

When Was Revelation Written?

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The date of the writing of Revelation has been hotly disputed by preterists. Preterism is the belief that all prophecy has been fulfilled, including the second coming of Jesus Christ, which is alleged to have occurred in a non-physical sense in AD 70. Christian tradition has placed John's exile to Patmos during the reign of the emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). Not until the rise of preterism has this been challenged.

The dispute over the date of the composition of Revelation is a crucial one. If it was composed by John after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, preterism is at once refuted. Revelation is a prophetic book, predicting the coming of Christ in the future. A post-AD70 date makes equating the coming of Christ with the destruction of Jerusalem utterly impossible.

There is no question that Revelation was written while John was a prisoner of the Roman state, exiled to the prison island of Patmos. That much can be gathered from the first chapter of Revelation. *"I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ."*¹

There were only two Roman emperors who persecuted Christians on a large scale in the first century, Nero and Domitian. The other Emperors were either indifferent to Christianity, or did not consider it a serious threat to Rome. The first Roman persecution under Nero took place in the decade of the 60s, just before the fall of Jerusalem. Nero was responsible for the deaths of both Peter and Paul in Rome in AD 67, Peter by crucifixion, and Paul by being beheaded.

There is no record of Nero's banishing Christians to Patmos, only his brutality against the Christians of Rome. It was Nero who made a sport of throwing Christians to the lions for the entertainment of the crowds, and who burned many at the stake along the road leading to the Coliseum merely to light the entrance.

After Nero's death Rome left the Christians alone until the rise of Domitian to power in AD 81. Although not as cruel and insane as Nero, Domitian had many Christians killed, the property of Christians confiscated. Scriptures and other Christian books were burned, houses of Christians were destroyed, and many of the most prominent Christians were banished to the prison island of Patmos.

All ancient sources, both Christian and secular, place the banishment of Christians to Patmos during the reign of Domitian (AD81-96). Not a single early source (within 500 years of John) places John's banishment under the reign of Nero, as preterists claim. All modern attempts to date Revelation during Nero's reign rely exclusively on alleged internal evidence, and ignore or seek to undermine the external evidence and testimony of Christians who lived about that time, some of whom had connections to John.

Eusebius the Christian historian, living only two hundred years after Domitian's reign, gathered evidence from both Christian and secular sources that were still extant at the time (some of which are no longer extant today). All of the sources at Eusebius' disposal placed the date of John's Patmos exile during the reign of Domitian. Eusebius' earliest source was Irenaeus, disciple of Polycarp, disciple of John. But he also used other unnamed sources both Christian and secular to place the date of the Patmos exile of Christians during Domitian's reign (AD 81-96).

*"It is said that in this persecution [under Domitian] the apostle and evangelist John, who was still alive, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos in consequence of his testimony to the divine word. Irenaeus, in the fifth book of his work Against Heresies, where he discusses the number of the name of Antichrist which is given in the so-called Apocalypse of John, speaks as follows concerning him: 'If it were necessary for his name to be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been declared by him who saw the Revelation. For it was seen not long ago, but almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian.' To such a degree, indeed, did the teaching of our faith flourish at that time that even those writers who were far from our religion did not hesitate to mention in their histories the persecution and the martyrdoms which took place during it. And they, indeed, accurately indicated the time. For they recorded that in the fifteenth year of Domitian Flavia Domitilla, daughter of a sister of Flavius Clement, who at that time was one of the consuls of Rome, was exiled with many others to the island of Pontia in consequence of testimony borne to Christ."*²

While Eusebius quoted Irenaeus' statement, notice that he also indicated that other secular histories at his disposal accurately indicated the banishment of Christians to Patmos occurred during Domitian's reign. Eusebius continues:

"Tertullian also has mentioned Domitian in the following words: 'Domitian also, who possessed a share of Nero's cruelty, attempted once to do the same thing that the latter did. But because he had, I suppose, some intelligence, he very soon ceased, and even recalled those whom he had banished.' But after Domitian had reigned fifteen years, and Nerva had succeeded to the empire, the Roman Senate, according to the writers that record the history of those days, voted that Domitian's horrors should be cancelled, and

that those who had been unjustly banished should return to their homes and have their property restored to them. It was at this time that the apostle John returned from his banishment in the island and took up his abode at Ephesus, according to an ancient Christian tradition.”³

Here again Eusebius mentioned an ancient Christian tradition, but did not quote his sources, that placed John's return from exile on Patmos after Domitian's fifteen year reign, and Nerva's rise to power (AD 96).

