it was also known as the capital of the empire which is where the Roman rulers lived. Where the emperors lived. So I guess it would make sense why John would interpret the beast's heads as both a city and as rulers of that city.

Then we come to this interesting bit here about the prostitute being called Babylon. John also says that she's identified as a city. That's important. Doing some background homework, we find out that Babylon was another nickname for Rome because much like Rome, the Babylonian Empire also destroyed Jerusalem and her temple. So basically we find out that early Jews and Christians gave Rome this nickname of Babylon because Rome was repeating what the Babylonian Empire had done before. There's other reasons perhaps why early Christians and Jews gave Rome the nickname Babylon, but this is perhaps the biggest reason; because Rome destroyed Jerusalem and took over the temple and so forth.

So all of that makes sense. So, in light of all of this historical data that we've got, we don't have to speculate. We are not left guessing because the historical background context helps us interpret the text.

Imagine with me for a moment. Imagine if you did not know any of this background? What would you be left with? Well, you'd be left to speculate. But speculation is not necessary, when you have historical data to work with. But you don't have historical data to work with if you don't do historical research. So that is very important.

So let me just stop here for a moment and say, when you read books on Revelation, before you purchase the book, do a quick investigating of the book. Did the author of the book do research into the first century context? Or into the political context? Because if John is referencing political figures in Revelation 17, and Revelation 13 by the way, and throughout even, you have to ask yourself, why is he doing that? Why is he getting into this kind of stuff? Well, there are reasons for that. And so we won't get into all that today. But the point is, before you buy that book on Revelation, make sure that the author has done homework. Are they even looking into the first century context, cultural context, religious, political? I've seen a lot of books on Revelation and end times books that never even broach the subject. And I think that does a big disservice to readers because we need to be providing that historical context so that we can understand the historical text of Revelation.

25:40 So, I guess what I'm doing here is offering a very brief example as to how that historical background data can help us build that interpretive structure I was talking about. So that interpretive structure is important because we can hang our interpretations on it. And if we don't have an interpretive structure, then our interpretations won't ever gain that stability they need. Our interpretation would just fall to the ground. So we want to have a good historical context to build a good interpretive structure upon which we can hang our interpretations.

When it comes to reading Revelation, this is one mistake we make. We don't realize that knowing the historical context is actually important. But it is important. Why should we treat a letter such as Revelation as if it's a book that fell from the sky in printed form? I mean, that's sometimes how we read Revelation, right? That wouldn't make any sense though. We should just treat Revelation exactly for what it is. It's a letter by a person ministering in the first century who was given a message to share with first century churches. So we need to start there. And I think that alone is reason enough to do research on the first century. Think about it, if you have first century letter, written by a first century person, to first century people, don't you think doing research on the first century is important? Of course it is. Isn't it important to maybe research some events and maybe happenings going on in first century? Of course you should. That's very important. And shouldn't you do some historical research on the province in which these churches were living? Yeah, absolutely. You have to know Asia Minor stuff. You have to know what was going on in the province of Asia in the first century.

The next time you sit down to read Revelation, remember that you are sitting down to read another person's letter. Remember that you are eavesdropping. And you can't possibly understand the letter, without understanding the situation that gave rise to the letter. Ask yourself, why is John writing this letter? What is going on in these churches? What is going on historically in Asia that would necessitate John to write this letter? Why would Jesus want these churches to hear the things they are hearing from him. What's the point? What's the motive, what's the context, what's the situation? Well, here's the thing. You can't understand the situation that gave rise to writing the letter without researching on the historical context of those situations. You've got to do some historical research. You've got to find some resources that offer you that historical data. Again, it's just difficult to it otherwise. Let me say it again, if you want to understand the content of Revelation, you have to understand the context of Revelation. And that context means historical context, it means cultural context, it means religious context. Religious context, my goodness, we need to know about the Imperial Cult. The Imperial Cult is of course that phenomenon that was going on in the first century. It was going on especially in places like Asia where the worship of Caesar was being promoted. Caesar had temples built to his and his family's honor. And they had priests associated with these temples and people were sometimes forced to worship. And there was definitely social and cultural pressure for people to worship Caesar. Shouldn't that be important data that we bring to the table? Of course it should. So we've got to know the context.

So in the next episode, in part two of this little series, I'm going to discuss two other mistakes that we often make when reading Revelation. Let me give you a little teaser, if you will. Revelation calls itself an apocalypse. Well what in the world does that word mean? Does it mean end of the world? Or does it mean something else? Revelation also describes itself as a prophecy. Does this mean that Revelation is all about the future? Isn't that what prophecy is about – you know, making claims about the future? Well, I'm going to address these and other questions in part two. Be sure to tune into that episode. You won't want to miss it.

30:10 That's the end of today's episode. And thanks again for listening to The Bible Unmuted. If you like this podcast, consider rating it on your podcast platform, subscribing to it, and sharing with your friends. You can also support the podcast by becoming a patreon member. Go to: <https://www.patreon.com/TheBibleUnmuted> - or simply find the link in the description of this episode. Thanks for listening. Until next time, friends.