

THE DATE OF THE APOCALYPSE¹

The consensus among twentieth-century scholars is that the Apocalypse was written during the reign of Domitian around 95 A.D. A minority of commentators have dated it immediately prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The difference of dating could alter the interpretation of the book, since the occasion prompting John to write might be different in each case. The early date is especially important for those viewing the main intention of the book as prophecy of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem: interpreters who hold to the early date generally understand the book primarily as a polemic against apostate Jewish faith. And the early date places many of the book's descriptions of persecution against the background of Nero's oppression of Christians in 65.

But if the book was written in the nineties, then it was occasioned by the situation of Christians living under the reign of Domitian, a situation that itself is an issue of debate. The majority maintaining a late date have viewed Domitian as a persecutor of Christians, though a few others recently have viewed his reign in more benevolent terms.

One can in fact affirm the early date or the late date without the main interpretative approach being affected. Under either dating position the book could be understood as a polemic against Rome and especially against compromise with ungodly Roman culture. The early date allows for an anti-Jerusalem focus but does not demand it.

There are no single arguments that point clearly to the early or the late date. The early date could be right, but the cumulative weight of evidence points to the late date. The following discussion surveys only key areas of evidence.

Arguments for a Late Date

Emperor Worship

Revelation presupposes that Christians were being required to participate to some degree in the imperial cult (e.g., 13:4–8, 15–16; 14:9–11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Roman emperors began to require worship of their person as divine prior to Domitian's time. It is possible that Christians in Rome were required to recognize Nero's deity, but that is not the occasion for his persecution of them. He persecuted them because he blamed the great fire of Rome on them. In contrast, in the Apocalypse persecution arises because of refusal to worship the ungodly king.

“Hard” evidence for persecuting Christians for refusing to acquiesce to legal requirements for emperor worship comes in 113 A.D. during the reign of Trajan in a letter

¹G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 4.

written by Pliny to Trajan and in Trajan's response. Trajan's approach was that Christians were not to be sought out but were to be executed if accused and convicted; the only way out was to deny being a Christian and to confirm this by emperor worship. Pliny's failure to find any official ruling or precedent for dealing with Christians does, as Downing notes, make it unlikely that there was any established policy, especially since Pliny was zealous to find precedents. Trajan's instructions to Pliny that Christians were "not to be sought out" points in the same direction. This implies that there were no Roman records of significant court cases brought against people for claiming to be "Christians." Consequently, when Christians, in one way or another, came to have a high profile in the eyes of the Romans, their practices and beliefs were scrutinized more closely, and they were sometimes persecuted, depending on the imperial zeal and attitude of local governors and magistrates.

It is possible but improbable that even this ad hoc practice happened overnight. If the same situation did not exist during Domitian's reign seventeen years earlier, then there were probably increasing tendencies in that direction. Indeed, Pliny's letter to Trajan refers to people who had apostatized "many years" earlier and "a few as much as twenty-five years ago," that is, during Domitian's reign. Such apostasy strongly suggests significant though sporadic persecution of some kind at that earlier period; the persecutions were of such an occasional nature and apparently insignificant (from the Empire's perspective) that, if there were court cases, there were not enough to establish a legal pattern for governors throughout the Empire to follow. But we are told by ancient Roman writers that toward the end of Domitian's reign there was more chaos in the cultural and social spheres of the Empire than at any prior time. Furthermore, we are informed that Domitian insisted on greater divine titles than earlier emperors in order to increase his tyrannical hold on the reins of government. Those refusing to acknowledge these new titles were persecuted.

However, L. L. Thompson attributes such statements about Domitian's self-glorification to severe bias on the part of Roman writers wanting to curry favor with later emperors. He deduces such bias on the part of Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Dio Chrysostom, and Dio Cassius from other sources that present contradictory evidence of praise for Domitian's civil and political policies. He concludes that there was neither more civil chaos than in prior reigns nor heightened titles of deity demanded by or used of Domitian. While he may be partly correct, he unfortunately does not explore the possibility of bias on the part of these conflicting sources themselves, a striking omission since these writers were Domitian's contemporaries and could well have had motives to praise Domitian unduly for self-advantage, just as later writers excessively praise Trajan. Others see references to Domitian's deity as reflecting not an absolutist, tyrannical imperial policy but attempts by Roman officials to flatter Domitian, an assessment more accurately reflecting all the diverse sources.

The truth likely lies somewhere in between the recent historical revisions concerning Domitian (Thompson and others) and more traditional assessments of Domitian, since all the ancient testimonies both for and against Domitian contain varying degrees of bias and truth. Probably some of the people oppressed by Domitian were Christians. For example,

Dio Casius records that Domitian executed the aristocrat Flavius Clemens and banished his wife Flavia Domitilla because of “atheism” (ἀθεότης). Some regard it as unclear whether this refers to Christian faith or whether these two were merely caught in a broader purge of Roman aristocracy who had irritated the emperor. A balanced assessment is that such persecution highlights the danger of explicitly identifying with a religion that renounced any involvement with the imperial cult in a culture where sociopolitical requirements and religion overlapped.

