

When was the Apocalypse written?*

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The Apocalypse does not state when it was written but the introduction indicates that it was at a time of persecution. This article reviews both the evidence for it being written in the time of Domitian at the end of the first century and that for it being written at the time of Nero just before the great Jewish revolt, and concludes that, on balance, the evidence favours the former.

THE GENERALLY accepted view of the established church is that John was banished to Patmos during a period of persecution under the reign of Domitian about the year A.D. 95. There is also extant within the annals of church history another tradition, later proposed by the literary critics of the nineteenth century, that John was banished under the persecution of Nero, not Domitian, about the year A.D. 66. To understand properly the application of this piece of Scripture it is desirable to have some knowledge of its historical context. Though various commentators have suggested dates within the reigns of Galba, Vespasian, Nerva and Trajan, it is only the reigns of Nero and of Domitian that have been generally recognised as credible candidates for the persecution of Christians that is the background to the Apocalypse.

Early Church Fathers

John does not record within the Apocalypse the name of the emperor that exiled him (if indeed it was an emperor; it may well have been a governor or another lesser official). Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 150), making mention of the Apocalypse's predictions of the millennial reign of Christ, gives no indication when the book was written. It is Irenaeus of Lyons (A.D. 174) who is the earliest witness as to when it was written. He writes, with reference to "the number of the beast" (13:18):

"However, we will not risk a pronouncement on this or assert positively that he will have this name, for we know that if his name had to be proclaimed openly at present, it would have been spoken by the one who saw the Apocalypse. It was seen not long ago but nearly in our generation, toward the end of the reign of Domitian".¹

Victorinus of Pettau (c. A.D. 305), in his commentary on the Apocalypse, writes:

"When John said these things he was in the island of Patmos, condemned to the labour of the mines by Caesar Domitian".²

Jerome (c. A.D. 347-419) also places the Apocalypse's authorship within the reign of Domitian, saying:

"In the fourteenth year then after Nero Domitian having raised a second persecution he [John] was banished to the island of Patmos, and wrote the Apocalypse, on which Justin Martyr and Irenaeus afterwards wrote commentaries".³

Eusebius, Crosius, Sulpicius Severus, Primasius and Hippolytus also date the banishment of John and the authorship of the Apocalypse within the reign of Domitian.

In opposition to these statements, other early church writers can be cited. Farrar mentions Arethas, Theophlact and Photius. Wjns refers to the Syriac Apocryphal book *The History of John the Son of Zebedee*. Epiphanius of Salamis is another writer frequently referred to in defence of an early date for the Apocalypse, though he states that John was banished under Claudius in John's extreme old age(!) (A.D. 41-54). However, it should be recognised that none of these writers predates Irenaeus, and many are considerably later.

Given the opposing views of later church writers, many commentators have turned to other considerations to fix the date for the composition of the Apocalypse. The most significant of these considerations is to determine under which period of persecution John suffered.

Persecution in the first century

John writes during a period of persecution of the early church. He himself was "on the island that is called Patmos for [dia, on account of] the

* Scripture quotations are from the NKJV. Fuller details of works quoted and authors referred to are given in the Bibliography.

1. Book V.30.1, *Against Heresies* (p. 178, R. M. Grant, 1997).
2. Ch. 10.1, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John* (http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-07/anf07-30.htm#P4689_1786082).
3. Ch. IX, *Lives of Illustrious Men* (http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-03/Npnf-03-07.htm#P7136_1834210).

word of God" (1:9), indicating that he had been exiled to that island for his adherence to the gospel message. He writes to the churches in Asia, calling himself "your brother, and companion in the tribulation [*thlipsis*, oppression]", suggesting that Christians in the province of Asia were also suffering for their faith. We also read within the letter to Pergamos, "Antipas was my faithful martyr [*martus*, witness], who was killed among you" (2:13), showing that Christians were even being put to death for their beliefs.

