

Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 23: Apocalyptic and Resistance

Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rfst-152/lecture-23>

Overview

The Apocalypse, or the Revelation of John, shares many of the traits found in apocalyptic literature: it operates in dualisms—earthly events contrasted with heavenly ones, present time with the imminent future, and it calls for cultural and political resistance. Its structure is like a spiral, presenting cycle after cycle of building tension and reprieve, so that the reader who experiences the text also experiences crisis and then catharsis. Politically, Revelation equates Rome with Babylon and the empire as the domain of Satan.

1. *The Revelation of John and the Genre of Apocalyptic*

[1] *Professor Dale Martin:* The word “apocalypse” is the Greek word *apocalypsis* that is translated as “revelation” because that’s exactly what it means, “an uncovering.” You will often hear the Revelation of John also referred to as The Apocalypse because that’s also its title. Now one point, please don’t call it “The Revelations.” I don’t know why people think that “Revelations” is the name of the book. It’s not, and it’s the “Revelation of John,” that’s the title. The word just means “the uncovering,” it refers nowadays in the modern world to an entire genre of literature of the ancient world, most of which is Jewish, but there are some maybe Greek apocalypse, things that people would call a Greek apocalypse or apocalyptic type literature in some Latin texts or in Egyptian or in other near eastern situations. Most of what we call apocalypses comes from either an ancient Jewish or ancient Christian milieu.

[2] This kind of literature has several characteristics the scholars have pointed out, and I’ll go over this very briefly. They tend to be pseudonymous, and they are set deep in the past like we saw in the book of Daniel. In fact, Daniel is where we get a lot of our generic notions of what an apocalypse is. The two apocalyptic, most apocalyptic books in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation. There’s kind of an apocalyptic world view that I’ll talk

about also. When we talk about apocalypse we’re talking about first that genre of literature. They’re usually pseudonymous, they’re ascribed to some ancient hero, so we have apocalypses that are titled after Enoch, said to be by Enoch, who lived way, way, way back just after Adam. We have apocalypses attributed to various other Old Testament characters, so that the idea, as we saw with Daniel, is it’s written at one time but the author claims to be writing centuries before. Like we saw in the case of Daniel, they usually tell you what’s going to happen in the future. Of course it’s actually in the past for the writer, all up until a certain point, and then the end of the current society or the end of the world as we know it. It’s not normally the end of the world entirely. Usually it is a destruction and then a resettling or recreation of a physical world. It’s just called in the Kingdom of God or something like that.

[3] They usually have a chronological span of time. They have all kinds of images, angels, demons, sometimes beasts, sometimes monstrous kinds of beasts as you’ve seen also in Revelation and in Daniel. They’re usually constructed as some kind of narrative. The author will say something like, I was in a dream and I saw this and then this angel grabbed me and took me to this part of heaven and to took me to the third heaven, or the fifth heaven, or the 12th heaven, and then I went down to the deep and saw the dead. Think Dante’s *Inferno* and the way that Dante is led

around into the different parts of the cosmos. And they have a cosmology. They usually have a storied structure to the universe with several different layers of heavens and often several different layers of underneath, the different hells or Hades. That's the genre of an apocalypse.

[4] There's also the world view of apocalypticism we'll call it. Why we use this term is because Paul, as far as we know it, never wrote an apocalypse, and yet his letters show strong influence of apocalypticism, that is an apocalyptic world view. You have, for example, three different kinds of dualisms. You've already seen in the Gospel of John and other texts how there's a dualism between good and evil, there are the good guys and the bad guys, there is God and there is Satan, so there's an ethical kind of dualism. There's also a spatial dualism. There's a dualism of up there and down here, and so you have things that go on on the earth are simply shadows of what's going on actually in the heavens. It's like every country, according to Daniel, has its own prince, by that he means some kind of angelic being. The Prince of Persia refers in Daniel to some huge angelic super human being who actually rules Persia. The Prince of Judah, the angel of Judah tends to be Michael or some other angel that you've probably heard of, like Raphael. Each of the nations has its own angel so you can imagine sort of that Russia has its angel, and so then America has its angel, and if Russia and America were to go to war this would be actually simply an earthly shadow type reflection of the true reality which would be going on as the angel of Russia was battling the angel of America in heaven. So everything that goes on in our cosmos is simply a mirror image of these battles that are going on the heavens. So that's another dualism of space.

