

Dating the Book of Revelation in Light of Tradition

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With regards to the when the Book of Revelation was written, there is a lack of consensus among the voices of tradition, which date the writing of this book to four different Roman emperors: Claudius, Nero, Domitian, and Trajan. Some traditions are imprecise and do not mention the emperors by name. The dominant view among present-day Biblical scholars is that the Book of Revelation was written in the late first century as one of the last books of the New Testament. This view is based on the internal information contained within the Book of Revelation than on the voices of tradition; nonetheless, proponents of dating the book to a later time are convinced that the voices of tradition also speak in favor of a later date when this book was written. Today, very few scholars believe that the last book of the New Testament was written earlier.

1. Citing the Book of Revelation

There are at least two themes common to the Book of Revelation and Flavius Josephus' *The Jewish War*, which was written around 75 AD. However, it is unlikely that there was a direct relationship between the two works, because there are no quotations common to both and the similarity in subject matter can be explained by the fact that both authors made use of themes present in Jewish apocalyptic literature. The Book of Revelation speaks of a series of seven plagues, while Flavius Josephus' work contains seven books; there are some traits common to both the last two plagues and Flavius Josephus' last two books.¹ The Book

1 The sixth book of *De bello Judaico* describes the destruction of Jerusalem; the seventh deals with the triumph and ceremony in the temple of the god of lightning; the sixth plague in the Book of Revelation always speaks of great destruction, while the seventh deals with lightning and triumph.

of Revelation also deals with a series of seven trumpets, which is a reference to seven voices. Meanwhile, according to Josephus, the destruction of the Temple was preceded by six voices (*De bello Judaico*, VI, 301). For Josephus, the number seven was an expression of completeness and immutability, while six was an incomplete number; six was an incomplete seven. Thus by using the series of six voices, he expressed his conviction that the destruction caused by the Romans was not irreversible and that therefore the Temple would be rebuilt.² Therefore, there is a series of similar themes, but they are used differently.

Deane James Woods has noted the similarities between the collection of poems titled *Silvae* by Publius Papinius Statius (d. 96) and the Book of Revelation. Woods has counted eleven similar themes common to both works. In Woods' view, the author of the Book of Revelation was familiar with the writing of Statius and made use of it in his work.³ These are rather far-reaching conclusions, because the *Silvae* was written near the end of Statius' life and is usually believed to have been written between 89 and 96, while the first three books were published after 93.⁴ Such a late date makes it impossible for the author of the Book of Revelation to have made use of this work not only during the rule of Nero, but under Domitian as well. Statius wrote in Naples while John was in Ephesus. The only acceptable date when the Book of Revelation was written was the last part of Trajan's rule. Furthermore, the author of the Book of Revelation made use above all of the books of the Old Testament and very reluctantly used contemporary sources. Thus the more likely possibility is that it was Statius who made use of the Book of Revelation, especially since the common themes are more discernible and clear in the latter work. Perhaps both made use of already-existing models, independent of each other. There are no quotations from the Book of Revelation in Statius.

One of the first works that cites the Book of Revelations is the First Epistle of Clement, which was written in the late first century. There are similarities between the text of 1 Clement 34:3 and Revelation 22:12. The similarities between the two texts are too strong for us to consider this a mere coincidence. When we compare the context and how the quotes are used, we can conclude that it is more likely that, due to the formula *προλέγει γὰρ ἡμῖν* preceding the quotation, the text from the First Epistle of Clement has the traits of a quotation.

2 Similarly, in Ezekiel 9:2 the first destruction of Jerusalem is done by six destroyers.

3 D. J. Woods, *Statius' "Silvae" and John's "Apocalypse": Some Parallel and Contrastive Motifs*, Dallas 1990, p. 321, 324.

4 D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Statius. Silvae*, Cambridge 2003, p. 5.

In the apocryphal epistle, these types of formulas are preceded by quotes from the Bible. Usually, these formulas sound as follows: λέγει γάρ, εἶπεν γάρ ἡδὴ γέγραπται γάρ. These quotes are usually not exact, so influence by the Book of Revelation is possible. This does not have to be a direct influence, because both texts also bear significant similarities to Isaiah 40:10 in the Septuagint. Both, however, lack the information about God’s strong arm (ὁ βραχίων μετὰ κυριείας), which could suggest reliance on one another. Although the date when the First Epistle of Clement was written is uncertain, it seems more likely that the author of the epistle quoted Revelation rather than the reverse. However, Clement uses four quotations of unknown origin, and thus we should not exclude the possibility that both he and the author of the Book of Revelation got this text from the Targumic tradition, for instance.⁵ Furthermore, there are no other texts influenced by or similar to the Book of Revelation; thus the reliance of the First Epistle of Clement on Revelation is not so obvious.