Nevertheless, it is plausible that Christian faith was at least partly the basis for the persecution for Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla, since “atheism” was a common accusation against Christians at other periods of persecution. Indeed, Dio’s full statement views “atheism” as “a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned.” A similar but later statement affirms that Domitian’s persecution was explicitly two-pronged, being directed against “*maiestas* [treason]” or against “adopting the Jewish mode of life.” Penalties ranging from the economic sphere to exile and even to death could be inflicted for this offense. It is apparent that those accused of treason were separate from those charged with living as Jews, with the latter including both aristocrats and persons of less noble birth. It is possible that living as a Jew was equated with treason, but political intrigue and religious nonconformity could be distinguished. In fact, Pliny says that among the Christians persecuted under Domitian were both Roman citizens and noncitizens, and he links these persecuted persons of the past with Christians “of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes,” including even “female slaves” and people living in “cities ... , villages and rural districts.”

Even if Domitian’s only motive were to purge aristocrats, using Christianity as an excuse to charge some of them, this would still have been viewed by Christians as persecution, especially if many were so charged. In fact, the usual basis for persecution of Christians from 100 A.D. on was disloyalty to Rome, evidenced in refusal to worship the emperor as a deity. And the loss through capital punishment of even a few Christian aristocrats under Domitian’s reign who likely held prominent positions in the small Christian community at Rome, though not viewed as significant from the Roman viewpoint, would have been felt as a staggering blow by the Roman church. Later Christian tradition supports the notion that Domitian’s persecution may have focused on Christians in the aristocratic class.

The question is whether those “adopting the Jewish mode of life” could have included Christians. Some commentators answer in the negative, arguing that by the end of the first century such a chasm had developed between Judaism and Christianity that not even pagan writers would have lumped the two together. But while Christianity probably began to be perceived as distinct from Judaism at the beginning of the second century, it still was not likely perceived by unbelieving Romans as absolutely distinct but as an offshoot from and sect of Judaism. Pliny can say even in 113 A.D. that he was unsure about “the nature of their [the Christians’] creed,” but was at least certain that their “inflexible obstinacy” should be punished. Indeed, even before 70 A.D. Tacitus affirms that those “called Christians by the populace” were considered separately as “a class hated for their abominations.” On the other hand, they were probably also considered a

Jewish sect, since in the same passage Tacitus says that the Christian “superstition” originated in Judea.

Similarly, Eusebius records that the relatives of Jesus were brought before Domitian because “they were reported as being of the family of David” *and* because they were identified with the movement of “Christ.” As Christianity slowly but surely began to be distinguished from mainstream Judaism, it would have less and less enjoyed Judaism’s distinct privilege as a “permitted religion” (*religio licita*). That privilege included the right “to observe their legal tradition, to gather at the synagogue for worship . . . or to be exempt (albeit tacitly) from the state cult. . . .” Christianity likely took on the appearance of an illegitimate Jewish sect. The charge of “atheism” against Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla was not unique but, Dio tells us, was “a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned.” Because Judaism was “permitted,” accusing numbers of mainstream Jews in Rome of “atheism” would have been radically inappropriate; that such a thing happened under Domitian is possible but improbable. But Christians, considered members of an off-brand Jewish sect becoming increasingly distanced from, yet still linked with, Judaism, could well come under such an accusation.

When a clearer distinction between Christians and Jews would have been noticed by pagan neighbors and by city, provincial, and imperial officials is hard to determine. Such a distinction likely emerged in the cities of Asia Minor not at once but at different times in different places. The situation in the churches of Asia Minor during the mid to late second century, especially in Sardis, Philadelphia, Magnesia, and Tralles, reflects a continuing problem that Christians had in either being perceived as associating with Judaism or as being tempted to associate with the customs or doctrines of Judaism. The pagan accusations of “adopting the Jewish mode of life” and of “atheism” point to accusations directed against Christianity and not against Judaism.

Against this background, it is certainly viable to conceive easily of pagan Roman writers, Roman officials, and others at the beginning of the second century still viewing Christianity as a Jewish sect, yet as a breakaway movement. Neither is it implausible, especially in the light of the situation of the churches in the latter part of the second century, that a writer like Dio Cassius could still see some kind of overlap between the two movements.

With particular reference to Flavia Domitilla, inscriptions and Christian tradition affirm that she professed Christianity, which would have made her a prime candidate for a charge of “atheism” by those believing in the deity of the emperor. Such persecution is reflected in *1 Clement* 1.1 (96 A.D.), who alludes to “the sudden and repeated calamities and reverses that have befallen us.”

