The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday PM Bible Study

**Introduction Part 2**

**Dating the Revelation**

It is difficult to date with certainty any book of the bible. It is, however, much more difficult to attribute a date to the Revelation since in the eyes of most scholars, commentators and bible students, dependent on the date is the overarching interpretation of the book’s historical setting, dilemma and message. It is generally known that there are two dates proposed by scholars and commentators suggesting when the book was written.

The first is typically referred to as the *“late date”* and it pertains to the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. This date is accepted by a wide array of bible students and brethren as a plausible solution for the book’s historical setting, dilemma and message. The other and less popular view is that which is commonly referred to as the *“early date.”* This date is pre-70 A.D. and is generally used to suggest the historical setting, dilemma and message deal with the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Matt. 24). The early date does not necessitate that the destruction of Jerusalem be the focal point but most who hold to the early date view it in this light.

The following information is a brief synopsis of the evidence that has been put forth concerning both the early date and the late date. Naturally, the evidence will demonstrate which view is stronger but ultimately it cannot be known for sure which date John penned the message. The faithful disciple should be encouraged that regardless of the date, the message remains the same: **God will win!**

**Early Date (54-68 A.D.)**

Those who would make the argument for an early date generally place it around Nero (666 ?), the temple and its impending destruction, internal evidence (Rev. 11:1-2, 8 ?), the seven kings and the identification of Babylon the great.

Persecution of the Saints and Emperor Worship

The sporadic persecution that had occurred among the churches in Asia minor (2:3, 9, 13, 19; 3:8) is cited as the ongoing result of what Nero started in 64 A.D. Tacitus records the persecution against the Christians in Rome (*Annals,* 15.44) who were blamed for the great fire that many speculate was the fault of Nero.

This situation was an isolated one by most accounts and was not the foundation of concerted efforts to persecute Christians either in Rome or outside of Rome (Asia Minor). There are others, however, who describe Nero as demanding worship as a god and those who would not relinquish would suffer. There is strong evidence to the contrary, however, that suggests not only that Nero was not deified but that it was not the practice of the early emperors to be worshipped while alive.

Osborne says, *“In the Roman world this began early on with the deification of Julius Caesar and Augustus, followed by Claudius and Vespasian. But the practice was to deify the emperor after he died rather than to worship a living emperor. Caligula demanded to be worshipped, but he was not recognized as divine by the senate. Tiberius and Claudius refused deification while they were alive. More important for the issue here is that Nero was not deified, though there is some evidence that he wished to be. However, there was no widespread demand that he be recognized as such”* (Osborne, *Revelation*.)

The Identification of the Beast– 666

Still there are some who hold that the identification of the beast points to Nero and if the beast is active then Nero must have been alive at the time Revelation was written (cf. Rev. 13). The number put forth in Revelation 13:18 (666) is suggested as correlating to the Hebrew gematria of Nero’s name (Neron Caesar). Yet, this suggests that the audience would have been well versed with Hebrew and the gematria system but evidence shows most of these Christians and readers were Greek speaking and/or gentiles. This would also mean that we take a literal rendering of the number than adhering to its symbolical meaning.

The Seven Kings

Another argument put forth by advocates of this date is that Nero is identified as the King who is alive during the Revelation based on Revelation 17:9-10. If taken literally, the five kings that have fallen could be Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. The one *“who is”* would then be Vespasian (if Galba, Otho and Vitellius are not considered legitimate). On the other hand, some claim Julius Caesar was recognized as the first Roman emperor.

Thus, the list would now consist of Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius who would together represent the five fallen kings. That would make Nero the one *“who is”* which advocates of the early date suggest as proof that the Revelation was written during his reign. However, there are many who count Galba, Otho and Vitellius as legitimate emperors and discount Julius Caesar from the list. There is no real consensus concerning the list of legitimate emperors.

Again, these problems arise primarily because the passage is taken literally just as Rev. 13:18 is taken literally. Concerning the seven kings, G.K. Beale says, *“More likely the seven kings are not to be identified with any specific historical rulers but represent rather the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God’s people”* (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*). Is there other evidence to suggest that the Revelation was written before 70 A.D.?

The Temple

We said earlier that most who hold to this date attribute the book to the destruction of Jerusalem. This they do by suggesting Rev. 11:1-2, 8 as evidence that the temple is still standing and the later chapters speak of its destruction. This is a possibility if, again, the text is read and interpreted literally. Yet, most of this chapter if interpreted literally will not make much sense. Faithful bible students will realize that the temple of chapter 11 is the same one spoken of by Ezekiel in the final chapters of that book (40-48).

The Destruction of Jerusalem and Babylon the Great

There is yet one more crucial piece of evidence that may or may not point to a pre-70 A.D. composition. The identification of Babylon the great or the harlot in chapters 17 and 18 is often used to support the argument that not only was the book written before 70 A.D. but that it clearly speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem. Why is Babylon identified as Jerusalem?