Iz 40:10 LXX	1 Klem 34:3	Ap 22:12
Ἰδοὺ κύριος μετὰ ἰσχύος ἔρχεται καὶ ὁ βραχίων μετὰ κυριείας, ἰδοὺ ὁ μισθὸς αὐτοῦ μετ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ ἔργον ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ.	Ἰδοὺ ὁ κύριος, καὶ ὁ μισθὸς αὐτοῦ πρὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ, ἀποδοῦναι ἑκάστῳ κατὰ τὸ ἔργον αὐτοῦ.	Ἰδοὺ ἔρχομαι ταχύ, καὶ ὁ μισθὸς μου μετ’ ἐμοῦ, ἀποδοῦναι ἑκάστῳ ὡς τὸ ἔργον ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ.

The Shepherd of Hermas is without a doubt a text influenced by Revelation; however, the exact date of the writing of the former work is unknown, and dating it has been dependent on dating Revelation. According to the Muratorian fragment, Hermas was the brother of Pius I, the bishop of Rome, and thus his *Shepherd* must have been written sometime after 140. According to Origen, the author is Hermas, who is mentioned in Romans 16:14, and thus *The Shepherd of Hermas* could not have been written later than in the first century. Those in favor of an earlier date of the Book of Revelation prefer to date it to the end of the first century (Schaff,⁶ Robinson,⁷ Gentry⁸). *The Shepherd of Hermas* can be used as an argument in favor of dating the Book of Revelation only if one proves that the *Shepherd* was written after 100. However, there is no strong evidence in favor of this.

The Book of Revelation is not quoted in the *Didache* or by Ignatius of Antioch, which is an argument in favor of a later date of this book. On the other hand, it

5 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids 1999, p. 1137 (The New International Greek Testament Commentary).
 6 P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids 1950, p. 688ff.
 7 J. A. vol. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, London 1976, p. 319–320.
 8 K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell. Dating the Book of Revelation*, Tyler 1976, p. 86–90.

could be the result of insufficient circulation of the Book of Revelation or of doubt as to whether it was a canonical book. The *Didache* deals with eschatological themes and is almost exclusively based on Matthew 24 (16:1–7). Ignatius writes letters to Ephesus, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, among others, to whom three of the seven epistles of the Book of Revelation were addressed (Revelation 2–3).

2. From Justin Martyr to the Muratorian Fragment

Justin Martyr never provides us with any information concerning the time when Revelation was written. He calls the author John, one of the apostles (81:4). His *Dialogue with Trypho* takes place in Smyrna at the beginning of the Bar Kokhba revolt (1:3; 9:3), which can be a reference to the conditions under which the Book of Revelation had been written in the past. David E. Aune mentions Justin as a proponent of the earlier date of Revelation.⁹

The author of the first commentary to the Book of Revelation is Melito of Sardis. This commentary has been lost; only the fragment of the *Apology* addressed to Marcus Aurelius cited by Eusebius, in which he mentions two emperors who persecuted Christians, Nero and Domitian, has been preserved.¹⁰ Thus we can assume that he believed that the Book of Revelation originated during the rule of one of them. R. H. Charles, however, considers Melito to be a proponent of a later date of the book.¹¹ We lack the information that would be needed to make such far-reaching conclusions.

According to the Muratorian fragment, when St. Paul the Apostle wrote his epistles to the Churches, he modeled them on the seven letters in Revelation (chapters 2 and 3). This does not mean that according to the author the fragment of Revelation had been written during the rule of Claudius. Rather, this would mean that it was written before the entire collection of Paul's Epistles and does not mean that it is older than each of the epistles.¹² It is worth noting that the chronology of Paul's Epistles is incorrect. The Epistles to the Thessalonians were sixth, and the Epistles to the Corinthians were considered to be the oldest.

9 D. Aune, *Revelation*, Dallas 1997, p. LVIII (Word Biblical Commentary, 52).

10 Euzebiusz z Cezarei, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV, 26, 7–11.

11 R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh 1920, vol. 1, p. XCII (International Critical Commentary, 44).

12 Por. W. Linke, *Data powstania i temat główny Apokalipsy Jana we wczesnej tradycji kościelnej*, [in:] *Trud w Panu nie jest daremny*, red. W. Linke, Niepokalanów 2010, p. 331.

3. Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus of Lyons believed that the book was written at the end of Domitian's rule (81–96).¹³ He calls the visionary John, a disciple of the Lord who lived until the reign of Trajan.¹⁴ Although Irenaeus does not directly refer to him as an apostle, the way in which he describes him suggests that he was an apostle.¹⁵ He mentions him alongside Paul. The apostles had selected Polycarp to be the bishop of Smyrna.¹⁶ Irenaeus does not mention these apostles by name.¹⁷ Perhaps Irenaeus was aware that the tradition concerning John the Apostle had been mixed up with that of another John who also was a disciple of Jesus. Because he was incapable of solving this problem, he does not call the author of Revelation an apostle just to be safe. Irenaeus' opinion regarding the time of writing Revelation was later repeated by Victorinus, Eusebius, Jerome, and other Church Fathers; it was also shared by medieval commentators and modern exegetes. It was also concluded that Irenaeus was referring to the Apostle John. Only in the nineteenth century was there talk of two disciples named John.

David E. Aune has pointed out that Irenaeus uncritically referred to voices of tradition that were not very credible. When describing the exceptionally plentiful harvest during the thousand-year kingdom, Irenaeus referred to the fourth book of Papias' lost work titled *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, which mentions the unbelievable amount of wine that the vine would produce. According to Irenaeus, this teaching comes from Jesus Himself, was repeated by John, a disciple of the Lord, and was ultimately written down by Papias *Adversus Haereses*, V, 33.3).¹⁸ Judas did not believe Jesus and doubted in the veracity of His prophecy (*Adversus Haereses*, V, 33.4). Meanwhile, this theme appears in the Jewish apocalyptic literature (1 Enoch 10:19; 2 Baruch 29:5) and originates in early Judaism. This theme is also present in the Apocalypse of Paul, which Papias could have used.¹⁹ The quote from Papias does not refer to John as an

13 *Adversus Haereses*, V, 30.3.

14 *Adversus Haereses*, II, 22.5; III, 3.4.

15 "Quidam autem eorum non solum Johannem, sed et alios apostolos viderunt" (II, 22.5). He also names him alongside Paul (III, 3.4).

16 *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3.4.

17 According to Tertullian, this was done by John the Apostle.

18 It is commonly assumed that Irenaeus had John the Apostle in mind.

19 D. E. Aune, *Prolegomena to the Study of Oral Tradition in the Hellenistic World*, [in:] H. Wansbrough, *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, London: T & T Clark International 2004, p. 82–83.

apostle, but as a disciple of the Lord. According to Eusebius, Papias never saw John the Apostle.

Papias gives a fairytale-like and very unlikely account of the death of Judas; among his claims are that the earth in the town where Judas had died ceased to be fertile and that up to his time it was impossible to go there without holding one's nose.²⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea criticizes Papias for referencing strange and legendary tales. He notes that Papias was respected by Church writers, among them Irenaeus, who rather credulously believed the former's accounts.²¹ Eusebius probably had in mind pre-Nicene writers. He calls Papias himself a dull mind.

It is not difficult to notice that Irenaeus mixes different traditions; for example, he includes the meeting between John the Apostle and Cerinthus in his account of Polycarp's encounter with Marcion (*Adversus Haereses*, III: 3.4). Irenaeus calls Papias a disciple of John and listener of the apostles.²² Eusebius of Caesarea accuses Irenaeus of not being precise in quoting Papias and notes that the latter never claimed to have seen or listened to the apostles. According to Eusebius, Papias was only a listener of presbyters²³ (i.e., John and Aristion). Perhaps Irenaeus confused the John the Presbyter with John the apostle. However, Eusebius' quotations and the way in which he judges Papias is rather ambiguous. The quote in *Adversus Haereses*, III: 39.3–4 does not unambiguously demonstrate that Papias saw the presbyters John and Aristion.

Perhaps Irenaeus' error resulted from the fact that the death of the author of Revelation took place shortly after Domitian's death. Furthermore, there were two disciples named John, and Irenaeus did not distinguish between them. According to Irenaeus, John lived in Ephesus up until the rule of Trajan and played an important role in Asia Minor. However, both Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna refer to Paul the Apostle and his activity in Asia Minor in their writings, but they completely avoid mentioning John the Apostle.²⁴ This does not preclude John the Apostle's stay in Ephesus,²⁵ but it suggests that this visit was either short or John did not play as important a role as Irenaeus

20 Apolinary z Laodycei, *Fragmenty*; A. W. Zwiep, *Judas and the Choice of Matthias. A Study on Context and Concern of Acts 1:15–26*, Tübingen 2004, p. 112–115.

21 *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 39.2–7.