All in all, what emerges from both the early secular and Christian sources is that there is some evidence for a hardening of Roman policy, which became increasingly intolerant toward explicit Christian nonparticipation in the political-religious life of Greco-Roman society. More important evidence for persecution of the churches addressed by John than this broader context of intolerance is the documentation from Asia Minor of local

enthusiasm for the imperial cult in conjunction with other local cults (e.g., cults of patron deities of trade guilds) and local indignation for Christians' failure to participate (see pp. 12–16 below on this persecution).

Therefore, a date during the time of Nero is possible for Revelation, but the later setting under Domitian is more probable in the light of the evidence in the book for an expected escalation of emperor worship in the near future and especially the widespread, programmatic legal persecution portrayed as imminent or already occurring in Revelation 13, though the letters reveal only spasmodic persecution. The likelihood is that outright oppression was occasional and that John expects a heightening of the persecution imminently.

L. L. Thompson's assertion that the civil disorder and officially required heightened divine titles for Domitian reported by Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Dio Chrysostom, and Dio Cassius are due to bias has some merit. But he overstates the point. First, he says that Domitian's demand, reported by these historians, that he be addressed as "Lord and God" finds no documentation in sources dating from the time of Domitian's reign itself. This may be true with respect to use of the title as an imperial demand, but the use of the complete title and partial forms *is* documented from sources contemporary with Domitian, which supports A. Y. Collins's view that the title was used out of motives of flattery. Thompson acknowledges that the title was so used, but says that it is attested only by the poet Martial, who affirms that it was used to flatter Domitian. This dilutes to some degree Thompson's evaluation of the reports by Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Dio Chrysostom, and Dio Cassius concerning Domitian's insistence that he be addressed as "Lord and God." While it is possible that bias in favor of Trajan was the motive influencing these writers to say that the title was an imperial requirement, it is likely that their report of the title was not produced wholly from thin air. Likely these are recollections of a tendency among aristocrats to flatter Domitian. And it is possible that, while Domitian did not require the divine title as a policy, there may have been times when he persecuted people for not using it when called on to do so to show loyalty. The evidence of Pliny shows that this may well have been the case only a few years later, in Trajan's reign.

In fact, there are authors contemporary to Domitian other than Martial who speak of explicit affirmations of Domitian's deity. Besides abundant references to Martial, K. Scott adduces passages from Statius, Juvenal, and Silius Italicus, as well as inscriptional and numismatic evidence from Asia Minor, that attest to people addressing Domitian as a deity (though Juvenal wrote between 115 and 127 A.D.). Likewise, recently, Friesen has concluded that there is much inscriptional evidence from Asia Minor, including some from the late first to the early second centuries, "that equates the gods and the emperor in a sacrificial context" and distinguishes the deity of traditional gods from that of the deity of the emperors, including Domitian. Thompson also strikingly cites Domitian's contemporary Quintilian referring to Domitian as a god, contradicting his assessment of Quintilian on the same page. Scott understands that flattery was a motive, not only for Martial, but also for Statius and likely others. Scott regards Pliny's evaluations of Domitian as arising from bias and exaggeration, yet sees that there was some foundation

for Suetonius's report concerning Domitian's tendency to bring convictions against people on slight pretexts. Price has observed that as early as the time of Augustus it was conventional for diplomatic approaches to the emperor and requests for privilege to be made through the laudatory forms of the imperial cult.

Therefore, a more likely scenario is not to discount totally the evidence of Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Dio Chrysostom, and Dio Cassius, as Thompson appears to do. Rather, these writers reflect a tendency among aristocrats to flatter Domitian, corroborated by earlier writers. Juvenal wrote: "What flattery is more apparent... ? There is nothing that he cannot believe about himself when his power is praised as equal to the gods." This is a striking statement since it establishes a link between flattery and its effect on Domitian. The more Domitian was flattered by deific adorations, the more he probably would have expected it.

Indeed, Dio Chrysostom places some of the flattery into a realistic "situation in life" when he says that Domitian "was called 'master and god' by all Greeks and barbarians, but was in reality an evil demon." Then he adds that he himself did not flatter the emperor in this manner or try to avert his hostility by special entreaty. In other words, flattery did not necessarily arise predominantly from motives of popular opportunism or from those who sought benefits from Domitian. It was likely also used in attempts to escape punishment, which Dio Chrysostom himself suffered and did not try to allay by flattery. Dio Cassius asserts that an aristocrat averted Domitian's punishment by bowing before him and addressing him as "Master" and "God," "terms that were already being applied to him by others." Scott's view, denied by Thompson, that the longer Domitian reigned the more of a tyrant he became, is possible, though not demanded by the evidence. Nevertheless, Scott's conclusion is consistent with the idea that continued flattery probably affected the emperor's self-image, so that he came to have an increasingly inflated view of himself.

Statius's testimony that Domitian forbade anyone addressing him as *dominus* cannot be a proof text for a universal fixed policy but only that there may have been occasions when such a form of address was not appropriate, especially in the light of contrary evidence elsewhere in Statius. In contrast, at an even earlier period the self-exalting Gaius (Caligula) was upset when he realized that Jews were sacrificing on his behalf to their God instead of sacrificing to him as "a god acknowledged among all the other nations but not to be named by you." And Flavius Philostratus portrays Domitian as demanding to be regarded as "the god of all humankind" in response to a person who shows disrespect to him.