Beale notes, *“…11:8 refers to the place “where their Lord was crucified” as “the great city,” and in the following chapters “the great city” is also called “Babylon” (18:10, 16, 18-19, 21; cf. 14:8; 17:5)”* (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*). This is possible if 11:1-2, 8 is taken literally and applied to what is seen in chapter 17 and 18.

There is also the emphasis of the harlot as Babylon the great. There is a strong possibility this could be referencing the unfaithfulness of the Israelites (Ezek. 23; Hosea) and especially their persecution of the saints that particularly takes place in the book of Acts (Acts 14:2-6, 19; 17:5-8). Jesus Himself spoke of the cruelty and persecution the Jews did among their own people and that they would be judged for it (Matt. 23:34-37; Matt. 24).

But is Revelation 11, 17 and 18 speaking of this? As we have already discussed, one would have to interpret Rev. 11:1-2, 8 literally to fit the context of 17 and 18. It is true that the Jews have been infamous for their rejection of the Messiah and stirring up trouble among their own people and also the gentiles. If it be true that the book speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem, what comfort and encouragement do saints receive from that especially since it is known from external evidence that Christians were persecuted well after 70 A.D.? Christians were already being persecuted but the worse was still to come.

External Evidence

There is external evidence which suggests that the situations spoken of in the churches in Asia minor may not have full developed as yet during the 60’s A.D. It is believed that the church at Smyrna hadn’t existed in the 60’s. Laodicea experienced a crippling earthquake in the early 60’s but yet the city is described as wealthy in Rev. 3. Such would necessitate that time had passed in order for recovery and growth to have taken place. The early date would not fit well with these examples.

Early date related to Rome

Finally, we said earlier that most who hold to the early date view the book as relating to the destruction of Jerusalem. There are some who hold to this date but believe it to be referencing Roman persecution and it has nothing to do with Jerusalem. This view is accepted by some but the evidence is rather weak. As we discussed briefly, there are no examples of Roman emperors demanding worship except for Caligula who died before he could erect a statue of himself in Jerusalem. Nero’s persecution was isolated and never spread beyond Rome. The growing practice of emperor worship while they were yet alive did not become popular until the late 1st century.

Domitian would have been reigning at this time which would negate the early date. Yet it wasn’t until the 2nd and 3rd centuries that emperors demanded utter loyalty and worship as deity thus magnifying the trend which began towards the end of the 1st century and not before. The evidence for an earlier date of the book is stronger vis-à-vis the Jerusalem/temple destruction dilemma than Roman persecution in the middle of the 1st century.

**Late Date (81-96 A.D.)**

Those who hold to the view that the book of Revelation was composed during the 80’s or 90’s A.D. refer to this as the *“late date.”* Because this view sees Revelation’s completion post 70 A.D. the destruction of Jerusalem is not discussed since it has already transpired. This view largely centers around emperor worship and whether or not is was existent at the time or how prevalent it was if it already existed.

Emperor Worship

Well known scholars and religious figures Irenaeus, Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria and Origen all point to the setting of Revelation taking place towards the end of Domitian’s reign. When one reads the Revelation, it is clear that there is a conflict between the saints and their enemies. Mounce sheds further light on this matter by saying the following:

*“When one turns to Revelation itself, it is evident that the background is one of conflict between the demands of a totalitarian secular power and allegiance to the Christian faith. The Roman Empire is personified as a beast who demands universal worship (Rev 13:4, Rev 13:15-17; Rev 14:9; Rev 16:2; Rev 19:20), insisting that everyone bear his “mark” or be put to death (Rev 13:15-17; Rev 14:9; Rev 16:2; Rev 19:20; Rev 20:4). These references can be reasonably interpreted only in terms of the development of the imperial cult, specifically in Asia Minor”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).

While most of the early emperors received deification after their death, the tendency to worship the king or the emperor as divine grew rapidly as each one died. Therefore, by the time Domitian came to power it was well known that the king ought to be revered as such. W.G. Kümmel speaks of the state of the saints under Domitian by saying, *“persecution of Christians by the state on religious grounds took place for the first time”* (Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*).

Elsewhere he adds, *“The picture of the time which the Apocalypse sketches coincides with no epoch of the primitive history so well as with the period of Domitian’s persecution”* (Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*). However, solid evidence of saints being persecuted for not worshipping the emperor does not surface till later during the reign of Trajan (98-117 A.D.). Nevertheless, there is some evidence suggesting Domitian insisted on divine titles more so than his predecessors and any found unwilling to accept him as deity were punished.

The Roman historian Dio Cassius records a particular striking instance where Domitian may have himself oppressed Christians: *“And the same year Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperors. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria”* (Dio Cassius, *Roman History 67.14*).

It is interesting that the charge is atheism thereby indicating that Domitian considered himself the only god and there was no other beside him. Furthermore, Cassius discusses that they had drifted into Jewish ways. What exactly is this referring to? Early on when Christianity had just started and it began to grow, the Romans as well as many others viewed Christianity as a cult or a sect of the Jewish ways or religion. Beale says, *“Christianity likely took on the appearance of an illegitimate Jewish sect”* (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*). As such, it is quite possible Cassius records an instance where Christianity is called Jewish ways and these gentile converts were persecuted for their faith.