[5] Then there's of course a dualism of time. We've talked a lot about how for Daniel, remember there is a dualism of before time and the after time. There's a time that Daniel's writing, which is up to this, and then what will happen is some big cataclysm will happen, and then, according to Daniel, the Son of Man will come down, battle against the bad evil forces, overthrow Antiochus the IV Epiphanes, and set up the Kingdom of God. You have the same kind of structure of the time before and the time after in the New Testament except it's squirrely, right? Because according, say, to

Paul, this is what's happened: you have the now time which is still going on, and then you have the future time which has already started impinging on the present. The thing that marks the beginning of the end time has been the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was raised—what do you have when people are raised? The end of the world. The dead are supposed to be raised according to Jewish mythology, and this is something that doesn't happen all the time, and mainly it happens at the end of time.

[6] The early Christians were Jews expecting an apocalyptic Kingdom of God to happen, and Jesus probably taught this sort of thing himself as an apocalyptic prophet. But when Jesus was killed then the whole thing seemed to go awry because the Messiah is not supposed to be killed. The followers of Jesus, though, very quickly believed that they had seen him after he died, so they believed they had seen the resurrected Jesus. We're not going to talk about what they actually saw or what happened. From a historical point of view all we can say is that they believed they saw him raised from the dead. And that meant they thought, oh the end time must have already started because he has been raised. In other words, remember how Paul talks about Jesus as the "first fruits of those who sleep." That just means that Jesus is just the first apple on the tree in his resurrection, and all the rest will be raised when the final end comes. But for the early Christians they believed the end had already to in some sense started with the resurrection of Jesus, so that's this end. But then they also know the full end hasn't come because we don't see the Kingdom of God around us. Those damn Romans are still in charge. The bad evil American government is still running things in the world, so this must not be the Kingdom of God. It may be the kingdom of Obama but it's not yet the Kingdom of God. The Christians expected Jesus to come back down, to come from heaven. This was called the parousia. We've already seen it in several texts. In I Thessalonians, for example, Paul talks about Jesus will come and then we'll fly up in the air and meet him. That's the parousia, which is a Greek term that just means "presence" or "coming," and we'll refer to the time when a king or the emperor would come to visit a city, and all the people in the city, the important

people would come out of the city, out of the gates, to meet the king and give him gifts and the king would give them gifts, and they would all accompany the king back into the city. That's called a parousia. It's a purely sort of political civic kind of term. This is what early Christians use to call the coming back of Jesus in his parousia. Christians lived, according to Paul's theology, right in this middle time of an overlap of the before and the after, but that's still the before and after that you see of apocalypticism. It's still there. All these different dualisms are one of the characteristics, and you can see these sorts of things even in texts that aren't themselves apocalypses, but they show influences from this kind of world view and this kind of narrative view of history and the cosmology.

[7] Often apocalypses seem to have served as a form of cultural resistance. They make the most sense often if you see them as being popular among people who either are oppressed by some more powerful entity or at least believed that they are oppressed. They fear themselves to be oppressed. For example, it's a perfectly natural world view—you can understand how the world view is, if you believe you're an oppressed minority and you can't really fight against the more powerful entity. There's no way these early little Christians groups or even the nation of Israel could rebel against the Roman Empire and win. The idea is that, well, we will resist them and eventually God will intervene in history with his angels and his army and the divine armies will come, and we will fight alongside them to overthrow the Greeks. The earliest apocalypses, Daniel was talking about the Greeks and Syrians, the Greco-Syrian Empire. So the Greeks were the first oppressive power that people thought they could overthrow this way. Then of course the Romans became the more oppressive power later, so in Jesus' time and Paul's time it's the Romans who are the enemy that will be overthrown. But that will all happen.

[8] It's not always true that the people who believe in these kinds of apocalyptic ideas are themselves in fact an oppressed minority. After all, Ronald Reagan was the President of the United States, and he still believed this stuff. He still believed that God was going to come any day, he thought it was going to happen right then, any day now, and God was

going to have a big battle. Israel would be involved in it and all the different nations of the earth, and then God would set up the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem. Reagan talked about this on the phone with different Israeli politicians and leaders. How does this make sense for Ronald Reagan, the most powerful man in the world, to have this apocalyptic world view? Well Reagan spent a lot of his life feeling like he was on the out and feeling like he was not one of the liberal establishment of the east coast and this sort of thing. It doesn't necessarily mean that people who hold these views are themselves discriminated against minorities or oppressed minorities, but it usually means that they perceive themselves that way, because, otherwise, if you really do have power you just make the world like you want it to be. You overthrow somebody or you wage a battle, and wage war, and you fix the problem yourself. It's when you don't have the power politically or militarily to fix the problem that this kind of world view becomes very persuasive to you, very believable, plausible.

