

When Was the Book of Revelation Written?

Does it really matter? If so, Why? Preterists won't like this article!

When people write about the dating of the books of the New Testament they often reveal much about their theological position in relation to those books. Liberal theologians and sceptics like to put the date of the authorship of the Gospels long after the event in order to cast doubt on their authenticity.

Date of Other New Testament Books

If we take the testimony of the New Testament writers at their word, it is clear that **almost all of what we now have as the New Testament had to be written before AD70**; the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Central to dating the New Testament is the Book of Acts. It is reasonable to conclude that the events described in the last chapters of Acts must have taken place before AD62. The view of the Roman Empire given in these chapters fits in well with what we know of the relatively benign rule of Nero in his **early years** when he was under the influence of the philosopher Seneca (Nero reigned from AD54-68).

By AD59 Seneca's influence over Nero decreased, and in AD62 Seneca retired altogether to devote his time to writing. Nero became increasingly tyrannical as Seneca withdrew from public life.

We know from the writing of Josephus that the governor Festus who features in Acts 25 succeeded Felix in AD59 and died in AD62. Acts does not record the death of Paul which, according to tradition, took place between AD64-67. It would seem highly unlikely that Acts could have been written after the death of Paul, since Luke would almost certainly have recorded that event.

Luke tells us at the beginning of Acts that his Gospel was written before Acts. **At the beginning of Luke he tells us that other Gospels were written before his.** At least this must include Mark and probably Matthew. The last of Paul's letters must have been written by AD64-67 when he died. So must Peter's epistles before his martyrdom around AD64-68, and James' likewise about AD62.

Even if Hebrews was not written by Paul, it must have been written before the destruction of the Temple or it would have made no sense.

By this process we have covered most of the New Testament apart from John's writings. Since John lived until the end of the first century his writings could be later than AD70 and used Roman time.

For this reason, we should place the dating of the bulk of the New Testament before 70AD, before the destruction of the Second Temple, whatever liberal theologians may teach in Bible colleges. **When it comes to the Book of Revelation, however, a late date is much more plausible.**

The issue of the dating of Revelation has a bearing on one's interpretation of it. For those who take a Pre-millennial view of Scripture the prophetic events of Revelation are to happen in the **future**, in particular the prophecies of the Beast / Antichrist in Revelation 13 and 17.

Preterist View

Conflicting with this view, is the Preterist view that the events of Revelation and of the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled in the destruction of the Temple in AD70. Obviously if Revelation was written after this event it has no value as a prophecy of Jerusalem's fall and can't possibly refer the fall of Jerusalem: it must be a future tribulation.

This view is favoured by liberal and Catholic theologians who like to see Revelation as a coded message about the struggle of the early church with the Roman Empire, particularly during the times of the persecutions of Nero. It has been claimed that the number 666 of Revelation 13 is a reference to Nero.

The way of arriving at this conclusion is somewhat complicated. It involves taking a relatively uncommon form of Nero's name, Nero Cæsar or Cæsar Nero, and adding an "n", resulting in Neron Cæsar. Next the Latin is transliterated into Aramaic, resulting in "nrwn qsr" which, when using the numeric equivalent of the letters, then adds up to 666 as follows:

Nun	=	50
Resh	=	200
Waw	=	6
Nun	=	50
Qoph	=	100
Samech	=	60
Resh	=	200

An example of this spelling has apparently been recently discovered in one of the Dead Sea scrolls. If you use the same process, but without the added “n”, the result is 616. Interestingly, a very few early manuscripts have 616 rather than 666, but even scholars such as Irenæus [AD120-202] attribute the 616 number to a copyist error. He wrote:

“This number [666] being found in **all the most approved and ancient copies**” [of the Apocalypse] and asserts that “men who saw John face to face bearing their testimony” [to it - 666] (*Against Heresies: Book V Ch.XXX*).

There is a problem though with the above calculation. According to the rules of Jewish numerology, known as gematria, when the letter Nun appears a second time in a word, it is known as a “Final”, and takes the value of 700. So to be precise, “nrwn qsr” actually adds up to 1316 and not 666.

Reconstructionist View

Another viewpoint which looks for an early dating of Revelation is the Reconstructionist view (also known as Post-millennialism, Restorationism or Kingdom and Dominion teaching) which believes that Jesus will not come back until the Church has taken dominion of the earth through establishing a Christian world government and bringing the nations into subjection to the Gospel.