Some scholars argue, however, that Domitian himself did not require emperor worship. It was instead the aristocrats and governors who forced others to do so in order to flatter the king so they could gain favor and perhaps climb up the ladder. While this is likely, it does not negate the facts of what Dio Cassius recorded. This also does not rule out the possibility that Domitian grew to enjoy this flattery and later required it of the populace.

Osborne adds, *“Asia was the epicenter of the imperial cult, and cities competed for the privilege of erecting a temple. In 29 B.C. Pergamum was the first to erect a temple, and Smyrna the second in A.D. 21 after a vigorous competition. Ephesus was the third, and it was especially linked with establishing the Flavian dynasty in Asia. A seven-meter statue of Titus (some think Domitian) was erected in the temple, and worship of the emperor was meant to bind the province of Asia together under the Pax Romana”* (Osborne, *Revelation*.)

Persecution of the Saints

We have stated above that the persecution in the book of Revelation has been sporadic and minor to what is later described as a systematic, concerted effort to oppress the saints (6:9-11; 12:1; 13:7, 10, 15; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). Many scholars and commentators contend that Roman persecution was not the persecution spoken of in chapters 2 and 3. While Nero did harm the saints, there is little or no evidence that this spread to Asia minor.

Most of the evidence of persecution of the saints during the reign of Domitian comes later after his death. There is no solid evidence for full blown persecution during his reign but there is evidence to suggest little had begun (cf. Cassius, *Roman History 67.14*). Osborne in citing from Clement says, *“…speaks of “sudden and repeated calamites” that had fallen upon the church, and in 7.1 Clement says “we are in the same arena, and the same struggle [as in the time of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul] is before us”* (Osborne, *Revelation*.)

While there is not much evidence of widespread, systematic persecution during the time of Domitian, the situation of the churches in Asia minor experiencing persecution may relate to the increasing tendency of the Roman culture to participate in events and festivals linked to religious practices associated with the emperors. The citizens, including Christians, were placed under severe pressure to adhere to the practice and cast their loyalty to these religious notions.

Background of the Churches in Asia Minor

The churches in Asia minor and their respective environments/situations give us a fairly good insight of which date fits better. It is widely known and recognized that the city of Laodicea experienced a devastating earthquake in 60-61 A.D. That they would be described as wealthy (Rev. 3:17) only a couple years after the earthquake (if early date is taken) is not very plausible. On the other hand, the city was reconstructed in 80 A.D. which would fit well with the later date and thus the description of the Laodiceans being wealthy would be appropriate.

Beale suggests the spiritual problems experienced by some of the churches which aided in their spiritual deterioration may have taken place over a longer amount of time than a shorter one. 60’s A.D. would mean a shorter period of time but 80’s or 90’s A.D. would be longer. It is also believed that the church is Smyrna may not have existed until after 69 A.D.

G.K. Beale argues that the strongest evidence for a later date comes from the identification of Babylon the great in Rev. 17-18. Of course, this is the same thing that advocates of the pre-70 A.D. date suggest attributing Babylon to Jerusalem. Beale says, *“‘Babylon’ refers to Rome in Jewish literature after 70 A.D. and roughly contemporary with the Apocalypse. Jewish commentators called Rome “Babylon” because the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 70 A.D. just as Babylon had done in the sixth century B.C.”* (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*).

**A Possible Third Option**

Some hold to a view that is an intermediary between the early date and the late date. This view is gotten by semi-literal reading of Rev. 17:9-11 (The seven kings). McGuiggan holds to this view and suggests that the seven kings are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian and Titus. Julius Caesar, Galba, Otho and Vitellius are removed since none are considered legitimate emperors. Thus, that would make the 8th *“who is one of the seven”* Domitian.

The five who are fallen ends with Nero and so the one *“who is”* would be Vespasian. Thus, McGuiggan and a select few contend that the book was written some time during Vespasian’s reign (69-79 A.D.) Vespasian is known for some trouble but not to the extent Nero, Domitian, Trajan and later emperors were known for. This would also mean the book spoke of the widespread impending persecution falling under Domitian’s reign and those proceeding him. Yet, as we have already discussed, there is not much evidence to suggest a systematic widespread persecution under Domitian.

While this view may be more plausible that the early date, it is still weaker than the late date. This necessitates that we decipher the seven kings in Rev. 17:9-11 but as we have already seen, it is rather difficult to know which seven would be considered legitimate. We must also consider that the number 7 is rather symbolic and is often used that way in this book.

**Conclusion:**

While the evidence for the early date is good, it falls apart in several areas and the later date is likely more plausible in respect to internal and external evidence. One may choose to accept the intermediate date but it is still weaker than the late date. Ultimately it cannot be known for sure the exact date of the book, but one thing we do know that is certain: **God will win and overcome the enemy!**

**Sources:**

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