

THE BOOK OF REVELATION:

DATE AND HISTORICAL SETTING

To understand any New Testament book, it is valuable to establish the time it was written and to sketch pertinent features of its historical and cultural context. In deciding among the various possible approaches to Revelation in particular, such considerations can be altogether determinative. As mentioned above, the Book of Revelation was written during a time of persecution and trial for the recipient churches. It seems to have been written with a mind to encourage the believers that, though they may be called upon to suffer, or even die, for their faith, yet their vindication (and the doom of those who persecute them) is sure and not far off. The book would be a useful encouragement regardless when it was written, since the church has often been called upon to suffer, and the vision of the reigning Lamb and the vindicated martyrs transcends local, contemporary situations. Most commentators believe that the magnitude of the crisis described in Revelation requires that we identify it with one of the Imperial persecutions of the Roman emperors.

Altogether, there were ten emperors who are believed to have persecuted Christians. Only two of them, however, did so within the lifetime of John—namely Nero, who reigned from A.D. 54 to 68, and Domitian, who reigned from A.D. 81 to 96.

Most modern scholars appear to favor a later date in the time of Domitian for the writing of Revelation, placing it at about A.D. 96. There have been many advocates of note, though, who have defended an earlier date in the reign of Nero. Many evangelicals taking the preterist approach to Revelation favor the earlier date, since that would make the book predate the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This leaves the possibility open that the book may be predicting that event. However, not all who have defended the early date (pre-A.D. 69) have been preterists. There seem to be impressive arguments and impressive advocates for both dates.

WRITTEN DURING NERO'S PERSECUTION?

In favor of the earlier date of writing (during Nero's persecution), several internal evidences are adduced. Among them would be the apparent existence of the temple in Jerusalem at the time of writing (11:1-2), and the tension between the church and its Jewish detractors (e.g., 2:9; 3:9), both of which, it is argued, changed when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70.

These evidences are inconclusive, however. The temple described in chapter 11 is part of a symbolic vision, and need not have been seen prior to the destruction of its earthly counterpart. It is also not evident that Jewish persecution of Christians came to a grinding halt with the overthrow of the Jewish state. In fact, the Jews in Smyrna took an active role in the martyrdom of that town's Christian leader Polycarp in the second century.

One of the most important arguments for a Neronean date is based upon the cryptic passage in Revelation 17:10, which speaks of the king currently reigning at the time of writing: "There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time." Unless the term "kings" here is taken as "kingdoms" (i.e., Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, Rome), the natural understanding of this statement would be that five Roman emperors had fallen, and the sixth was reigning at the time of writing. Since Nero was the sixth man to be recognized as emperor of the Roman Empire, this would place the date of writing sometime within his reign. A further confirmation is often found in the identification of Nero with the number "666" (see preterist comments on verses 13:18).

Among the well-known scholars who have held to the early date of Revelation have been Jay Adams, Adam Clarke, Alfred Edersheim, J. B. Lightfoot, John A. T. Robinson, Philip Schaff, and many others. The early date was the prevalent theory among Bible scholars of the nineteenth century. Dr. Kenneth Gentry lists over 130 notable scholars and commentators who favored the early dating of Revelation.

Preterist Comments on Verses 13:18 of Revelation.

One of the major evidences for identifying the beast with Nero is this information about **the number of his name** (v. 17). John obviously did not expect his readers who had **understanding** (v. 18) to have any difficulty in identifying the beast, since they could simply calculate the meaning of this cryptogram. Here using English characters, the Hebrew form of "Caesar Nero" is Nrvn Qsr (pronounced "Neron Kaiser"). The value of the seven Hebrew letters is 50, 200, 6, 50, 100, 60, and 200, respectively. The total is thus 666. This is the solution advocated by David S. Clark, Jay Adams, Kenneth Gentry, David Chilton, and most others.

Most likely, the code utilized the *Hebrew* form rather than the Greek or Latin form of the name to avoid detection from Roman authorities, who would know both Latin and Greek, but not Hebrew. The readers of the book, however, knew considerable Hebrew, judging from the many symbols taken from the Old Testament and also John's use of Hebrew words like Armageddon, amen, hallelujah, Satan (a Hebrew name, used in addition to the Greek word for devil), and Abaddon (in addition to its Greek counterpart Apollyon). The Hebrew language has exerted so great an influence over the writing of Revelation, in fact, that some scholars have even speculated that John originally wrote it in Aramaic (his native tongue and a cognate of Hebrew).

As for the impossibility of buying or selling by those lacking the mark (v. 17), David dark writes:

“This was to boycott or ostracize the Christians, and deprive them of the common rights of citizens, or the common rights of humanity. The pressure of economic distress was to be laid on them to compel them to conform.”