[9] That's what the Book of Revelation is. In fact, we use the title of Revelation, the Apocalypse, as the term for the whole genre and for the whole world, and it comes basically from this book because it's the most famous apocalypse of all, naturally. The weird thing about Revelation, though, is that it's [not] pseudonymous. We don't—the book says it's just written by a guy named John. It's not the same John who was the brother of Zebedee, it's not the same John—if there was a John who wrote the Gospel of John and the letters of John, which we don't really know who wrote them, but whoever wrote Revelation is not the same person who wrote any of that literature. The style is too different, the theology is too different. It's just clearly not the same person. He doesn't claim to be any famous John, he just claims to be John, and so we call him often John the Seer or John the prophet or something like that. He doesn't seem to hide who he is, and, interestingly enough, he doesn't place the composition of his book centuries in the past. He actually places it in his own time. This is also tells you where he thought he was. He really believed that he was right there and that the end had already begun in a sense with Jesus. He doesn't feel the need to pass back into the past and prophesy again. He sees

himself as a prophetic figure like Daniel, but a prophetic figure not for the future, he doesn't believe there's going to be any more future. He believes that Jesus is coming back right now, so he just places himself right at the beginning.

2. *The Structure of Revelation*

[10] It's also a little bit unlike some apocalypses because you have these seven letters in the beginning of the book that are addressed to seven different churches in Asia Minor. One of the interesting things about all of Revelation is its structure. I talked about Hebrews last week and I gave you an outline to the letter to the Hebrews to show you that it was a very elaborately structured sermon. Hebrews was very well written. It's some of the best Greek in the New Testament. Revelation is interestingly structured, and I'll show you why I say that, but actually it's not very well written. The Greek is almost illiterate, and scholars have wondered about this, is it just because the writer of this didn't have a very good education? Or some people have even suggested maybe he's intentionally writing in kind of a weird way as sort of almost a form of protest against people in power. There are different theories about this, but it's not very good Greek, and it's not very well written.

[11] But it does have a fairly intricate and interesting structure, and I call this a structure of cycles, the spiral. I've titled your outline [*attached to this transcript document*] "a spiral outline of Revelation" because the story—a lot of people have read Revelation—well, let me also back up and explain what's different this week from what we did last week. Last week, if you recall, I spent a lot of time talking about Hebrews and medieval interpretation because I was trying to illustrate how the historical, critical interpretation of these texts that I'm teaching you in the semester is not the only way to do it. There are other kinds of allegorical, theological, literary ways to read these texts, and those are perfectly fine. Now, though, I'm completely reverting back to the historical critical way of reading this text. Partly because the way that so many people in popular culture read Revelation, especially very conservative Christians, is to read it about our time. It's been read over and over again to be about English wars or World War I or World War II, or most recently in *The Late*

Great Planet Earth and these kinds of things, it's about the Soviet Union versus the United States of America, and everything that it talks about is referring to what's going to happen in our lifetimes. So the weird animals, the locust type things that have the heads of men and fly through the air, there are all kinds of modern Christians that say, oh those are helicopters. The author didn't know what a helicopter looked like in the ancient world so he just described kind of what he saw, but we know now those are helicopters, so he's actually describing a big war that's going to break out around Israel and in Israel when the whole world's going to come to this big cataclysmic nuclear war, and it's all talked about right here in Revelation. Well, obviously I'm not going to do that. What I'm going to show you is how historians read this text precisely by putting it back in its ancient context.

[12] One of the things is, if you notice, the Book Revelation doesn't give one strict timeline. In fact it seems to have cycles of setting up some kind of weird crisis, having all these terrible things happen, and then have something that looks like a quasi resolution and then starting the cycle again. It ends up being a big cataclysmic crash at the end of the book, so this is why I call this a spiral of cycles that are going on in the Book of Revelation. First though look at just chapters 6-8, and I'm going to walk you through this very rapidly because you can see something of the structure of this book right here. Now this is after you've had the letters in the beginning of Revelation, then you've had the throne room scene with God, which we're going to talk about in a minute, and all the songs that everybody's saying. Let's just walk through first structure here.