Historians look at passages such as Revelation 17, referring to 'Babylon—Mother of Harlots', as being targeted against Rome. Verse 9 says, "The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits", and Rome is famous for being built upon seven hills. These references to Rome indicate that the Christians were suffering at the hands of the Empire. (The other candidate would be the Jews, that is, "the synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9). It may also be suggested that we are to understand the Jews as working in cooperation against the Christians, as in the martyrdom of Polycarp.)

Assuming that the persecution under which John and the churches of Asia suffered was activated by the Empire, then church history records for us two such periods within the first century, the reign of Nero and the reign of Domitian.

Persecution under Domitian

The persecution of Christians under Domitian is reported by Eusebius. He writes:

"Many were the victims of Domitian's appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally, he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God".⁴

Eusebius, writing A.D. 325, has reasons to stress (and perhaps exaggerate?) the sufferings of Christians at the hands of the pagans, since by that time Christianity had been seen to triumph over paganism with the ascension of the first Christian emperor, Constantine. In justification of the assertions quoted above, Eusebius cites a number of earlier writers. From Tertullian he quotes the simple statement:

"A similar attempt had once been made by Domitian, who almost equalled Nero in cruelty; but—I suppose because he had some common sense—he very soon stopped, even recalling those he had banished".⁵

In the passage quoted, Tertullian gives no examples of Domitian's persecutions. It is not clear where he gets his information from.

Eusebius also quotes in some detail Hegesippus, whose work only remains as quotes within other writers. He tells a story about the grandsons of Jude being called to appear before Domitian, for he "was as afraid of the advent of Christ as Herod had been". It is because of the witness of these two brothers that Domitian ordered that the persecution of Christians should cease. This story is probably apocryphal, as it is unlikely that Domitian would have known the prophetic importance of the Son of David, and if he had, it is even more unlikely that he would have cared.

The other sources that Eusebius quotes are those he calls "historians who accepted none of our beliefs", that is, pagans. Based upon these writers he asserts:

"Flavia Domitilla, who was a niece of Flavius Clemens, one of the consuls at Rome that year, was with many others, because of the testimony to Christ, taken to the island of Pontia as a punishment".⁶

It is probable that the heathen historians to whom Eusebius refers are Suetonius and Dio.

There was a tradition in the church that both Flavia Domitilla and Flavius Clemens were Christians. Suetonius, despite his hostility to Christianity, mentions only that Clemens was "executed . . . on some trivial pretext".⁷ Dio states that the charge brought against both Clemens and Domitilla was "atheism", adding that upon this charge "many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned".⁸ Some have taken "drifted into Jewish ways" to refer to Christianity, and it is likely that it is upon this that Eusebius bases his assertions. Yet it is odd that Dio should not explicitly call them Christians as he does in other places. As Barnes comments: "for later Christians to see in Flavia Domitilla a sympathy for, or adherence to, Christianity, was irresistible".⁹ Barnes concludes his comments on the reign of Domitian by saying, "nowhere in them [the stories quoted above] is there mention of any legal ordinance against the Christians".

4. Book III.17.1, *The History of the Church*.

5. Book III.20.4, *ibid.*, ch. 5, *Defence*.

6. Book III.18.3, *ibid.*

7. Book XII, Domitian. 15, *The Twelve Caesars*.

8. *Epitome*, Book LXVII.14.1-3.

9. T. D. Barnes, "Legislation against the Christians", *Journal of Roman Studies* 58, 1968.

Persecution under Nero

Of the persecution under Nero, evidence is a lot more forthcoming. Eusebius records:

“When Nero’s power was now firmly established he gave himself up to unholy practices and took up arms against the God of the universe . . . Many writers have recorded the facts about him in minute detail, enabling anyone who wishes to get a complete picture of his perverse and extraordinary madness, which led him to the senseless destruction of innumerable lives”.¹⁰

Tacitus (c. A.D. 112) records the events of the Neronian persecution. After stating that the Christians were condemned as a scapegoat to take the blame for the Great Fire of Rome, he writes of their sufferings in this way:

“An arrest was first made of all who confessed; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed”.¹¹

Also, Clement of Rome writes (c. A.D. 96) of persecution at the time of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (c. A.D. 66):

“Associated with these men of holy life is a great multitude of the elect, who because of jealousy have suffered many indignities and tortures and have set a very noble example in our midst. Because of jealousy women were persecuted, who as Danaids and Dircae suffered terrible and impious indignities and thereby safely completed the race of faith and, though weak in body, received a noble reward of honour”.¹²

The heathen historian Suetonius also writes about Nero’s persecution:

“Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief”.¹³

Sulpicius Severus also records Nero’s rage against the Christians, asserting that Nero made the Christian religion illegal.