Evidence that Thompson himself cites does not support the definite distinction that he makes between biased historians writing for Trajan and writers contemporary with Domitian. Among writers supposedly seeking to show that Trajan's reign represented a radical break with the former Flavian dynasty, Dio Cassius and Tacitus could praise an earlier stage of the Flavian dynasty, and Tacitus was even positive about Domitian's early career. Thompson's conclusion that there is no evidence that Domitian was a tyrant demanding a degree of divinization greater than earlier emperors is generally fair.

Thompson acknowledges that over the course of the Empire there was an increasing tendency to emphasize the emperors' deity, but, inconsistently, does not allow this judgment to affect his view that Domitian was no different from earlier emperors in his claims to deity and his policy of persecution. Trajan was addressed with the same divine names as Domitian, which suggests that the degree of Christian persecution testified to by Pliny was likely going on selectively under Domitian. Therefore, while Trajan's propagandist historians and poets may be biased against Domitian (and it is difficult to speculate accurately about the psychology and motives of emperors or ancient historians), their testimony about Domitian should not be jettisoned altogether. Domitian was probably worse than his predecessors and his immediate successors, but not as bad as the propagandists make him out to be. The epigraphic, numismatic, and prosopographical evidence adduced by Thompson to indicate a different assessment of Domitian's reign from that of the propagandists is not as significant as he contends, with respect to both the amount of evidence and its interpretative value.

E. P. Janzen has concluded from his study of the numismatic evidence that coins minted during Domitian's reign display his escalating delusions of grandeur, including claims to deity exceeding claims by prior emperors. Janzen regards this evidence as confirming the negative evaluations of Domitian by the majority of Roman writers (esp. poets). He observes that Thompson's work rarely interacts with numismatic sources and believes that there needs to be a reevaluation of Thompson's reevaluation of the ancient sources.

Persecution of Christians

The issue of persecution is closely connected to the debate about emperor worship, since Revelation depicts the latter as the basis for the former. The internal evidence of the book points toward a situation of relative peace and selective persecution, with an imminent expectation of intensifying persecution on a widening and programmatic scale.

There is no evidence that Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome extended also to Asia Minor, where the churches addressed in the Apocalypse are located. But John may have seen the outbreak of persecution in Rome as the first step of expanding persecutions elsewhere in the Empire.

Persecution under Domitian is possible but is supported by documentary evidence only in writers subsequent to his reign. Even if there was no such consistent persecution, John might have seen the storm clouds forming and on that basis might have expressed an expectation of imminent persecution. This is especially plausible in view of Pliny's evidence: widespread persecution was increasing, but Pliny was not aware of any formal imperial policy providing guidelines for persecuting Christians. His question to the emperor on how to proceed and other like requests would presumably have slowly but surely led to a more programmatic approach.

So either the Neronian or Domitianic date is possible. On either view the perspective of the Apocalypse is that of an imminent expectation of increasing persecution among the churches in Asia Minor.

But in the light of the conclusions reached above concerning emperor worship, it is more probable that the persecution pictured in the book occurred later than earlier. Though John's exile to Patmos (1:9) could have taken place under Nero, it fits better the conditions of Domitian's reign, when forms of persecution for refusal to participate in emperor worship were likely increasing and becoming more systematic. The letters in Revelation suggest that Jewish Christians were tempted to escape persecution by seeking some form of identification with Jewish synagogues, which were exempted from emperor worship, and that Gentile Christians were tempted to compromise with trade guild cults and even the emperor cult in order to escape persecution. Such a situation is more likely to have been present toward the end of the first century rather than earlier.

As suggested above, intense persecution under Domitian may be reflected in *I Clement* 1:1 (96 A.D.), who alludes to "the sudden and repeated calamities and reverses that have befallen us." Barnard has demonstrated the probability that this is a correct assessment of the evidence in Clement, especially in light of chs. 4–7. For example, in ch. 7 Clement compares the earlier martyrdoms of Peter and Paul by the Romans (ch. 5), as well as the persecutions of "a vast multitude of the elect" ("through many indignities and tortures," ch. vi), to the present circumstances of his readers: "we are in the same arena, and the same struggle is before us" (7:1). This language suggests that the writer is placing himself and the readers in the same generation as Paul and Peter, but as living years later than the two apostolic stalwarts (ch. 47 can easily be understood likewise) — probably neither before 70 A.D. nor much after 100 A.D. (see further below on the date of *I Clement*). To add to Barnard's evidence, ch. 39 states that "senseless and stupid and foolish and ignorant people jeer and mock at us." Chs. 45 and 46 present the patient sufferings of Daniel and his three friends as "examples" for his readers to follow.