22 *Adversus Haereses*, V, 33.4.

23 *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 39.8–14.

24 Por. C. Sandoval, *Can Christians Prove the Resurrection? A Reply to the Apologists*, Victoria 2010, p. 87.

25 Other sources also confirm John the Apostle's stay in Ephesus.

had claimed. Irenaeus himself claims to have seen Polycarp as a small child.²⁶ Irenaeus opinion was widely circulated and became broadly accepted in the early Church.²⁷

The value of Irenaeus' testimony is reduced by the fact that he tries to place it in the context of the challenges related to interpreting Revelation, trying to convince the reader using the argument that the book had been written recently, almost in his time, while he himself contacted people who had spoken to its author. Thus the reader should believe that his interpretation is correct. In this way, Irenaeus tries to portray himself as a disciple of the apostles. It is also worth noting that at least forty years passed between the rule of Domitian and the birth of Irenaeus, so it would be inaccurate to say that the Book of Revelation had been written almost during his time.

Irenaeus' version was commonly adopted by later Latin Church Fathers, because Irenaeus was considered to be a pupil of Polycarp, while Polycarp was considered to be a pupil of John the Apostle. Both of these views, however, are unlikely. Irenaeus himself only claims to have seen Polycarp as a small child.²⁸ Later legends made him his pupil. Polycarp probably also never saw John the Apostle, although he did know John the Presbyter. Papias, who was a contemporary of Polycarp, noted that he had never seen any of the apostles. Both lived in Asia Minor. Irenaeus confuses John the Apostle with John the Presbyter, and maybe he was aware of that, since he calls him a pupil of the Lord, but never refers to him as an apostle. He claims that the apostles had made Polycarp a bishop, but he does not refer to them by name. Only Tertullian claims that Polycarp was ordained by John the Apostle.²⁹ It is unknown where Tertullian got this opinion; perhaps he got it from reading Irenaeus. In various parts of his works, Eusebius cites different traditions concerning Revelation and the time when it was written, so it is difficult to know what his own view on the matter was. He probably ascribed authorship of this book to John the Presbyter.³⁰

26 *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3.4; V, 20.4–8.

27 D. Aune, *Revelation*, op. cit., p. LIX.

28 *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3.4.

29 *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 3

30 This is evident especially when Eusebius refers to Dionysius of Alexandria's view concerning authorship of the Book of Revelation.

4. From Clement of Alexandria to Victorinus

Clement of Alexandria claimed that the return from Patmos took place after the death of a tyrant; however, he did not specify the tyrant in question.³¹ Roman historians frequently referred to Nero as a tyrant, and his return was commonly feared. No other first century emperor deserves to be called a tyrant as much as Nero.³² Nero was also the first emperor who persecuted Christians. However, Domitian was also called a tyrant (by Suetonius, for instance).³³ The same term, “tyrant,” can refer to both Nero and to Domitian.

Clement, who was quoted by Eusebius, describes John’s activity in Ephesus, beginning with his return from the island of Patmos. He does not describe his activity before his exile at all. This means that Clement of Alexandria suggested an earlier date regarding the writing of the Book of Revelation, referring to the times of Nero.³⁴ Eusebius quotes Clement’s lost work.

Tertullian claimed that John’s exile to Patmos took place during the same time when the apostles Peter and Paul died.³⁵ This would mean that John had been exiled to Patmos by Nero. Hort has furthermore noted that when Tertullian writes of Domitian, he makes no references to John.³⁶

Hippolytus of Rome claimed that John the Apostle had a vision on the island of Patmos.³⁷ However, it contains no references to any Roman emperor.

Origen (185–254) was treated as a witness to the later dating of the Book of Revelation. However, he never names the emperor during whose rule John had been exiled. When commenting on the pericope about Zebedee’s son, he says: “A Roman king, as tradition teaches, exiled John to the island of Patmos.”³⁸ Perhaps Origen knew both traditions and was unsure during which emperor’s rule this exile had taken place. Kenneth L. Gentry has argued that the title of

31 *Quis dives salvetur*, 42.

32 Por. K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell. Dating the Book of Revelation*, op. cit., p. 69ff.

33 Suetonius, *Domitian*, 1, 3.

34 *Historia ecclesiastica*, III, 23.5–19.

35 *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 36.

36 F. J. A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of St. John: I–III*, London 1908, ss. xv–xvii.

37 *De antichristo*, 36.