Obviously the Pre-millennial view that the condition of the world at the time of the Second Coming will be one of Great Tribulation with the nations in rebellion against God, and turning to Antichrist not Jesus Christ, does not square with this view. Therefore some means has to be found to re-interpret Revelation and the Olivet Discourse for this view to be plausible.

This is done by David Chilton in his book *Days of Vengeance*, in which he writes:

“The Book of Revelation is not about the Second Coming of Christ. It is about the destruction of Israel and Christ’s victory over His enemies (i.e. Israel) in the establishment of the New Covenant Temple. In fact as we shall see the word coming as used in the Book of Revelation never refers to the Second Coming. Revelation prophesies the judgment of God on apostate Israel” (page 43).

This view takes a **very anti-Israel position** and bends the Scriptures in a most remarkable way, ignoring the clear reference to the Lord Jesus coming with power to the earth in Revelation 19.

There is no way that the events of AD70 were “Christ’s victory over His enemies”. Rather they were the victory of the anti-Christian Roman Empire over the Jewish revolt. For sure this was prophesied by the Lord Jesus in Luke 19:41-44 and in 21:20-24, but with the added word that the desolation of Jerusalem would **not be a permanent condition**:

“Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, UNTIL the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).

For Chilton’s view to make sense, it is vital that the Book of Revelation must have been written before AD70. One of his fellow Post-millennialists, Kenneth Gentry, writes:

“If it could be demonstrated that Revelation were written 25 years after the fall of Jerusalem, Chilton’s entire work would go up in smoke.” (*The Days of Vengeance: A Review Article, The Council of Chalcedon, Vol 11, No 4, p 11*).

In fact, as Thomas Ice points out:

“If Revelation was written even one day after the fall of Jerusalem then it ceases to be a prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem.”

The evidence points to a **late date for Revelation, during the persecutions of the Emperor Domitian around AD95-96**, and the text and testimony of the early Church support this view. We will now examine the evidence for this.

The Testimony of Irenaeus

The early church father Irenaeus (AD120-202) wrote around AD180: “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 (i.e. the Apostle John). **For that was seen not very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.**”

Irenaeus was from Asia Minor (modern Turkey) which is also the region of Ephesus where John ministered at the end of his life. He was taught by Polycarp who was himself taught by John, so he represents a **direct line of communication with John**. This gives weight to his testimony that Revelation was written during Domitian’s reign.

The Testimony of Eusebius

Eusebius, the Church historian who lived AD265-339, affirms Irenaeus’ dating of Revelation and also declares that John’s banishment to the Isle of Patmos occurred during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, commenting:

“After Domitian had reigned fifteen years, Nerva succeeded. The sentences of Domitian were annulled, and the Roman Senate decreed the return of those who had been unjustly banished and the restoration of their property. Those who committed the story of those times to writing relate it. At that time too the story of the ancient Christians relates that the Apostle John after his banishment to the island took up his abode in Ephesus.”

Eusebius goes on to say that John remained alive and returned from Patmos to continue in ministry which he says is confirmed by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. (*The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, translated by Isaac Boyle, p 188*).

The Testimony of Victorinus

Victorinus wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation about AD258 - 260 when he was a bishop in Modern day Slovenia. He was martyred in AD304 in reign of Diocletian. His Commentary revised by Jerome (AD398) to remove Chilianism/millennialism to conform to Nicean/Constantinopal Creed of AD381. The original

version of his commentary indicates he believed:

- There would be Great Tribulation before Christ returned
- Antichrist would be a Roman Emperor
- The Temple at Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the Jews would be converted in the last days
- Christ would return in glory after the Tribulation.
- There would be a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth.
- He understood mystery Babylon to be Rome on the 7 hills of Rome and that she was to be destroyed by God.

Victorinus clearly stated that John wrote the Book of the Revelation in the reign of Domitian about AD95-96 and the Gospel of John after AD96. In his comments on Revelation chapter 10 he stated:

“...He says, It is necessary to preach again, that is, to prophesy, among peoples, tongues, and nations: this is because, when John saw this, he was in the island of Pathmos, condemned to a mine by Caesar Domitian. Therefore, John is seen to have written the Apocalypse there. And when now old, he thought it possible to return after the suffering. Domitian having been killed, all his judgments were undone and John was released from the mine, and thus afterward he handed over this same Apocalypse which he received from the Lord. This is: It is necessary to preach again.”