This evidence, together with the above-cited evidence from Tacitus, Pliny, and Dio Cassius, at least points to the plausibility of selective yet significant persecution under Domitian. Therefore, later Christian sources referring to persecution under Domitian should not be wholly discounted, though some may overemphasize the programmatic nature and the severity of the persecution.

In line with the preceding analysis, S. R. F. Price has concluded that "the establishment of the provincial cult of Domitian at Ephesus, with its colossal statue, is what lies behind" the depiction in Revelation 13 of believers being put to death for not worshipping "the image of the beast." Indeed, "no other interpretation [of Revelation 13] which fits the known geographical and temporal contexts" is as suitable, especially since this event at Ephesus "involved the participation of the whole province, as attested by the series of dedications by numerous cities." Price deduces that such large-scale involvement by the entire province led to unusually strong pressure being placed on Christians to conform. Such a major event may also explain why John himself alludes in chapter 13 to the narrative in Daniel 3 of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's refusal to

bow down to a huge statue of Nebuchadnezzar (esp. according to the LXX of Dan. 3:12, 18; see the comments below on Rev. 13:7–8, 14–15, 18). Perhaps this event in Ephesus and the persecution it caused led the early church to see Daniel’s three friends as protomartyrs and as models for persecuted Christians — and Nebuchadnezzar’s image as prototypical of the Roman emperor’s image. This kind of *local evidence in Asia Minor* of imperial cult pressure is not available for the pre-70 A.D. dating of the book.

This assessment is corroborated by the fact that in Asia Minor, especially from the time of Domitian onward, the culture increasingly expected public expressions of loyalty to the imperial cult, and the local civil authorities not untypically mandated that inhabitants of towns and cities show varying degrees of support for the imperial religion. Such informal cultural pressure and formal civic insistence extended primarily to times of celebrations and festivals. These festivals were held both in temples and in civic centers, and civic mandates to participate extended even to people being required to offer sacrifices outside their houses as the festival procession passed by toward its final destination. Therefore, cities prescribed that “all citizens had a share in the city, and in the imperial cult.” Consequently, more important evidence for persecution of the Asia Minor churches is found in local enthusiasm for the imperial cult in conjunction with other local cults (e.g., cults of patron deities of trade guilds) and in local indignation for Christians’ failure to participate than in direct evidence for the deification of Domitian and persecution under his regime.

Price’s assessment that Asia Minor’s culture increasingly expected public expressions of loyalty to the imperial cult in the latter part of the first century has been recently corroborated in general by S. J. Friesen. Friesen argues that the cult of the Sebastoi was a witness to the developing nature of imperial authority in the late first century. The provincial cult under Domitian in Asia “was an unprecedented attempt to build a network, rather than a center, of provincial worship.” The result was that the cult became a greater part of the warp and woof of the life and structure of society than it had been. There is not much evidence that initial impetus for establishment of the cult came from Domitian; instead, the primary influence for the cult arose from native soil and was due to developments in Ephesus and the Asian province: the social elite, attempting to consolidate their own power and influence, were moving from roles in mere local, municipal bases to provincial service to Rome. In so doing, they were seen by Rome as more loyal and were in better positions to receive financial favor from Rome, all of which would have bolstered their own power base.

Friesen contends that his study of conditions in late first-century Asia Minor do not support the notion that Revelation was written because of Domitian’s direct attempts to persecute Christians due to lack of acknowledgment of his deity. However, he does conclude that John wrote because of the cumulative effects of these local, provincial developments undergirding the imperial cult in the late first century, which would have put increased pressure on Christians to conform to the demands of the cult and to compromise. The evidence pointed to by Friesen and Price suggests a more probable and precise setting for the writing of Revelation, since there is debate whether there was formal and broad persecution of Christians throughout the empire, ultimately instigated

by Domitian. It is especially against this background that references to Domitian as divine are to be seen as used by both provincial Roman officials and local people, the latter trying to flatter the emperor in order to gain Roman favor and to consolidate their own social-political positions.

Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.17, 20 (citing Hegesippus and Tertullian); 4.26 (citing Melito of Sardis), and Tertullian, *Apologia* 5, mention a major persecution during Domitian's reign.

B. Newman accepts Irenaeus's testimony to the Domitianic date of the Apocalypse, but doubts that there is evidence that the book is responding to a situation of persecution during that emperor's reign.

General consensus places the date of *1 Clement* in the mid-nineties of the first century: so *ODCC*, Beckwith, and Snyder. See all three works for further bibliography, in addition to Welborn, who acknowledges references representing the "nearly unanimous assent" to a mid-nineties date.

Welborn is one of the rare exceptions to the dating consensus for Clement. He argues that "the sudden and repeated calamities and reverses" of *1 Clem.* 1:1 refer not to persecution but only to conflicts within the Roman church and that such conflicts were the only problem facing the Roman and Corinthian churches. He argues that the letter represents a conventional literary genre employed by writers attempting to bring about peace in a community.