Reviewing the evidence

Barnes, in his article “Legislation against Christians” (cited above), evaluates the historical records of persecutions of Christians and finds no substantial evidence of any legislation against

them. He gives the example of Pliny (c. A.D. 112), who has to write to Emperor Trajan to inquire about what to do with the Christians, indicating that he knew of no law against the Christians. Some may object, asserting that the edicts of Domitian were repealed after his death and that Nero’s were perhaps specific to the accusations about the fire of Rome. There is ample evidence of persecution of Christians under Nero and some evidence of persecution under Domitian, though Morris comments, “while later Christians sometimes speak of a persecution under Domitian the evidence is not easy to find”.¹⁴ However, without the evidence of a law or edict against Christians we are less one major reason for believing that these persecutions were not just confined to Rome but also took place in the province of Asia, as is the case with the persecution referred to in the Apocalypse.

Frend, discussing the persecution under Domitian, gives only two pieces of evidence of “anti-Christian outbreaks in Asia”. The first is Revelation itself, which, if we were to use it as evidence, would make our reasoning circular. The second is “an inscription”, about which he says nothing more.¹⁵ Though he notes that it was under Domitian that “the practices of taking an oath by the Emperor’s genius, of offering libation and incense before his statue, and addressing him as Dominus [Lord] grew up”,¹⁶ there seems little evidence that these were enforced in the provinces. If there was indeed a persecution under Domitian (which some historians have doubted), it appears that we have little evidence to show that it was in effect in the province of Asia.

Although we may conclude from the fact that Nero’s persecution was based upon the accusation that the Christians started the Great Fire that his persecution was confined to Rome, the historian Ramsay states, “when Nero had once established the principle [of persecution] in Rome, his action served as precedent in every province”.¹⁷ In fact we have one easily accessible piece of evidence that suggests that Nero’s persecution was active in Asia, that of the First Epistle of Peter.

10. Book II.25.1, *op. cit.*

11. *Annals*, XV.44.2-8.

12. *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, VI.1-2.

13. Book VI, Nero.16.

14. p. 36, L. Morris, 1980.

15. p. 211-2, W. H. C. Frend, 1965.

16. p. 213, *ibid.*

17. p. 245, W. Ramsay, 1892.

The evidence of 1 Peter

We know that Peter wrote his first epistle from Rome (5:13, Babylon), which means it must have been written during the reign of Nero, since Peter died around A.D. 66. Peter writes to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, and the most prominent theme of his letter is Christian suffering. He makes frequent statements throughout this letter indicating that the Christians in the provinces were suffering besides the Christians in Rome:

“you have been grieved by various trials” (1:6);

“do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you . . . but rejoice . . . that you partake of Christ’s sufferings” (4:12,13);

“the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that *the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world*” (5:8,9).

It is clear that Peter believed there was not only persecution in Rome, but also in Asia and throughout the Empire. As such, Nero’s persecution would fit with what we know about the persecution that was happening at the time the Apocalypse was being written.

Banishments

Some commentators have argued that banishments, like that of the Apostle John, were more characteristic of Domitian’s persecution than of Nero’s. It is true that Tertullian mentions Christians being banished, Dio mentions “exiles” and Pliny also records the trial of Julius Bassus who was “banished by Domitian” (though not for being a Christian). However, Dio also states that some were put to death and “the rest were at least deprived of their property”.¹⁸ It can hardly be argued that Domitian was opposed to executions, and there is no evidence that exile was statutory or habitual punishment for John’s ‘crime’.

