

Facts on the Dating of the Apocalypse

Robert A. Sungenis, Ph.D.

Today, there are a few people who are pushing for a pre-70 AD date for the writing of the *Apocalypse of St. John*. Mostly these voices come from Protestant sectors and is due mainly to their presuppositions on how the Apocalypse is supposed to be interpreted. They claim that the “internal evidence” of the Apocalypse points to a pre-70 AD date. That conclusion, of course, is based on their idiosyncratic interpretations of Scripture, which are often at odds with Catholic interpretation. The bigger problem, however, is that the so-called “internal evidence” for an early dating of the Apocalypse runs smack into the patristic consensus which says it was written after 70 AD.

The reason this is of concern for us is that some Catholics today have decided they are going to depart from the patristic consensus and not only push for a pre-70 AD date, but they do so because they also want to depart from the patristic consensus regarding the place and time of the Millennium of Apocalypse 20:1-6. The two ideas go hand-in-hand. They have decided that the Fathers were wrong in placing the Millennium during the Christian era, from the First Coming of Christ to the Second Coming. These new “theologians” claim that the Millennium should be in the Old Testament. In essence, instead of a Christian millennium that we have always believed, they now want a Jewish millennium. This is just another indication how Catholic teaching today is being Judaized, the very warnings I have given many times in the last five years.

Here is the upshot. There is no Father that supports a pre-70 AD dating for the Apocalypse. There isn't a Father within 500 years that gives any explicit mention of Nero and Patmos in the same sentence, much less says Nero exiled John to Patmos prior to 70 AD, including the attempts of modern scholars to make Epiphanius depart from the consensus. Not until well into the Middle Ages does anyone suggest a pre-70 AD date for the Apocalypse, and they are few and far between (e.g., Theophlact, Andreas of Cappadocia).

There were only two Roman emperors who persecuted Christians on a massive scale, Nero and Domitian. In 67 AD, Nero killed St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome. But there is no record of Nero banishing any Christians to Patmos. Nero preferred to torture Christians by burning them and throwing them to lions.

Again, all the Christian and secular sources in the patristic era place the banishment of Christians to Patmos at the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD). No one places the banishment of John, or any Christian, under the reign of Nero.

Eusebius is one of our greatest sources, since he lived only two hundred years after Domitian's reign. Every source that Eusebius could gather said that John was exiled to Patmos during the reign of Domitian. Eusebius' earliest source was **Irenaeus**.

It is said that in this persecution 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. 2. 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 3. "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." (Church History, Book 3, Ch. 18).

Eusebius used other sources to confirm the same truth:

It is said that in this persecution [Domitian's] 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 (*Church History*, Bk. III, ch. 18).

Eusebius adds:

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 (*Church History*, Bk. III, ch. 20)

Victorinus also holds to the same date. His information is independent of Eusebius. He writes:

“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 labour 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. This, therefore, is what He says: Thou must again prophesy to all nations, because thou seest the crowds of Antichrist rise up; and against them other crowds shall stand, and they shall fall by the sword on the one side and on the other. (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 11)

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” (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*, XVII).

Clement of Alexandria gives the same information:

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. (*The Rich Man*, XLII)

The “tyrant’s death” could only refer Nero or Domitian, since they were the only ones who severely persecuted Christians. **Lactantius** confirms this:

After an interval of some years from the death of Nero, there arose another tyrant no less wicked (Domitian), who, although his government was exceedingly odious, for a very long time oppressed his subjects, and reigned in security, until at length he stretched forth his impious hands against the Lord. Having been instigated by evil demons to persecute the righteous people, he was then delivered into the power of his enemies, and suffered due punishment. (*Address to Donatus*, Ch 3).

Clement refers to the release of those exiled and this matches Eusebius reference to the same at the death of Domitian. The emperor in view cannot be Nero because Clement refers to John as a very old man, which would not have been the case in 70 AD.