Welborn errs by assuming that such a genre excludes factors of external persecution, especially because this would cause problems internally with respect to how a community would respond to further persecution. Indeed, some NT letters were written partly because of internal disagreements concerning persecution (e.g., Hebrews, 1 Peter, the letters to Pergamum and Thyatira in Revelation 2). Welborn correctly sees that *1 Clem.* 7:1 ("we are in the same arena, and the same struggle is before us") makes the purpose of the letter explicit, but he astoundingly attempts to limit "arena" and "struggle" to moral struggles within the church that have nothing to do with external persecution. However, as discussed above, the primary point of chs. 5–6 in relation to ch. 7 clearly concerns how external persecution relates to the church's internal problems. Welborn does not acknowledge the clear references to persecution in the letter (e.g., chs. 5–6, 39, and 45–46, on which see above). He suspects that commentators representing the consensus have a hidden "apologetic motive" driving their conclusions. But perhaps he himself is not without some apologetic impulse.

The Condition of the Churches in Asia Minor

The situation of the churches described in Revelation 2–3, when considered together, could point to a later rather than an earlier date. First, the spiritual lethargy of Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea is so widespread and severe that each church as a whole is on the verge of losing its very identity as a church of Christ. It is plausible that such spiritual deterioration took a significant period of time to develop. For example, that Ephesus had

left its “first love” could mean that the church had done so within only a few years of its establishment, but the language may fit better a longer development, perhaps so that the church was in its second generation of existence. The Laodicean church is called “wealthy,” but the city experienced a devastating earthquake in 60–61 A.D. Therefore, the natural assumption is that the city took longer than merely three or four years to recover economically. And, as suggested by many commentators, the very existence of the church at Smyrna suggests a later date, since it is possible that the church was not even established until 60–64 A.D.

The Myth of Nero’s Reappearance

Some commentators argue that some passages in Revelation reflect a “revival of Nero” myth, especially 13:3–4 and 17:8, 11, which speak of the demise of the beast and subsequent revival. In particular, 13:3–4 refers to the beast recovering from a fatal wound. The Nero myth held that Nero would return from the dead and lead a Parthian army against the Roman Empire. If these texts reflect the myth, then Revelation is better dated later than earlier, since presumably it took time for the myth to arise, develop, and circulate after Nero’s death in 68 A.D.

But even some who hold to a late date question whether these passages draw on the Nero myth, since there are differences in the portrayals. Therefore, the myth may not contribute significantly to settling the date question. But Bauckham has contended that John creatively adapts two forms of the Nero legend, one each in chs. 13 and 17, which portray distinct events in the career of the beast. Ch. 13 portrays “the power and success of the Roman Empire in its opposition to God and his people”; ch. 17 portrays “the ultimate downfall of the empire.” John’s interest in christological parody has influenced him to adapt the two forms of the legend, making the beast’s resurrection in ch. 13 a distinct event from the beast’s parousia in ch. 17. Bauckham’s arguments and conclusions seem viable for the most part, though qualifications need to be made at various points (see below and on 17:10–11). The general plausibility of his reformulation of a twofold Nero tradition gives John’s references to the Nero legend a decisive impact on the dating of Revelation.

The degree to which John consciously alluded to the Nero legend must remain unclear; Bauckham himself acknowledges that “Revelation says nothing explicitly about the historical Nero.”

Gentry tries to discern the beginnings of the Nero legend as early as the reigns of Galba and Otho (68–69 A.D.), since both in various ways associated their reign with that of Nero. However, though such associations may have enhanced Nero’s reputation, they certainly have no clear link to the “return of Nero” legend, which arose only years later in the latter part of the first century and subsequently. Interestingly, Domitian was viewed by Roman aristocracy as a second Nero. Furthermore, Gentry shows no awareness of the twofold nature of the Nero legend reflected in Revelation 13 and 17, which certainly has no precedent before 70 A.D. but only years later.

Robinson recognizes past attempts to trace developing stages of the Nero myth years after Nero's death, but says that the popular psychology of expecting Nero's return may, nevertheless, have arisen earlier. He cites Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8f., and Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Nero 57, as evidence. Robinson wrote before Bauckham and so could not take into consideration Bauckham's more developed version of the developing Nero traditions and their use in Revelation 13 and 17. Bauckham's perspective poses great difficulties for Robinson's position. For further discussion of the Nero legend see below on 13:3 and 17:10–11.

It is plausible that the OT and the apostolic tradition about Christ were the primary interpretative lenses through which John interpreted all other oral and literary sources, including extrabiblical traditions and myths, so that such traditions and myths are subordinated to biblical thought, and thus transformed and applied to the dragon and the beast and other figures in the Apocalypse. John painted verbal pictures in such a way as to ring bells in the minds of his readers, many of whom were former pagans and would have been familiar with some of these myths; he did so partly to put his readers' mythological background into biblical perspective. John can utilize even legends in order to conduct polemics against the ungodly world that formulates the myths. For example, the "seven heads" in 12:3 appears to come not from the OT but from cosmological traditions depicting the seven-headed sea monster Lotan. John adapts the Nero legend partly to supplement the portrayal of the beast's parody of Christ and to highlight the beast's judgment, especially to show that the beast's parousia concludes in destruction for himself and his kingdom, in contrast to the parousia of Christ. Similarly, in Acts 17 Paul applies to God statements about the attributes of Zeus in order to underscore that such pagan statements apply truly only to God. John executes the same polemic in Rev. 1:4 and elsewhere in his book. In the same way, OT authors applied to Yahweh attributes of Baal from Canaanite mythology in order to make precisely the same point.