38 Ῥωμαίων βασιλεὺς (ὡς ἡ παράδοσις διδάσκει) κατεδίκασε τὸν Ἰωάννην μαρτυροῦντα διὰ τὸν τῆς ἀληθείας λόγον εἰς Πάτμον τὴν νῆσον διδάσκει δὲ τὰ περὶ τοῦ μαρτυρίου ἑαυτοῦ Ἰωάννης, μὴ λέγων τίς αὐτὸν κατεδίκασε, φάσκων ἐν τῇ Ἀποκαλύψει ταῦτα· «ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης, ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὑμῶν καὶ συγκοινωνὸς ἐν τῇ θλίψει καὶ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ὑπομονῇ ἐν Ἰησοῦ, ἐγενόμην ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένῃ Πάτμῳ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ» καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς, καὶ εἶοικε τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τεθεωρηκέναι. (*In Matthaum*, 16, 6).

king fit Nero more than it did Domitian, because emperors following Caesar and before Nero were of aristocratic origin and thus were treated as kings in the East. Meanwhile, Nero's successors were generals.³⁹ However, Oecumenius calls Domitian a king.

The apocryphal *Acts of John*, which were written in the latter half of the second century and have been ascribed to Prochorus, claim that John had been exiled under Nero. The apocryph has not been preserved in its entirety, and the fragment dealing with the exile to Patmos is among the lost parts, although the chronology of the narration suggests that the exile took place slightly after John had arrived at Ephesus.

In his commentary on Revelation 10:11, Victorinus of Pettau claimed that John had been exiled to the island of Patmos to work in the mines during the rule of Domitian. Commenting on 17:11, he wrote that Revelation had been written during Domitian's rule, but published under that of Nerva.⁴⁰ He had a similar view on Pseudo-Augustine (*Quaestiones in Vetus et Novum Testamentum*, 76L 2). Both commentators appear to be influenced by Irenaeus.

5. Eusebius

In several parts of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius of Caesarea (264–34) claims that John returned from exile after Domitian had died.⁴¹ He repeated Irenaeus account in two different fragments of this work, suggesting that the exile could have occurred in the fourteenth year of Domitian's rule, because during that year Flavia Domitilla, the cousin of the consul Titus Flavius Clement, was sent to Ponza for being a Christian.⁴²

The fourteenth year of Domitian's rule is only Eusebius' guess, so there is no basis for us to treat this date as a certain one. Eusebius provides dubious dates and information in other situations as well. The date of the Apostle Peter's

39 K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell. Dating the Book of Revelation*, op. cit., p. 99.

40 *Commentarii in Apocalypsin*, [in:] *Victorini Episcopi Petavionensis Opera*, recensvit, commentario critico instrvxit, prolegomena et indices adiecit I. Havssleiter, Vindobonae–Lipsiae 1916, p. 92 (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 49).

41 *Historia ecclesiastica*, III, 20.9; III, 23.1.

42 *Historia ecclesiastica*, III, 18.1–4; V, 8.5–6.

arrival in Rome is different from the voices of previous tradition,⁴³ and Peter was supposed to have met Philo in Rome.⁴⁴

However, in *Demonstratio Evangelica* Eusebius mentions the death of Peter and Pawl and the exile of John to an island (V: 3) in the same sentence, which means that they should be considered to have taken place in the same time. This does not mean that in this work Eusebius opted for the rule of Nero as the time when the Book of Revelation was written, because Eusebius was inclined to believe that John the Presbyter, who had been confused with the apostle, could have been the author of Revelation.⁴⁵

6. Jerome

In his *De viris illustribus*, Jerome wrote that during Domitian's rule John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he wrote Revelation, to which Justin and Irenaeus wrote commentaries. He returned to Ephesus during Nerva's rule, founded many churches across Asia, and died in the sixty-eight year after the passion of "our Lord."⁴⁶ By linking together the exile with Domitian, he is influenced by Irenaeus, but the information about establishing numerous churches in Asia comes from a different source. If John had returned from exile during Nerva's rule, he would not have lived for very long and had little time to establish churches in Asia, not to speak of the fact that he would have been too advanced in age to be able to do such things. This situation would be completely different if he returned after Nero's death.

