How my students learned to think historically about Revelation

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In our "Reflections From the Classroom" series, seasoned teachers talk about their experiences walking with students and guiding their learning.

This past spring semester, I taught the book of Revelation at Faulkner University. Though I teach history at this Christian school in Alabama, this course wasn't primarily about historical interpretations of the text or American apocalyptic movements. It was a biblical exposition of a fascinating piece of literature.

Americans have been fascinated with Revelation for a long time. Many have focused on the millennium of chapter 20, seeing in wars or political events the onset of the thousand-year reign of Christ. The post-millennialists of the 19th century looked at social reform as a means to inaugurate the millennium, believing that after this period Christ would return. The premilliennialists have seen in American history and culture a decline in morals and religiosity that could only be stopped by the supernatural arrival of the kingdom of Christ, which would bring on the millennium.

There have also been variations within these broader views—such as “dispensational premillennialism,” which not only posits the second coming of Christ before the millennium but is also a philosophy of history, of how God has ordered his interactions with human beings in each period (or dispensation) between creation and millennium. Some, such as William Miller, have looked to Revelation along with other biblical texts to plot the timeline of the end. Others have considered the book to be more figurative than literal.

If the symbolism of the book was not already a challenge, the history of how people have read it makes engaging Revelation a difficult enterprise. But it was a challenge that the students in my class decided to take on. Our discussions early in the class revealed that students' interpretations varied. Some looked at the book as supplying philosophical principles that apply to all time periods (sometimes called the idealist position). Most, though, appeared to belong to the sizable group of Americans who accept a futurist interpretation, in which the contents of Revelation prophesy future

events.

I tend to support what is called the preterist position: the contents of Revelation symbolize a judgment of Roman attitudes and practices toward Christianity. The cataclysmic rhetoric is a call to Christians to maintain their allegiance to God as their only king. That allegiance would protect the book's original readers when God judged Rome, as would surely happen.

While I didn’t actively set out to change students’ minds about their interpretation, it did seem to me that their views shifted by the end of the semester. Thinking historically about the text was the main influence in this change. They had learned that Revelation was written to a specific set of Christians in a first-century context, and that it needs to be understood in how it made sense to those readers before we try to make it say anything to us today. When students began to understand more about the geography, customs, culture, and history of the ancient Roman Empire, they looked at text differently.

A perfect example of this is the much-disputed number 666. The number and the companion symbol of the "mark of the beast" are two of the disturbing images in Revelation. Once students understood the ancient practice of gematria and remembered to keep the symbol in its original context, they feared the number less.

I hope that our exercise in historical thinking will help those students in other parts of their education and their lives. This controversial book, which so many find confusing, began to make some sense with critical thinking, analysis, and some basic historical knowledge.

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