"Babylon"

Those preferring a pre-70 A.D. date for Revelation regard "Babylon" as a symbolic name for apostate Jerusalem, but John's use of the name may be the strongest internal evidence for a post-70 date. "Babylon" refers to Rome in Jewish literature after 70 A.D. and roughly contemporary with the Apocalypse. Jewish commentators called Rome "Babylon" because the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 70 A.D., just as Babylon had done in the sixth century B.C. This use of the name probably influenced John, as did other Jewish traditions (see the commentary section throughout). Jewish writings might have referred to Rome as Babylon before 70 A.D. merely out of a belief that Jews were still in exile, even though they were living in the Promised Land, because they were oppressed by a foreign power, because the new temple of Ezekiel 40–48 had not yet been built, and because the new creation had not yet occurred, all of which was expected to occur when Israel's exile was completely ended. But Jews do not appear to have labeled Rome "Babylon" until after 70 A.D. In fact, the only early metaphorical uses of "Babylon" occur, besides in Revelation, in 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and the Sibylline Oracles, which are clearly post-70.

J. Christian Wilson argues that in Jewish literature prior to 70 A.D. (OT, LXX, DSS, Pseudepigrapha) Babylon was associated primarily with the exile and only rarely linked with Jerusalem's destruction, whereas in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch (written after 70) the name is explicitly connected to Jerusalem's destruction. In Revelation "Babylon" is never linked with Jerusalem's destruction but represents only the place in which the saints live in exile. Wilson concludes that Revelation was written prior to 70 A.D. This is plausible, but the analysis is based in part on an argument from silence. Furthermore, Wilson's attempt to demonstrate that in the OT and LXX Babylon is only significantly thought of as a place of exile suppresses too much the important associations of Babylon with Jerusalem's destruction in that literature.

The Earliest Traditions

The testimony of the earliest patristic authors supports a date during the time of Domitian. The most important of these witnesses are Irenaeus, Victorinus of Pettau, Eusebius, and possibly Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

The most decisive and earliest witness is Irenaeus, who, in discussing the identity of the Antichrist in Revelation, writes, "We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by *him who beheld the Apocalypse*. For it was seen not very long ago, but almost in our day, toward the end of Domitian's reign." A few commentators have suggested that "it was seen" should be translated "he [John] was seen," so that the phrase does not mean that the Apocalypse was written during Domitian's time but only that John was seen during Domitian's time. But "the Apocalypse" is the closest antecedent, and the Latin translation of Irenaeus supports this understanding of the clause. The majority of patristic writers and subsequent commentators up to the present understand Irenaeus's words as referring to the time when the Apocalypse "was seen."

In the same context Irenaeus discusses various possible identifications for the number of the "beast" (666). But he does not entertain the possibility that the beast is to be identified with Nero, and he even rejects the possibility that the beast is to be identified with any Roman emperor at all (see Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.30.3). Such lack of consideration is striking since Nero's infamous reputation as a persecuting tyrant would still have been well known. Irenaeus's silence about Nero cannot be attributed to a future expectation of the beast, in contrast to a preterist view because one of the identifications that he does consider is *Lateinos*, which he identifies as the past, present, and future Roman Empire and understands as a beginning fulfillment of the prophesied fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 and 7. The number of the beast "indicates the recapitulations of the apostasy that occurred at the beginning and during the intermediate periods and will take place at the end" and is "a summing up of that whole apostasy that has taken place during six thousand years." Irenaeus certainly could have integrated some form of a "revival of Nero" view into his own "already-and-not-yet" interpretation of Rev. 13:18 (see the comments below on that verse).

Arguments for an Early Date

The Temple and Jerusalem

That the temple in Jerusalem is spoken of in Rev. 11:1–2 as still standing is sometimes taken as evidence of a pre-70 A.D. date, since it is unlikely that a Christian or Jewish author could mention such a thing after the destruction of the temple in that year.

But this assumes a literal reading of 11:1–2 — and that it refers to the first-century Herodian temple. The literal reading should be questioned in the light of the symbolism throughout the book and in ch. 11 in particular (e.g., vv 3–7). Furthermore the depiction and measurements of the temple are based literarily and architecturally not on the Herodian temple but on the eschatological temple of Ezekiel 40–48. What is portrayed is the eschatological fulfillment of Ezekiel’s temple in the new age (for full discussion see the comments below on 11:1–2). This argues against Robinson’s statement about 11:1 that “it is clear from what follows that this is the old temple of the earthly city.”