Another slant on this argument is to assert that Nero’s persecution was characterised by such gratuitous destruction of life that exile would be uncharacteristically mild for Nero. However, though it is not recorded of Christians, people were exiled by Nero, like Antonius Primus.

A new perspective

I think there is good reason to suppose that there was persecution of Christians in Asia Minor under the reign of Nero. The evidence of persecution under Domitian seems to be confined to (and is

certainly emphasised by) later Christian writers, but there is certainly no reason to suppose it did not happen. These considerations may lead one to suppose that the evidence of persecution presents a strong case for the Neronian date for the authorship of the Apocalypse.

However, a new perspective on this whole issue of persecution is given by the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, which includes the analysis:

“The common view that Revelation reflects a time of widespread and serious persecution of Christianity is not correct. The seven messages show that persecution was sporadic and dependent on local conditions”.¹⁹

A review of the seven letters certainly gives support to this conclusion. The letter to Pergamos refers to persecution: “Antipas was my faithful martyr” (2:13); and the letters to Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia predict some future suffering: “you will have tribulation ten days” (v. 10); “great tribulation” (v. 22) and “the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world” (3:10). The letters to Laodicea, Sardis and Ephesus seem totally free of references to external troubles. It would certainly seem bizarre for the church at Laodicea to be described as “rich” if it was really enduring state-sanctioned persecution.

As we saw above, Barnes has shown that there is no record extant of any legislation under Nero or Domitian sanctioning persecution of the Christians. There seems a good possibility, therefore, that the persecution of Christians in the first century was not imposed top-down but arose sporadically on the impulses of local governors, as is evidenced by the letters of Pliny, or even through the initiative of zealous individuals. We are therefore compelled to state that, due to scarcity of evidence, the issue of persecution is irrelevant to dating the Apocalypse, or at the very least can by no means be a determining factor within our considerations.

Conclusion

Though during the first century A.D. there were only occasional periods of persecution at the behest of certain emperors, the persecution at the hands of governors and individuals was a day-to-day reality for Christians. The picture given in the Seven Letters at the beginning of the Apocalypse is one of sporadic and localised

18. *Op. cit.*, footnote 8.

19. p. 1288, J. Barton and J. Muddiman, 2001.

persecution. So, though there is strong evidence of persecution at the hand of Nero, including the provinces of Asia, this cannot settle the issue. And even though the evidence of persecution under Domitian only comes from 'Christian' writers, this period cannot be discounted, because the conditions described in the Seven Letters could have come from any period in the latter part of the first century A.D.

Other internal evidence is likewise inconclusive. There is no strong reason to suppose that the conditions described of the Seven Churches could not have applied at any period in the latter part of the first century. Other arguments from internal evidence usually depend greatly upon the proponent's interpretation; all too often the reason for an early date being proposed is a Preterist interpretation (fulfilment of the prophecy at the time it was written).

We are left, then, to depend on the witness of the early Church writers. There does not seem sufficient reason to doubt the testimony of Irenaeus, who after all is likely to have met and spoken with those who knew the Apostle John. Therefore my inclination is to believe that John wrote the Apocalypse about the year A.D. 95. But perhaps the best conclusion on this subject comes from Brother John Thomas himself:

"the strongest evidence is for A.D. 96 . . . but owing to the unreliable character of the testimony of the post-apostolical [*sic*] writers as it has come down to us through the polluted and corrupting channels of Greek and Latin Orthodoxies, we cannot say when John's banishment occurred, how many years it continued, whether it began at the death of Peter and Paul, or before it, or during the Judaic war, or after the destruction of Jerusalem, or shortly before the assassination of Domitian . . . It would, indeed, satisfy curiosity to know, but that is all. The knowledge of these particular times does not at all affect the interpretation. This is independent of the *Anno Domini* of John's exile".²⁰

20. p. 40, J. Thomas, 1869.

A fuller version of this article, including more detailed references, is available by email from the author at

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