In his *Adversus Jovinianus*, Jerome refers to a legend provided by Tertullian concerning cooking John in oil and later exiling him to Patmos and claims that this

43 Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechesis*, 6), Filostratus (*De haereses*, 30), Sulpitius (*Historia sacra*, 1.2), Prosper of Aquitaine (*De promissionibus et praedictionibus Dei*, IV, 13), Maximus of Turin (*Sermones*, 5), Hegesippus Younger i Lactantius (*De mortibus persecutorum*, 2, 5) claim this event had taken place during the time of Nero. Irenaeus does not specify under which emperor Peter arrived in Rome (*Adversus Haereses*, 3:3). The works of Tertullian, Cyprian, Dionysus, Gaius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Familian, Ignatius of Antioch, Pope Clement I, and some apocryphal literature, such as the Apocalypse of Peter, also attest to Peter's stay in Rome. Dionysius of Corinth claims that Peter had arrived in Cornith from Asia, and from there he went to Rome (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2, 25). Eusebius writes that Peter arrived during the rule of Claudius (*Historia ecclesiastica*, II, 14).

44 *Historia ecclesiastica*, II, 17.

45 *Historia ecclesiastica*, III, 39.6.

46 Hieronymus, *De viris illustribus*, 9.

took place when Domitian was in power (*Adversus Jovinianus*, 1:26). However, Tertullian links the exile to the death of the apostles Peter and Paul, so this legend would make more sense with respect to Nero than to any other emperor.⁴⁷

7. From Epiphanius to Dorotheus

Epiphanius of Salamis (315–403) claims that John the Apostle’s exile and return took place under Claudius’ rule (41–54), while the Gospel according to John was written under Domitian.⁴⁸ Epiphanius probably had confused Claudius with Nero, who also used the name Claudius.⁴⁹

Pseudo-Augustine opted for Domitian.⁵⁰

Theophylact, the bishop of Ohrid (eleventh century), wrote that the Book of Revelation was written thirty-two years after Christ’s ascent into heaven.⁵¹ That would translate into 65, when Nero was in power. In the late Middle Ages, tradition dated the Gospel according to John to 32 years after the Ascension.⁵² However, in his commentary to the Gospel according to Matthew, Theophylact dates John’s exile to the time of Trajan.

Sulpicius Severus (363–420) speaks of John the Apostle’s exile under Domitian.⁵³

In his commentary to the Book of Revelation, Oecumenius (first half of the sixth century), a philosopher skilled in rhetoric, refers to Eusebius and claims that this book was written during the rule of Domitian.⁵⁴

47 Por. P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 428–429.

48 Epiphanius, *Haeresies*, 51, 13. 33, [in:] *Sancti Patris nostri Epiphani opera omnia*, accurate J.-P. Migne, Lutetiae Parisiorum 1857, kol. 909–910, 949–950 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca, 41).

49 Por. K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell. Dating the Book of Revelation*, op. cit., p. 104.

50 Pseudo-Augustine, *Quaestiones Vetus et Novi Testamenti*, 76, 2, [in:] *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis episcopi opera omnia*, accurate J.-P. Migne, Paris 1845 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina, 35).

51 Theophylactus, *Enarratio in Evangelium Joannis*, 1133–1134, [in:] *Theophylacti Bulgariae archiepiscopi Opera quae reperi potuerunt omnia*, accurate et denuo recognoscente J.-P. Migne, Parisiis 1864 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca, 123).

52 Such a date is provided by the colophons in such manuscripts of the New Testament as the manuscripts of the Lake family (f³) and miniscule 124. Except for miniscule 124, the manuscripts of the Ferrara family (f³) give the year 30.

53 Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicorum*, II, 31, [in:] *Quinti saeculi scriptorum opera omnia*, accurate J.-P. Migne, Parisiis 1845 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina, 20).

54 Διὰ τὸν Ἰησοῦν, φησί – τοῦτο γὰρ τὸ ἐν Ἰησοῦ – καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν, ἣν ἐγὼ ἐμαρτύρησα τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον αὐτοῦ κηρύξας, ἐγενόμην φησίν, ἐξόριστος ἐν τῇ Πάτμῳ. τοῦτο δὲ

Andreas of Caesarea preferred later dates of the Book of Revelation, and on several occasions in his commentary he argues against the proponents of earlier dates. This means that in his time there were proponents of earlier dates.

In his commentary on Revelation 1:9, Arethas of Caesarea cites Eusebius and claims that the exile took place during Domitian's rule,⁵⁵ but in his commentary to Revelation 7:4–8 he claims that the Book of Revelation was written after Jerusalem had been destroyed (18:19). Arethas wrote around 900. In Revelation 1:9, he is clearly influenced by Oecumenius.⁵⁶

Scholars have long noted that Arethas uses the commentary of different authors, mostly Andreas of Caesarea and Oecumenius, whom he does not use to check the veracity of the two to a significant degree and thus there are contradictions in his commentary. An example of this is his interpretation of the twelfth chapter of Revelation, in which he at some times refers to Andreas of Caesarea and at other to Oecumenius.