Chilton notes:

Similarly [the Jewish leaders] organized economic boycotts against those who refused to submit to Caesar as Lord, the leaders of the synagogues "forbidding all dealings with the excommunicated," and going so far as to put them to death.

WRITTEN DURING DOMITIAN'S REIGN?

On the other hand, many find evidences for a later date, during the reign of Domitian. Well-known advocates of this date include: Robert Mounce, Albert Barnes, B. B. Warfield, Donald Guthrie, John Walvoord, Merrill Tenney, and perhaps most other commentators since 1900. There are a number of internal evidences that have commended themselves to scholars as favoring this date. Many believe that emperor worship is alluded to in chapter 13, and that the references to a "mortal head wound that healed" allude to a well-known superstition that arose after Nero's death, claiming that he would in fact return and conquer Rome again. It is claimed that emperor worship was not enforced until the time of Domitian, and that he was widely regarded as a "second Nero," making him the best candidate for the current persecutor of John and his companions.

In response to this, it may be argued that, since John wrote prophetically, references to the reign of Domitian (if they are found in Revelation) need not have been written during that reign. John may well have written decades (or centuries!) earlier than the times which he predicted. Therefore, we may be looking in the wrong place for clues concerning the time of writing when we try to identify it with the time of the events described in the prophetic portions of the book.

Another argument for the later date is that Nero's persecution never extended far beyond the city of Rome itself, whereas Domitian's (it is claimed) engulfed the whole empire. Since the churches addressed in Revelation were in what is now Turkey, they were sufficiently distant from Rome to render Nero's persecution innocuous to them, though they would have suffered under Domitian's rule.

On the other hand, it is not necessary to believe that the seven churches in Asia were suffering as the result of an emperor's decree. If Nero persecuted Christians in Rome, Christians in other parts of the empire may well have faced local persecution incidentally at the same time, or their local enemies may have taken advantage of the general anti-Christian attitude of the emperor to justify harassing the churches. Nothing in the seven letters of chapters 2 and 3 indicates that the churches were currently experiencing trouble from any but local antagonists. It may also be pointed out that many scholars, including those supportive of a late date, have said that there is no historical proof that there was an empire-wide persecution of Christians even in Domitian's reign.

Support for the later date of Revelation is also obtained by appeal to the conditions prevailing in the seven churches at the time of writing. Some believe that the degree of spiritual decline found in the churches at Ephesus (which had left its first love), Sardis (which was dead, having only a reputation that was good), and Laodicea (which was lukewarm) would suggest the passage of considerable time since their founding. Since the persecution of Nero's time happened only a decade or so after these churches were founded, it is thought that this would not allow sufficient time for the necessary degree of spiritual decline to occur.

Yet the loss of first love in Ephesus is a condition which can happen to a church in a very short time, as the experience of many modern congregations can demonstrate. Paul marveled at how the Galatian churches had so severely regressed almost immediately after he had left them as infant congregations (Gal. 1:6). The founding of the churches in Sardis and Laodicea is not recorded in Scripture, and we know nothing of the original state of these congregations. For all we know, they may never have risen much above the condition in which Revelation describes them. The Corinthian church exhibited an alarming degree of carnality at a time at no great interval from the time of its founding. There is nothing incredible about the suggestion that similar scenarios may have applied to Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea as well.

It has been claimed that the church of Smyrna did not exist in the lifetime of Paul, who may have lived up until about A.D. 67. This would make it unlikely that there would be a church there to address within the time of Nero's reign. Since there was a church in Smyrna when Revelation was written, this has been used as an evidence for the later date of writing.

The belief that there was no church in Smyrna in Paul's lifetime is based upon a statement from Polycarp, who was the bishop of that very church in the second century. Polycarp wrote in a letter to the church at Philippi: "... among [you at Philippi] the blessed Paul labored, who are praised in the beginning of his epistle. For concerning you he boasts in all the churches who then alone had known the Lord, for we had not yet known him" [Letter the Philippians, 11:3).

Notably, Polycarp does not state that the church in Smyrna did not exist in Paul's life- time, but that the Smyrnans had not known the Lord at the time when Paul wrote his epistle to the Philippians, which was probably no later than A.D. 63, which allows sufficient time for the church to come into existence in Smyrna before or during the Neronean persecution.