[13] Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out with a voice of thunder, "Come!" I looked and there was a white horse. Its rider had a bow, a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

[14] This is conquering, and warfare is this first horse. "When he opened the second seal," — where is he going with the seals? — Picture this now: we've talked about how books were composed in the ancient world, and we talked about scrolls. Things were in scrolls not in books like this with all the different pages all sewn together. What he's imagining seeing is

there's this huge scroll in the sky that this angel is holding and doing different things. When you want to finish a letter or a book you roll up the scroll, and then you put a wax seal at the end of the roll and that seals the book. So anybody who wants to read that letter or that book the first time has to break that wax seal. The seals that he's talking about are the wax seals on the scroll. You imagine that you've got this scroll that has one seal and you can break that seal and you can unroll the scroll a little bit, but then you get another seal, so you undo that seal and you can unroll it a little bit more, so he's gradually unrolling this scroll that's going to have all these things pop out of it. There's this big huge scroll that has horses and riders jumping out of it and flying through the air.

[15] He opened the second seal. I heard the second living creature call out, "Come!" And out came another horse bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth so that the people would slaughter one another and he was given a great sword.

[16] So the first seal releases this horse that looks like Empire, the conquering of the conqueror; the second is just general warfare.

[17] When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked and there was a black horse. Its rider had a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine."

[18] The third seal is what? Famine and poverty.

[19] When he opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" And I looked and there was a pale green horse. Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with the sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

[20] So death is the fourth seal. "When I opened the fifth seal I saw under the altar"—notice we're not talking about horsemen anymore. You had four horsemen representing four different things. The fifth seal has something like a digression, the fifth seal is not another horse

like you expect. In other words, you're given to expect that you're going to see another horse that's going to be some other catastrophe, but you don't get that, you have a digression.

[21] Under the altar, the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given, they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number would be complete, both of their fellow slaves [it says "slaves" actually in the Greek, not "servants"] and of their brothers.

[22] It doesn't say sisters. There's almost no women in this text at all. It's all men, virgin men who have never been polluted by touching women. It's not exactly a pro-woman book. You might not get that idea if you have an English translation that keeps putting sisters in here, but there are no sisters in this book. There's the whore of Babylon, there's the mother bride, and then there are men. "... your slaves, you fellow brothers, who are soon to be killed as they themselves have been killed." What's the fifth seal? Well it gives him a vision of the altar of God, in the temple of God in heaven, and there's this big altar. And under the altar are the souls of all the followers of Jesus who have been martyred up to this time, and the souls of those people who will be martyred. They're not punished, they're saying how long, how long, and he says, oh keep your pants on, here's a white robe, just sit there and be nice under the altar, we're going to take care of it all very, very soon. The fifth seal is actually a digression that tells you, the audience, that if you suffer in this present time it will be taken care of by God. You have these four building up of terrible things, and the fifth is a digression that gives you comfort. But now we're going to get back.

[23] He opened the sixth seal, I looked and I heard a great earthquake, the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, the stars of the sky fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up.

[24] Remember I talked about how the sky in ancient cosmology isn't just air, it's actually a firm thing, it's like a big piece of leather or

something like that sits up there, and there's water on the other side of it in most ancient cosmologies, or something on the other side of it. When he talks about seeing the sky rolled up like a scroll he means that quite literally. The sky goes jrrrrrrrrrrrrrr and rolls up, and you can see heaven above it. So the sky vanishes like a scroll.

[25] Every mountain and island moved from its place. Then the kings of the earth, and the magnates and the generals, and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves, and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

[26] The sixth seal is all hell breaks loose. The cosmos is coming down on top of itself. He's created an increasing level of anxiety and catastrophe with this, but that fifth seal there's kind of a digression. "After this I saw four angels..." Now you think, oh man, if the sixth seal is like that you know one more seal is coming up. What's the seventh seal going to be? Man, I'm eager to hear this! Remember all this was read out loud in the ancient world so you're hearing all this.