Dorotheus of Gaza (505–565) believed that John the Apostle had been sent to the island of Patmos during the rule of Trajan for preaching the Word of God in Asia. He wrote his Gospel on the island of Patmos, and after Trajan had died he returned to Ephesus, where he lived as a guest with Gaius, who is mentioned by Paul, and there lived to be 120 years old. Dorotheus acknowledges, however, that some are of the opinion that the exile occurred under Domitian. Instead, it can be deduced from Dorotheus that the exile took place shortly after the apostle's arrival in Asia Minor, because he preached the Gospel (*Euangelium Domini Iesu Christi in Asia praedicavit*) and was exiled for this reason (*propter verbu Domini exilio damnatus est*).⁵⁷

Dorotheus is one of the best examples of mixing traditions. The Gospel, not the Book of Revelation, was written on the island of Patmos, while Gaius from Romans 16:23 became identified with the Gaius from 3 John 1 in whose home John the Apostle lived.

παθειν αὐτὸν ὁ Εὐσέβιος ἱστορεῖ ἐν τῷ Χρονικῷ Κανόνι ἐπὶ Δομετιανοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως, (*Oecumenii Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, ed. M. de Groot, Lovanii 1999, p. 74–75).

55 Arethas, *Apocalypsin*, 654.

56 Διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ. Λόγον φησὶ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ μαρτυρίαν τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ο ἔγραψεν. Εξῆριστον δὲ αὐτὸν γενέσθαι ἐν Πάτμῳ τῇ νήσῳ ὑπὸ Δομετιανοῦ, Εὐσέβιος ὁ Παμφίλου ἐν τῷ Χρονικῷ αὐτοῦ Βιβλίῳ παρατίθεται.

57 *Dorothei episcopi Tyri qui sub Constantino magno vixit, De vita ac morte Prophetarum, & Apostolorum, Synopsis*, [in:] *Sulpiti Severi Aquitani Sacre Historiae a Mundi Exordio ad sua usq. tempora deductae*, Parisiis 1560, p. 145.

8. Other Sources

The *Peshitta*, which was written in the fifth century, initially did not contain the Book of Revelation, while the later translations of Philoxenus of Mabbug and Thomas of Heraclea contain the following explanation in the preface to the Book of Revelation: “This is the revelation given to John the Evangelist by God on the island of Patmos, where he was sent by Emperor Nero.”

Some minuscules place the Book of Revelation right after the Gospels (60, 792, 1006, 1064, 1328, 1551, 2323, 2643), while others place it after the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles (1772, 1934, 1948, 1955, 1957, 2004), and others still place it after the Acts of the Apostles (1859, 2186). Most manuscripts situate Revelation at the end of the New Testament. The main reason for this was is the late date during which it was written, but because the chronology had been modeled after the order of the books in the Septuagint, in which the prophetic books were last.

Isaac Newton believed that Polycarp had received the Book of Revelation around the time of Domitian’s death, or John edited it anew then; hence Irenaeus’ mistake.⁵⁸ Perhaps Irenaeus’ error resulted from the fact that the death of the author of Revelation took place around the same time as Domitian’s death.⁵⁹

Final Conclusions

Attributing authorship of the Book of Revelation to either John the Apostle or John the Presbyter is an argument in favor of an earlier date of the book. If either of them had lived to the end of Domitian’s rule, he would have been approximately ninety years old. The exile to Patmos involved hard work in the quarries, so it is doubtful that someone of such an advanced age would ever be sent to do such work. The tradition of ascribing authorship of Revelation to the apostle John and dating it back to the time of Domitian probably resulted from Irenaeus’ mistake.

In the nineteenth century, the view that Irenaeus was the first author who speaks about dating Revelation but makes use of an inferior source (a pupil of one of the apostles) was common.⁶⁰ Today, the approach to Irenaeus is not so

58 I. Newton, *Sir Isaac Newton’s Daniel and the Apocalypse*, ed. W. Whitla, London 1922, p. 295.

59 Hieronim, *Epistola ad Galatas*, 3, 6.

60 “Irenaeus is not only the most ancient writer on this subject, but he was a disciple of Polycarp, who was personally acquainted with St. John. Consequently, Irenaeus had the very best information

uncritical; however, writings coming from him are still greatly trusted in present-day exegesis. Clement of Alexandria and Origen both speak of Domitian, although they do not call the Roman emperor by name. Henry Barclay Swete has taken great pains to prove that the oldest tradition of the writing of Revelation dates back to the time of Domitian.⁶¹ This was uncritically accepted by the subsequent generation of Biblical scholars, and since then the view has been that earlier voices of tradition speak in favor of a later date, and opinions on an earlier date appeared much later.⁶² The dominant view is that tradition speaks in favor of a later date. Unfortunately, Irenaeus' writing is not very credible and is the result of a mistake. Irenaeus confuses and mixes traditions and is not precise in citing Papias' work, and therefore uncritically believing Irenaeus' writing should be avoided.