EXTERNAL EVIDENCES FOR THE LATER DATE

The foregoing internal evidence we have considered for the late date of Revelation has been ambiguous at best. The strongest argument for the later date is from the testimony of extrabiblical sources. Several church fathers indicate that Domitian was emperor when John wrote Revelation. All of them, however, seem to base their information on the testimony of Irenaeus, found in a passage wherein he wrote:

“Now since this is so, and since this number [666] is found in all the good and ancient copies, and since those who have seen John face to face testify, and reason teaches us that the number of the name of the beast appears according to the numeration of the Greeks by the letters in it... We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. *For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign*” (emphasis mine).

The meaning of Irenaeus' statement has been debated. What was seen toward the end of Domitian's reign? Was it the vision which John "beheld"? or was it the apostle himself, who was "seen . . . face to face" by those who testify? The phrase "That was seen ..." may be a corruption of an original that read, "He was seen . . ." If this is true, then it only proves that John lived into the reign of Domitian, though he may have written the Apocalypse much earlier.

If Irenaeus is saying that the vision was seen at this late date, then his witness carries considerable weight. In view of the claim that Irenaeus knew Polycarp, who in turn knew the apostle John, he might well be expected to have accurate information regarding the time of John's imprisonment on Patmos. Several other church fathers, following the lead of Irenaeus, indicated the same time frame for the date of the writing of Revelation. But is this the correct understanding of Irenaeus' words?

Those who originally translated Irenaeus' work into English complained of the poor condition of the manuscript evidence for his work. They wrote:

“The great work of Irenaeus, now for the first time translated into English, is unfortunately no longer extant in the original. It has come down to us only in an ancient Latin version, with the exception of the greater part of the first book, which has been preserved in the original Greek, through means of copious quotations made by Hippolytus and Epiphanius. The text, both in Latin and Greek, is often most uncertain.”

Since the text is admittedly "uncertain" in many places, and the quotation in question is known only from a Latin translation of the original, we must not place too high a degree of certainty upon our preferred reading of the statement of Irenaeus.

RESPONSES FAVORING AN EARLIER DATE

In *The Beast of Revelation*, Dr. Kenneth Gentry marshals seven strong reasons, some linguistic, some contextual, and some logical, for interpreting Irenaeus' statement as meaning that John—not the vision—was seen during the principate of Domitian.

For example, earlier in the passage, Irenaeus refers to "all the ... ancient copies" of Revelation. This presupposes that the book had been around a good long while before this statement was written. If there were "ancient copies," was not the original more ancient still? Yet, in Irenaeus' estimation, the time of Domitian's reign was not considered to have been very ancient history, for he speaks of it as "almost in our day." How could Irenaeus speak of "ancient copies" of a work the original of which had been written "almost" in his own time? With reference to his mention of Domitian's reign, there are grounds for believing that Irenaeus was speaking of the time of John's last being seen by the brethren, rather than the time of John's having seen the apocalyptic vision.

Gentry paraphrases what he believes to have been Irenaeus' thought as follows: "It is not important for us to know the name of the Beast (or Antichrist), which was hidden in the number 666. Were it important, why did John not tell us? After all, he lived almost to our own era, and spoke with some men I have known."

Gentry's arguments, modern sentiments notwithstanding, present a formidable case for the early dating of the Apocalypse. I have encountered no treatment of the dating of Revelation more thorough than his dissertation on the subject. Further, any independent arguments advanced in favor of the preterist approach, applying the prophecies of Revelation to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, also argue for a date of writing prior to that date. At the very least, the possibility of the early date keeps the preterist approach legitimately in the debate.

Future sessions will include the following:

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The Early Church

Views of Pre-Nicene Western Fathers

The Alexandrian Fathers

The 12th through the 16th Century Church

The Development of Historicism

The 18th Century Church

The Rise of Literary—Critical and Dramatic Approaches

The 19th through the 21st Century Church

The Rise of the Futurist Approach

The Development of the Spiritual Approach

The Contemporary Conservative Protestant Scene

The Development of the Pre-Wrath Position

The Development of the Partial Preterist View

ANALYSIS OF THE SIX APPROACHES:

- 1. The HISTORICIST Approach:**
Revelation Surveys the Whole of Church History.
- 2. The PRETERIST Approach:**
Fulfillment is in the Past, Shortly after the Time of Writing.
- 3. The FUTURIST Approach:**
Everything After Chapter Three Awaits Fulfillment in the Future.
- 4. The SPIRITUAL Approach:**
No Single Fulfillment: Only Transcendent Principles and Recurrent Themes.
- 5. The PRE-WRATH Approach:**
The rapture happens when Antichrist's persecution against God's elect is cut short by Christ's coming.
- 6. The PARTIAL PRETERIST Approach:**
Most of the Book of Revelation occurred during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
Yet, still affirms an orthodox future bodily return of Christ to earth at an unknown day and hour.