[27] "I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, hurrying back the four winds of the earth." Now you get a bunch of other stuff, "I saw another angel ascend, and I heard the number of those were sealed." Now you have all the followers of Jesus are numbered into different tribes of 12,000 a piece, and each of those tribes is sealed themselves. Isn't that interesting, you have another use of the term seal but now this is a seal that's put on the faces of all the people who are the true followers, who are the true Israel, twelve tribes like the twelve tribe—the lost ten tribes and the other two tribes of Israel. There's the reconstituting of Israel now, and they're sealed, and the seal is a good thing. It means you won't be harmed if you have this on you. That goes on all of chapter 7. You're thinking where is the seventh seal? We had six, I know there's another one coming, where is it? You have to wait all the way through chapter 7 wanting the seventh seal but you're not getting it yet. In other words, he's just stringing you along. But he's stringing you along in a way that's kind

of good because he's reassuring you. You know the seventh seal is coming, and you're just—you're pretty sure it's going to be really, really, really bad because the sixth seal was. But before you get to the seventh seal you have this sealing of you, if you're a faithful follower of Jesus, with the reassurance of a seal.

[28] And then you have some songs, we're going to talk about some songs, but everybody comes in and it's like a Broadway play. You have something happen, and then the chorus all runs on stage and they do a little song, blessed be the lamb, and the blah, blah, blah, halleluiah, halleluiah, and then they run off and you have more action. That's the way the story is structured, for interesting reasons.

[29] We get to the end of chapter 7, we're finally to this chapter, so you get to Chapter 8—of course they're not numbered in the ancient world. But "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal," you ready for this? "there was silence in heaven for a half an hour." That's the seventh seal. What's going on? The text builds up tension, and you hear this read out loud, and it keeps building up this tension, but then the seventh seal is such a anticlimax: silence in heaven for a half an hour. Then it doesn't explain anything about that, it just starts over. And then you have another cycle a little bit later. "Another angel of the golden censor came and stood by the altar."

[30] In other words, what's you've got is something like this. You have these four scrolls—the four seals which are terrible, terrible, terrible awful things, and then you have the fifth which is a digression, and it's actually a good thing, it's the telling of the souls who have been martyred, don't worry, you'll be saved, here's a white robe, relax. Then you have the sixth seal which is another worse thing than all of these, it's really, really bad and its goes on longer, and then you have this long digression again, this is like the fifth seal, it's a sealing of the followers of Jesus with salvation. Then after that digression then you have this seventh seal which is really kind of anticlimactic. But it's not bad because, you know, silence in heaven for a half an hour.

[31] Look at your spiral outline now because this kind of structure of having a cycle of catastrophes that are interrupted every once in

a while by some kind of digression that then ends with something good, that's the way the whole book is structured in three different cycles. For example, I said in the fourth chapter of Revelation you have the big heavenly throne room scene. Revelation 5, you have the introduction of the scroll with seven seals and the lamb, and then you have the first cycle of seven, and that's what I just walked you through just now. Then right after 8:1, the silence in heaven, it starts again with a second cycle, and you have in 8:2 introduction of seven angels with seven trumpets, and then again you have the first, second, third, and fourth trumpet which announce these kind of catastrophes. And then you have an interlude where this eagle comes through and announces woes on everybody. And then you have the fifth trumpet in 9:1-12, and the sixth trumpet in 9:13, and then you have chapter 10 which has another interlude which is about the scroll of prophecy. Chapter 11, you have the talk about the temple, and he has to measure the temple. And then in 11:14 you have the end of the second woe. And finally in 11:15 you have the seventh trumpet. And what does the seventh trumpet introduce? Praise in heaven, sort of like that half hour of silence.

- [32] Then you have a long interlude, which is chapters 12, 13, and 14 which is about battles between the woman who's the mother of church or the mother of the Savior, and the dragon. Chapter 13 is about the dragon and the beast. Chapter 14 is about the lamb, the horned lamb which represents Jesus who's a horned lamb who is wounded. And then you have starting in 15:1, you have a third cycle of seven angels and seven plagues or bowls. Then you have the great conclusion, which is the very end, the destruction of Rome in chapters 17-19. The final battle which is 19:11-21, the imprisonment and eventual destruction of enemies which is Chapter 20 and the establishment of the new Jerusalem in chapters 21 and 22.