Clement quotes John as saying to an apostate thief:

“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....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 falling on his knees, and kissing his right hand itself, as now purified by repentance, led him back to the church.” (*The Rich Man*, XLII)

We also know that John lived until after Domitian from Irenaeus’ references to Polycarp, John’s disciple. Polycarp was born in 65 AD and died in 155 AD. This makes him two years old when Nero died and five years old when Jerusalem was destroyed. Since Polycarp was taught by John, it must have been several decades after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jerome testifies to the same, and also mentions **Irenaeus** and **Justin Martyr** as writing commentaries on the same connection between Domitian and Patmos. Notice how Jerome mentions Nero, but bypasses him to make the connection between Domitian and John’s exile to Patmos:

In the fourteenth year then after Nero, Domitian having raised a second persecution he was banished to the island of Patmos, and wrote the Apocalypse, on which Justin Martyr and Irenaeus afterwards wrote commentaries. But Domitian having been put to death and his acts, on account of his excessive cruelty, having been annulled by the senate, he returned to Ephesus under Pertinax and continuing there until the title of the emperor Trajan, founded and built churches throughout all Asia, and, worn out by old age, died in the sixty-eighth year after our Lord’s passion and was buried near the same city. (*Lives of Illustrious Men*, Ch IX).

Jerome testifies to the same truth in another work:

We maybe sure that John was then a boy because ecclesiastical history most clearly proves that he lived to the reign of Trajan, that is, he fell asleep in the sixty-eighth year after our Lord’s passion, as I have briefly noted in my treatise on Illustrious Men. Peter is an Apostle, and John is an Apostle – the one a married man, the other a virgin; but Peter is an Apostle only, John is both an Apostle and an Evangelist, and a prophet. An Apostle, because he wrote to the Churches as a master; an Evangelist, because he composed a Gospel, a thing which no other of the Apostles, excepting Matthew, did; a prophet, for he saw in the island of Patmos, to which he had been banished by the Emperor Domitian

as a martyr for the Lord, an Apocalypse containing the boundless mysteries of the future Tertullian, moreover, relates that he was sent to Rome, and that having been plunged into a jar of boiling oil he came out fresher and more active than when he went in (*Against Jovinianus*, Book 1, 26).

Sulpitius Severus says:

Then, after an interval, Domitian, the son of Vespasian, persecuted the Christians. At this date, he banished John the Apostle and Evangelist to the island of Patmos. There he, secret mysteries having been revealed to him, wrote and published his book of the holy Revelation, which indeed is either foolishly or impiously not accepted by many (*The Sacred History*, Ch 31).

Testimony to these Fathers is noted in one of the more detailed commentaries on this issue:

“The same is the recorded judgment of **Jerome**; the same of **Augustine’s friend, Orosius**; the same of **Sulpitius Severus**. Once more, we find an unhesitating statement of similar purport in **Primasius**; an eminent Augustinian commentator on the Apocalypse, of the sixth century. In his Preface to this Commentary, he speaks of the Apocalyptic visions having been seen by St. John when banished and condemned to the mines in Patmos by the Emperor Domitian” (*Horae Apocalypticae*, E. B. Elliott, vol. I, p. 36).

Hippolytus says:

John, again, in Asia, was banished by Domitian the king to the isle of Patmos, in which also he wrote his Gospel and saw the apocalyptic vision; and in Trajan’s time he fell asleep at Ephesus, where his remains were sought for, but could not be found (*The Twelve Apostles*, XLIX).

Regarding lone testimony of Epiphanius, Elliott states: “Nor can it be wondered at: seeing that as to any contrary statement on the point in question, there appears to have been none whatsoever until the time of Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, in the latter half of the fourth century: ...whose chief work, *On Heresies*, is decried ... as ‘full of blots and errors, through the levity and ignorance of the author.’ ...For he speaks of St. John having prophesied when in the isle of Patmos, in the days of the Emperor Claudius: --a time when... it does not appear from history that there was any imperial persecution of the Christian body whatsoever...” (*Horae Apocalypticae*, vol. I, p. 37).