A confluence of two traditions, those related to John the Apostle and to John the Presbyter, respectively, took place very early. The mixing of traditions is evident in Irenaeus. When we sift through the various currents of early tradition that intersect with each other, we should assume that the current that dates John's exile to Patmos to the same time as the death of Peter and Paul and appears to be original and primary probably dates back to the first century. It appears in Tertullian, Pseudo-Prochorus, and Eusebius. Even some of the authors dating the Book of Revelation back to the time of Domitian claim that it was written thirty-two years after Christ's Ascension or during the Jewish war,

on this subject" (J. C. Woodhouse, *The Apocalypse or Revelation of Saint John*, London 1805, p. 19).

61 "Early Christian tradition is practically unanimous in assigning the Apocalypse to the last years of Domitian" (H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, London 1906, p. XCV).

62 "This evidence almost unanimously assigns to the last years of Domitian" (R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. xci). "Undoubtedly a strong argument in favour of a Domitianic date is the fact that the earliest and the weightiest external witnesses attest it" (D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, Downers Grove 1970, p. 956). "While Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the early third century do not actually use the name of Domitian, there is little doubt that he is the emperor they have in mind" (R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 16). "The testimony of the earliest patristic authors supports a date during the time of Domitian" (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, op. cit., p. 19). "Though most ancient Christian authors, apparently dependent on Irenaeus, thought that Revelation was written toward the end of the reign of Domitian, a few have suggested it was written earlier, during the reign of Claudius, Nero, or Galba, while others thought that it was written after the death of Domitian, during the reign of Trajan (the ancient evidence summarized in Swete, XCIX-C; Charles, L : XCI-XCIII)" (D. Aune, *Revelation*, op. cit., p. LVIII). "The oldest of them speak of John's exile to Patmos and writing of Revelation during the last years of Emperor Domitian's rule (81-96)" (F. Gryglewicz, p. Mędała, *Apokalipsa św. Jana*, [in:] *Wstęp do Nowego Testamentu*, red. R. Rubinkiewicz, Warszawa 1996, p. 517).

which is evidence that this is initial and original information and has not been entirely reconciled with the proponents of a later date. Jerome writes that John died sixty-eight years after Christ's passion.

It is also worth noting the current of tradition that speaks of John's activity after he had returned from the island of Patmos; he supposedly founded many churches in Asia Minor then. The voices of tradition tell us little or nothing about John's activity in Ephesus before his exile to Patmos (Clement of Alexandria, Pseudo-Prochorus, Dorotheus). He was exiled there right after he had arrived in Ephesus.

Another current of tradition that also merits our attention is that which claims that John's death occurred at the beginning of Trajan's rule. This probably refers to John the Presbyter, who had the opportunity to listen to Papias and Polycarp. Since he was a small child, Irenaeus could have incorrectly remembered Polycarp's message, which is the source of this confusion.

Writings also often confused the Gospel according to John with Revelation, and the information first ascribed to one book were later ascribed to another. This is why in some sources the fourth Gospel is dated to the thirty-second year after the Ascension, while in others it is dated to the time of Domitian. The tradition dating the writing of the Gospel according to John to the time of Domitian appears to be original. This probably happened as a result of a later mistake in dating Revelation, which has been incorrectly considered to be a later book.

Abstract

Dating the Book of Revelation in Light of Tradition

Christian tradition has not been consistent with regards to the date of the Book of Revelation. According to ancient sources, the book was written during the rule of Claudius, Nero, Domitian, or Trajan. Among these four traditions, the strongest is that associated with Domitian. The first proponent of this view was Irenaeus. He was quoted by Eusebius, Victorinus, Jerome, and several other Church Fathers, because they believed he was a disciple of a disciple of John the Apostle, the author of the Book of Revelation. Consequently, Irenaeus was commonly treated as the best source of information on this subject. This view was dominant among Biblical scholars until recently. Evidence for the earlier date of the book having been written during the rule of Nero is even older, but not as strong. This view was rejected by the majority of the Church Fathers. At the present time, only some scholars prefer the Neronian date.

Keywords: Revelation; Nero; Domitian; Irenaeus; Eusebius; Tertullian; Victorinus; Jerome

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