3. *Crisis, Catharsis, and Politics in Revelation*

- [33] What does this structure tell us? Because the structures in these different cycles, it builds up crisis and then it gives you something, a relief at the end. There's a famous New Testament scholar who teaches at the Divinity School, this time it's not me, who teaches in the

Divinity School, Adela Yarbro Collins. Many years ago when I was still a student I read this book she had wrote called, *Crisis and Catharsis*. It's a wonderful book about Revelation. And her thesis was, the very purpose of the Book of Revelation is to build up a sense of crisis in early followers of Jesus. If you're too comfortable with your world, you don't know that things are really a lot worse than what you think they are. If it's addressed to Christians who are, if they're comfortable, it wants to make them uncomfortable with Roman rule. If they're uncomfortable with Roman rule, and feel depressed and oppressed, then eventually the book will lead them to feeling comfort. So crisis is created by the book in order to let you experience a catharsis of the salvation. The looping structure of the book tries to work that out psychologically in its hearers. You can see how it's going to do this.

- [34] And, remember, it's meant to be performed. You're hearing it read out loud. It's a long book, but you sit there, and you imagine a bunch of Christians in Asia Minor in some church, say, in Ephesus, and they're meeting is dark, they're meeting in some house somewhere, in somebody's dining room, and somebody has sent around this document and asked it to be read. You're all sitting around with just some candles going and somebody's reading this book, and it's got all these strange things going on, strange creatures, and a lot of these songs and things that people are singing, and angels are singing, and beasts are singing, and elders are singing. It's sort of like in the fourth chapter, look at the fourth chapter of Revelation. This is where we're in the throne room of God.

- [35] After this I looked, and there in heaven, a door stood open and the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne with one seated on the throne. And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. And around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders dressed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne were flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder, and in front

of the throne were seven flaming torches with the seven spirits of God.

[36] You have all this going on and then the four living creatures, these monstrous combination kind of monster creatures are standing around the throne and they starting singing “holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come.” Then you see the twenty-four elders, and they’re singing another song. The whole thing is meant to be seen in your mind, not just read silently.

[37] We’re going to do a little experiment here to show how that might happen. We’re going to break up into thirds. You [pointing to a group] get to be the four living creatures. Then we’re going to split the rest of the class right here, you all [pointing to another group] get to be—I think it’s the elders I can’t remember, and then you’ll be another group [pointing to the last third of the class]. These are the quotations. I want you to say this with me very soft at first, all right? Don’t rush, don’t get faster. I’m a musician you know, I’m going to make you stick with the tempo I set.

[38] [Instructs the first group to chant continuously.] “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come.” Say it!

[39] [The next group begins to chant continuously.] “Worthy is the lamb that was slain.” Don’t rush. “Worthy is the lamb that was slain.”

[40] [Last group begins to chant.] “Glory, honor, power to thee, oh Lord, most high. Glory, honor, power to thee oh Lord most high.” Now get a little bit louder.

[41] [All three groups are chanting while Professor Martin speaks.] There’s smoke in the throne room. There are beasts flapping their wings. Now close your eyes and get louder. [Students are chanting.] Shout it! [Students are chanting loudly.] Stop! [Everyone stops.] You feel something? You’re supposed to feel something. You’re supposed to kind of feel weird. You’re supposed to feel uncomfortable just a little bit, you’re supposed to feel a little tingle, because reading Revelation as if it’s a blueprint for Jesus coming back and what’s going to happen with the Republicans and the Democrats kind of misses the point. Because what it really is doing, it’s trying to pull you

into a world, a very performative world. That’s the thing—it really is like a stage show except the stage is the whole cosmos and all kind of weird things that are happening all around.

[42] Part of what’s going on here, to use Professor Collins’s phrase, is it introduces this sense of a crisis in the cosmos. It doesn’t do that because it wants you to, in the end, simply live in that crisis. It’s because the author believes God’s going to take care of the crisis eventually but not necessarily today. The book, having this book performed in your church for you, read out loud in the middle of the night, deals with your sense of persecution if you have one. But what if you don’t have a sense of persecution? What if you’re actually fairly comfortable with Rome? What if you’re fairly well off? You’ve got a good business, the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, actually allows you to travel. You can get on a ship and not have to worry about pirates, unlike today [student laughter], or unlike it was a hundred years before this. Pompey was the general who cleaned the pirates out of the Mediterranean in the first century BCE. So if you’re a businessman, and you’re fairly well off, you might think that the Roman peace is a pretty good thing. Sure a few people’s heads got to get cracked every once in a while, to keep the peace, that’s just the way it is.