There is more early evidence, both explicit and implicit, from other early writers prior to Eusebius. Victorinus, bishop of Pettaw (Italy), agreed with Irenaeus. That Victorinus did not rely on Irenaeus for his information is clear from the fuller details of his statement not referenced by Irenaeus.

*“‘And He says unto me, Thou must again prophesy to the peoples, and to the tongues, and to the nations, and to many kings.’ He says this, because **when John said these things he was in the island of Patmos, condemned to the labor of the mines by Caesar Domitian.** There, therefore, he saw the Apocalypse; and when grown old, he thought that he should at length receive his quittance by suffering, Domitian being killed, all his judgments were discharged. And John being dismissed from the mines, thus subsequently delivered the same Apocalypse which he had received from God.”⁴*

A little farther, Victorinus again made the same claim.

“The time must be understood in which the written Apocalypse was published, since then reigned Caesar Domitian; but before him had been Titus his brother, and Vespasian, Otho, Vitellius, and Galba.”⁵

Clement of Alexandria (AD150-220) recounted a story about John shortly after his return from exile, while a very old man.

*“And that you may be still more confident, that repenting thus truly there remains for you a sure hope of salvation, listen to a tale, which is not a tale but a narrative, handed down and committed to the custody of memory, about the Apostle John. For when, **on the tyrant's death, he returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos,** he went away, being invited, to the contiguous territories of the nations, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole Churches, there to ordain such as were marked out by the Spirit.”⁶*

The expression “the tyrant's death” can only refer to the death of either Nero or Domitian, the only two “tyrants” that ruled in the first century. Eusebius related that

upon the death of Domitian, the Roman senate voted to release those exiled by Domitian. This seems to parallel Clement's statement above. However, the above statement *could* refer to Nero, except for one fact. In the story that Clement related, he clearly stated that John was a very old and feeble man. John was still relatively young when Nero died.

The story is about a young new convert whom John entrusted to a certain elder to disciple in the Faith. The man had formerly been a thief and robber. Upon John's return from exile on Patmos, he heard that this young man had returned to his old life of crime. Upon hearing this, he sharply rebuked the elder in whose custody he had left him. John immediately set out for the place where this robber and his band were known to lurk. Upon reaching the place, he was assaulted by the band of robbers. He demanded of them to take him to their leader. They brought John to the very man whom John had formerly won to Christ, and left in the custody of the elder. When the young man saw John approaching, he began to run away. John began to run after him, calling, *"Why, my son, dost thou flee from me, thy father, unarmed, old? Son, pity me. Fear not; thou hast still hope of life. I will give account to Christ for thee. If need be, I will willingly endure thy death, as the Lord did death for us. For thee I will surrender my life. Stand, believe; Christ hath sent me."* John then explained to him that forgiveness and restoration was still possible. Clement then stated, *"And he, when he heard, first stood, looking down; then threw down his arms, then trembled and wept bitterly. And on the old man approaching, he embraced him, speaking for himself with lamentations as he could, and baptized a second time with tears, concealing only his right hand. The other pledging, and assuring him on oath that he would find forgiveness for himself from the Savior, beseeching and failing on his knees, and kissing his right hand itself, as now purified by repentance, led him back to the church."*⁷

From this account we see that upon John's release from exile on Patmos, he was a feeble old man. John was most likely in his teens or early twenties when Jesus called him. He and his brother James were working with their father as fishermen (Matt. 4:21-22). Assuming John was in his twenties, he would have been in his eighties in AD 96. If he was in his teens when Jesus called him, he would have been in his seventies at the end of Domitian's reign. However, if the "tyrant" referred to by Clement was Nero, then John would have still been fairly young by the time of Nero's death, perhaps in his forties or early fifties. He would hardly be spoken of as a feeble old man by Clement.

That John lived until after the reign of Domitian is also shown by Irenaeus' repeated references to his own mentor, Polycarp, being John's disciple.⁸ Polycarp was born in AD 65, and died in AD 155. He was five years old when Jerusalem was destroyed. He was two years old when Nero died. His being tutored by John therefore must have been at

least a decade after the destruction of Jerusalem, and more likely two or three decades afterward.