In his comments on Chapter 11 he states:

“...and to show him a reed like a rod, so that he might measure the temple of God and the altar and those worshipping in it: he speaks of authority, which, having been released, he afterward displayed to the churches. For he also afterward wrote the Gospel. For when Valentinus and Cerinthus and Ebion and others of the school of Satan were spread throughout the world, the bishops of the nearby cities came together and compelled him, so that he might write his own testimony about the Lord.”

In his comments on Revelation chapter 17 Victorinus states:

“Accordingly, it is useful to understand the time in which the Apocalypse was written, because Domitian was Caesar then. And before him was Titus his brother and Vespasian their father, Otho, Vitellius, and Galba. These were five who have fallen; one is, he says, under whom he says the Apocalypse was written, namely Domitian.”

The testimony of Irenaeus, Victorinus and Eusebius from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries leaves no doubt about the date of the writing of the Book of Revelation.

Nero and Domitians' Persecutions

The evidence of Revelation fits perfectly with the persecutions under Domitian, but not at all with the conditions under Nero. Nero's persecutions occurred between AD64 (the date of the fire of Rome) and his death in AD68. They were local in character and largely confined to the area around Rome itself. There is no evidence that they spread as far as Asia Minor. Nero slaughtered Christians as a scapegoat for his own crimes, not because of any refusal to worship Caesar as Lord, which was not an issue in his time.

Domitian's persecutions, however, were much more widespread and did reach Asia Minor. The issue at the time of Domitian was the oath that Roman citizens were compelled to make declaring Caesar is Lord (Kurios Caesar). Christians could not take this oath as they believed that Jesus is Lord. **Domitian favoured banishment** rather than execution and those who were banished were eventually recalled. If John had suffered under Nero's persecutions in Rome he would have been killed like Peter and Paul; not banished.

The Letter to Ephesus

Another factor pointing to a late date for Revelation is the condition of the Seven Churches of Asia. Had John written before AD70 the message to the Church at Ephesus would have overlapped Paul's messages to Ephesus, and also the letter to Timothy, whom Paul appointed as bishop of the Ephesian Church.

Paul warned the Ephesians of the dangers of "*grievous wolves*" coming in to devour the flock (Acts 20:28-30) and appointed Timothy to oversee the Ephesian Church (1 Tim.1:3).

In his admonitions to Timothy and in his letter to the Ephesians there is no hint of the same problem which is highlighted in the Lord's word to Ephesus in Rev.2:1-7; losing their first love.

Paul's messages warn of deception coming in and the need to stand firm against the wiles of the Devil, and in the doctrine delivered by

the Apostle (Rev.2:1-7) rebukes the Ephesians for coldness towards the Lord as a result of doctrinal orthodoxy without love.

It is hard to believe that the two situations could be contemporary, as must be the case if Revelation were written before AD70. It is very easy to believe this could be the case if Revelation were written **a generation later**.

The Letter to Smyrna

According to Polycarp the Church at Smyrna was not founded until after the death of Paul, so it could not have been born any earlier than around AD64-67. There is no way that it could have reached the stage of being a representative Church for the letters to the Seven Churches if Revelation were written before AD70.

The Letter to Pergamos

History records that Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake in AD60 and took 25 years to rebuild. During the period AD60-AD70 the Church in Laodicea could not have been described as rich and in need of nothing (Rev.3.17). **By AD96, however, it had recovered its trade and wealth** so fitting in with this word from the Lord.

All of this points to a late date for the writing of Revelation and therefore a future fulfilment of its prophecies. The events of AD70 were long past by the time John penned these glorious words for our edification, and therefore they have nothing to do with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. Nor will this age end in the triumphant Church imposing Christianity on the nations. It will end with a time of Great Tribulation, as described in Revelation chs.6-19.

At the climax of this time of Tribulation, as the nations gather for the last battle at Armageddon, the Lord Jesus Christ will return in triumph, defeat the powers of evil and judge the world in righteousness. Then the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever (Rev.11:15).