[43] The Book of Revelation seems to have a dual purpose. It’s like that old saying about what good preaching is, good preaching is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That’s kind of what the Book of Revelation seems to try to do. Because notice, what is the view of Rome that you get here? Look in Revelation 18 and 19. If all you had was the letters of Paul, what might you think about Rome, what might you think about the government, what might you think about the emperor? If you all you had were certain other books such as the Pastoral Epistles what would you think the—about their politics? There’s no way you could find this author saying something like “honor the emperor,” which is precisely what you get in some other early Christian letters.

[44] After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven having great authority and the earth was made bright with his splendor. He called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great! It has become a dwelling

place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants, and the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.”

[45] This is clearly Rome. Babylon is the code name for Rome here. We know it is because in 17:9,18 he talks about this city being on seven hills, referring to the famous Seven Hills of Rome. Of course in 13:18

[46] ... so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark of the beast, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom, let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is 666.

[47] What is 666? Well, back in the 1980s some of us leftists said Ronald Wilson Reagan, or you can come up with all kinds of other things. Scholars think that if you take the word “Nero,” the name of the Emperor and you spell it “Neron,” with a final N like you would, in the Hebrew letters, it comes out to be 666, adding up those three letters. Now you’ll notice there’s also a footnote that says other ancient authorities say 616, so some scribe comes along and sees 666 and said, oh no that can’t be right, it must be 616. It’s actually—that makes a lot sense if this is supposed to refer to Nero because if you spelled Nero’s name slightly differently, in a way that was still possible to spell it for the ancient world, it comes out to be 616 rather than 666, which leads a lot of us scholars just to think the writer is probably referring to Nero in some way. Nero is a beast, and Nero is the whore, Rome is the whore that’s had sex with every rich man and every king throughout the whole world. This is not a very positive view of Rome, and Rome of course is completely destroyed at the end.

[48] The part of Nero is when we don’t when this text was written. Some people actually believe that Revelation was written in the 60s when Nero was himself the emperor. More tend to believe that it’s written toward the end of the century, when Nero had already been dead. This refers to a great myth from the ancient world called Nero redivivus. The myth was

that Nero was such a terrible, terrible, terrible bad man that even though he had been assassinated he was going to rise from the dead someday. Or some people believed he wasn’t ever dead, he escaped and he was off living with Parthians, who were these people who lived on the very eastern corner of the Roman Empire. The idea was Nero was still alive somewhere and he was going to raise an army of Parthians, and he was going to come back and he was going to wage war and take over the Roman Empire again. Or he was going to rise from the dead and raise an army and take over the empire again.

[49] This was especially chilling for followers of Jesus because Nero was well known, at the end of the century, for being the first emperor to have persecuted the followers of Jesus in Rome. The famous story is that Nero—there was a big fire in Rome, and Nero was blamed for the fire because he was clearing a bunch of apartment buildings of lower income people out of a certain area of Rome, it’s right by the Coliseum, to build his huge big palace. In fact now, if you go to Rome, they’ve opened up the Golden House, they call it, and this was the palace that Nero built. It’s beautiful, you have to go under the ground to get into it and see it and everything because it’s all covered by the ground. If you go to Rome, get tickets and go to Nero’s palace because it’s only in the last several years that it’s been reopened for the public. The idea was, Nero had actually burned a bunch of tenements in order to make room for his palace, but because this was so unpopular, he blamed it on the Christians. He said, the Christians set the fire, the Christians are those really bad people, and the story goes that he had big barbeques in his palace grounds and he put the bodies of Christians covered with tar on stakes and crucified them, and put them on stakes, and lit them and their burning bodies provided the torchlight for his party. This is the story that was circulated about Nero by later Christians and by other people too. For followers of Jesus, Nero was this terrible figure, who they thought he might even rise again from the dead and do battle against us.

4. The Social Context of Revelation

[50] Who does all this make sense of? The writer is giving this big myth, obviously the whore is killed, Babylon is killed, Rome is destroyed,

all the wealthy people are destroyed, all the kings of the earth are destroyed by the angels and by Jesus coming down. And then the setting up of the new Jerusalem that's gold and beautiful, and there's no night or day there because God is its light and everybody lives happily ever after. What is the kind of situation that this speaks too? We're going to go back to the beginning of Revelation now.

[51] Look at chapter 2. These are in the letters. We know it was written by a guy named John. He says he was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos in the Mediterranean when he wrote this, and then he circulates it around. He starts off with these seven letters to seven churches. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus." Ephesus, we've seen Ephesus, haven't we? One of pseudo-Paul's letters may have been addressed to Ephesus. Paul apparently did found a church in Ephesus, and it was one of his bigger churches it seems like. He spent years there.