More than one early writer mentioned the persecution of the Apostles under Nero. They spoke of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, but made no mention of John's exile during this persecution.

As is obvious to the unbiased reader, the early external evidence that Revelation was written under the reign of Domitian is indisputable. No evidence exists, from the first three centuries of Christian tradition, placing the composition of Revelation during the reign of Nero. Nor is there any evidence (Christian or secular) that Nero exiled any Christians to Patmos.

The familiarity of John and his readers with Temple worship in Revelation is alleged to indicate that both he and his readers relied on personal first hand knowledge of Temple worship in Jerusalem. According to preterists, this implies that the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing when Revelation was written.

However, this argument is flawed at its very foundation. The Old Testament is full of the same Temple imagery. Any Gentile Christian familiar with the Old Testament (LXX) would be sufficiently familiar with the Temple imagery. Furthermore, familiarity with the New Testament book of Hebrews would also be sufficient. Even a cursory reading of Revelation reveals that John's visions and comments reference Old Testament prophecy on virtually every page.

Ezekiel saw a future Temple in his prophetic visions.⁹ Yet, his visions occurred during the Babylonian captivity years after Solomon's Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Many of those who returned after the seventy year captivity to rebuild the Temple had never seen Solomon's Temple, or observed its rituals.¹⁰ Their familiarity with the Temple was based solely on the Torah and scrolls like Ezekiel's and Daniel's.

The Temple destroyed by the Romans has been gone for nearly 2000 years. No one in the last 1900 years has seen it. If preterists' claims are correct, we should not be able to understand Revelation or write about Temple worship today because we have no personal first-hand knowledge of the Temple and its rituals. Such a position is absurd, since our knowledge of the Temple comes from the Scriptures. Neither the writing nor understanding of Revelation requires or implies first hand knowledge of the Temple. The Old Testament is sufficient. John certainly was himself familiar with the Temple, having been there with Jesus on several occasions. And his readers were well trained in

the Old Testament Scriptures. There is therefore no good reason to suppose that the Temple must have been still standing for John's readers to understand the book.

That John was told in his vision to "*measure the Temple and them that worship therein*,"¹¹ is likewise no indication that the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem. This prophetic vision clearly parallels Ezekiel's vision.¹² Ezekiel saw his vision during the Babylonian captivity, fourteen years after Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.¹³ Yet, in his vision, Ezekiel was taken to Jerusalem, shown a glorious Temple far larger than Solomon's Temple, and proceeded to record all the measurements of the Temple in great detail. John saw his prophetic Temple vision during Domitian's reign (AD 81-96). It is obvious that the command given John in chapter 11 to "*measure the Temple*" was meant to parallel Ezekiel's vision. Since Ezekiel saw his Temple vision fourteen years after the first Temple had been destroyed, there is every reason to conclude that the same situation existed when John wrote Revelation. Ezekiel's Temple vision and prophecy was clearly intended to portray a future rebuilt Temple. Ezekiel did not see the former (Solomon's) Temple that had been destroyed, or a Temple that was currently standing. Therefore, John's vision of the Temple in Jerusalem should be seen in the same way, being a prophetic portrayal of the Temple that will indeed be rebuilt.

That this is how the early Christians understood Revelation, even after the destruction of the Temple, is clear from their claims that the Temple in Jerusalem would be rebuilt and would be the seat of the Antichrist in the last days.¹⁴

Preterist attempts to date Revelation before the destruction of Jerusalem fail on both internal and external evidence. This failure is indicative of their whole system, which is forced upon the Scriptures, and in this case, upon history as well. Preterist scholarship on this question is clearly agenda driven.

Notes:

1. Rev. 1:9
2. Eusebius, Bk. III, ch. xviii
3. *ibid.* ch. xx
4. Victorinus, Commentary on the Apocalypse, XI
5. *ibid.* ch. XVII
6. Clement, Who is the Rich Man that shall be Saved, XLII
7. *ibid.*
8. Irenaeus, frag. ii
9. Ezek. 40-44
10. cf. Hag. 2:3
11. Rev. 11:1-2
12. cf. Ezek. 40:3ff & Rev. 13:1-2
13. Ezek. 40:1
14. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk V, XXV, i-ii, Bk. V, XXX, iv, Hippolytus, On Daniel, II, xxxix, Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, vi, Appendix to the Works of Hippolytus, XXV