He adds: “ ...another testimony to the early date of the Apocalypse. The subscription to a Syriac version of the book, written about the beginning of the sixth century, is thus worded; ‘The Revelation which was made by God to John the Evangelist in the island of Patmos, whither he was banished by the Emperor Nero.’ But of what value is this opinion, then first broached, as it would appear?” (*Horae Apocalypticae*, vol. I, p. 38-39).

Elliott also states that Domitian was often known by the name Nero, thus the confusion some scholars have with Nero and Domitian.

May not the mistake have arisen from Domitian having sometimes the title of Nero given him; and in fact the original writer of the Syriac subscription have meant Domitian, not Nero?" He includes in this footnote further proofs given in Latin of this title applying to Domitian (*Horae Apocalypticae*, vol. I pg. 39, footnote 1).

The **Acts of John** reports that John was indeed exiled under Domitian:

And the fame of the teaching of John was spread abroad in Rome; and it came to the ears of Domitian that there was a certain Hebrew in Ephesus, John by name, who spread a report about the seat of empire of the Romans, saying that it would quickly be rooted out, and that the kingdom of the Romans would be given over to another. And Domitian, troubled by what was said, sent a centurion with soldiers to seize John, and bring him. And having gone to Ephesus, they asked where John lived.

And when all were glorifying God, and wondering at the faith of John, Domitian said to him: I have put forth a decree of the senate, that all such persons should be summarily dealt with, without trial; but since I find from thee that they are innocent, and that their religion is rather beneficial, I banish thee to an island, that I may not seem myself to do away with my own decrees. He asked then that the condemned criminal should be let go; and when he was let go, John said: Depart, give thanks to God, who has this day delivered thee from prison and from death.

And having prayed, he raised her up. And Domitian, astonished at all the wonders, sent him away to an island, appointing for him a set time. And straightway John sailed to Patmos, where also he was deemed worthy to see the revelation of the end. And when Domitian was dead, Nerva succeeded to the kingdom, and recalled all who had been banished; and having kept the kingdom for a year, he made Trajan his successor in the kingdom. And when he was king over the Romans, John went to Ephesus, and regulated all the teaching of the church, holding many conferences, and reminding them of what the Lord had said to them, and what duty he had assigned to each. And when he was old and changed, he ordered Polycarp to be bishop over the church. (*Acts of the Holy Apostle John, Exile and Departure*).

This agrees with Eusebius' account:

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 honors should be cancelled, and that those who had been unjustly banished should return to their homes and have their

property restored to them. 11. 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. (Church History, Book 3, Ch 20).

At that time the apostle and evangelist John, the one whom Jesus loved, was still living in Asia, and governing the churches of that region, having returned after the death of Domitian from his exile on the island. 2. And that he was still alive at that time may be established by the testimony of two witnesses. They should be trustworthy who have maintained the orthodoxy of the Church; and such indeed were Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. 3. The former in the second book of his work *Against Heresies*, writes as follows: “And all the elders that associated with John the disciple of the Lord in Asia bear witness that John delivered it to them. For he remained among them until the time of Trajan.” 4. And in the third book of the same work he attests the same thing in the following words: “But the church in Ephesus also, which was founded by Paul, and where John remained until the time of Trajan, is a faithful witness of the apostolic tradition.” 5. Clement likewise in his book entitled *What Rich Man can be saved?* indicates the time, and subjoins a narrative which is most attractive to those that enjoy hearing what is beautiful and profitable. Take and read the account which runs as follows: 6. “Listen to a tale, which is not a mere tale, but a narrative concerning John the apostle, which has been handed down and treasured up in memory. For when, after the tyrant’s death, he returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus, he went away upon their invitation to the neighboring territories of the Gentiles, to appoint bishops in some places, in other places to set in order whole churches, elsewhere to choose to the ministry some one of those that were pointed out by the Spirit. (*Church History*, Book 3, Ch 23).

Robert A. Sungenis, Ph.D.