[52] These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lamp stands. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evil doers, you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. [There are false apostles running around.], I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you ...

[53] See some of the letters are mainly letters of praise to the churches and some of them are scolding letters, so it's interesting to see what does he scold people for, and what does he praise them for?

[54] Remember, then, from what you have fallen, repent. [This is a backslid church he thinks.] Do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place unless you repent. Yet this is to your credit, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [Well, we don't really know anything about the Nicolaitans, so that doesn't tell us much.] Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

[55] Then he goes onto another church. So there are false apostles, but then look at 2:9:

[56] I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews but are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

[57] There is this poverty, he's praising poverty. He talks about people who -say they're Jews but they're not. 2:13: "I know where you are living." This is to Pergamum which happened to be a huge site of the imperial cult, the cult to the emperor. In fact you can go there now, I'm going to be there in June, aren't you jealous? You can go to the top of this mountain, the Acropolis in Pergamum, and the Austrian archeologists are rebuilding all these temples to Trajan and Hadrian on the top of this hill. Of course Trajan and Hadrian are after he wrote this, but there was still a big emperor cult there.

[58] I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. [well maybe that's a reference to the emperor cult itself.] You are holding fast to my name, you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, I have some things against you, you have some ...

[59] Well, I'm running out of time but let me tell you what basically he really doesn't like. He doesn't like a woman named, he calls Jezebel, who is one of the prophets in one the churches. He doesn't like rich people. He says stuff about idolatry which makes it sound like he doesn't like people who are eating meat sacrificed to idols. We don't think there were any of these churches that were actually practicing pagan idolatry. What's probably going on is, he knows that there are some Christians who eat meat sacrificed to idols, and he calls that idolatry.

[60] Now let's think about it, which churches are in this area of western Asia Minor that have women as leaders in them, they've been told by their apostle that it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and some of them are not that poor, like there seem to be people in Corinth who seem to be fairly well off. Maybe this guy, and this is just a theory, but I think it's fun to think about, maybe he's actually writing to Paul's churches precisely because he thinks they're too comfortable with Roman rule, and he wants to make them

uncomfortable with Roman rule in order to turn them against Rome and to convert him to his own vision about this anti-Roman version of the Gospel. And that's why he constructs the letter to say, as I said, if you're troubled, if you feel like you're oppressed you're supposed to be comforted by this text. But if you're too comfortable with the Pax Romana

you're supposed to be mad uncomfortable by the text and get on the right side. On Wednesday we'll talk about some texts that may have been more comfortable with Roman rule.

[end of transcript]

Spiral Outline of Revelation

RLST 152 Introduction to New Testament History and Literature
Dale B. Martin

Rev. 4: Heavenly throneroom

Rev 5: introduction of scroll with seven seals and the Lamb

First cycle:

Opening of seven seals:

6:1 first seal (white horse of empire)

6:3 second seal (red horse of warfare)

6:5 third seal (black horse of famine)

6:7 fourth seal (green horse of death)

6:9 fifth seal: souls under the altar

6:12 sixth seal: general cosmic catastrophe

interlude: chapter 7: sealing of the saints, hymns of praise

8:1 seventh seal: silence in heaven

Second Cycle:

8:2 introduction of seven angels with seven trumpets

8:7 first trumpet

8:8 second trumpet

8:10 third trumpet

8:12 fourth trumpet

interlude: eagle announces "woes"

9:1-12 fifth trumpet/first woe (opening of the bottomless pit; locusts)

9:13 sixth trumpet/second woe (four angels of plagues)

interlude: Chapter 10: scroll of prophecy; Chapter 11: Temple and witnesses

11:14 end of "second woe," announcement of "third woe"

11:15 Seventh trumpet: praise in heaven

Long interlude:

chapter 12: the woman and the dragon

Chapter 13: the dragon and the beast

Chapter 14: the Lamb and the redeemed

Third Cycle: seven angels with seven plagues/bowls (15:1)

15: intro to seven angels

16: 2 first angel

16:3 second angel

16:4 third angel

16:8 fourth angel

16:10 fifth angel

16:12 sixth angel

16: 17 seventh angel

Great Conclusion:

Great Interlude: Destruction of Rome, wailings, and praise (17-19:10)

Final Battle: 19:11-21

Imprisonment and eventual destruction of enemies (20)

Establishment of new Jerusalem (21-22)