The allusion to “the holy city” (11:2) and “the great city” (11:8) are also understood as literal references to historical Jerusalem immediately before the Roman siege of the city. While possible, such a literal understanding suffers from the same weakness as the literal interpretation of the temple in that it fails to deal with the symbolic import of the text (see further on 11:2 and 8). Furthermore, Robinson observes that the city is not completely destroyed at the end of ch. 11 and infers from this that historical Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed by the time John wrote. But the seventh bowl (16:17–21) does in fact picture “the great city” as entirely destroyed.

The Seven Kings

In 17:9 “seven mountains” are noted, which most agree is a way of referring to historical Rome and its seven hills. Then the angel tells John in v 10 that these mountains represent seven kings: “five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come.” The sixth king is the one in power as John writes.

An early dating of the book will identify the first of these “kings” as Augustus, the first official Roman emperor, and the sixth as Galba, who reigned briefly after Nero’s death (68–69 A.D.). Or one might just as plausibly begin with Julius Caesar, who first claimed the rights of Roman emperor. In that case, Nero would be the sixth and Galba the seventh.

A late dating can construe the list in a number of ways. Some commentators start the list with Caligula, since he was the first Roman ruler to be installed after the new age inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection and the first Roman ruler to reflect overtly the characteristics of Antiochus Epiphanes, a forerunner of the Antichrist in Christian tradition (e.g., Matt. 24:15), by attempting to erect a statue of himself in the Jerusalem temple. Others begin with Tiberius, the emperor under whom Christ was crucified and under whom Jewish persecution of Christians occurred. If we begin with Nero, the

seventh king is Domitian. Some begin with Augustus, going on to Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (the five fallen kings), then Vespasian (the “one” who “is”) and Titus (the one who “has not yet come”), though the eighth king (v 11) is sometimes identified as Domitian. But should Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, who reigned briefly and successively after Nero, be thus excluded? Some ancient writers considered them legitimate emperors. What would be the basis of their exclusion?

Questions facing any historical identification are: Which ruler should we begin with? Are all the emperors to be counted or merely those who fostered the emperor cult? If all the emperors are included, there are too many for both the Neronic and the Domitianic datings. And how could the eighth emperor also be “one of the seven” (17:11) historically?

Specific problems face the identification of Nero as the sixth king and his reign as the time when Revelation was written: (1) The brief reign of Galba would likely have to be identified with the final revival of the beast, who is decisively destroyed after this final reappearance (17:11). But Galba died before the fall of “Babylon” (i.e., Jerusalem, within this theory), whereas chs. 17–18 have Babylon destroyed before the beast. The identification of Galba’s reign with the beast’s final phase of existence could be confirmed by identification of the reign of the “seventh” king for “a little while” (17:10) with the brief temporal reign (“one hour”) of the beast (17:12). But the problem is compounded because the beast (= the persecuting Roman Empire) was not decisively defeated with Galba’s reign but continued on in historic form for centuries. This would have been an insuperable problem for the church’s recognition of Revelation’s divine authority, since 17:11 would have been viewed as a false prophecy contradicting the message in chs. 17–18 that Babylon would be destroyed before the beast.

(2) Likewise, if Galba’s reign is identified with the final revival of the beast and his last unleashing of persecution (cf. 17:8, 11 with 11:7), then the historical incongruity would lie in the fact that there was no significant persecution in his reign.

(3) Though the sixth king is said to exist presently (he “is,” 17:10), the beast is described as not presently active in any significant way (17:11). A viable reading of this is that though the sixth king is ruling in the present, the beast is not using him as a pawn to persecute on as severe a scale as the seventh king, who is to come and who will persecute on an unprecedented scale; even if this is not the precise meaning of “is not” in 17:11, 11:7 and 20:1–9 still bear out that the last historical adversary of God’s people (= the seventh king) will persecute on a larger and more severe scale than any earlier ruler (see the comments on 17:8a, 10–11, as well as 11:7 and 20:1–9). But, if the sixth king is Nero, then the description of Rev. 17:10–11 does not fit, since Nero was infamous as a greater persecutor than any Roman emperor of the first century. Robinson, an advocate of the pre-70 dating, acknowledges that Nero could not be the sixth king, since “if one thing is certain it is that Nero is dead and not ‘now reigning.’ ”

(4) According to the assumption that 17:8, 9–11 reflects the “revival of Nero” myth (see above), if Nero’s death is presupposed in the imagery of 17:9–11, then he cannot be both the king who “is” presently ruling (17:10) and the king who “is not.”

(5) Lastly, this view, as well as the others, is not able to identify clearly the “ten kings” of 17:12 (see below for further discussion of these problems).

Chilton, who holds to a Neronian date for the book, responds to (1) and (2) by saying that the beast was resurrected, not only in Galba’s reign, but in subsequent reigns. He bases this on the identification of the beast as an “eighth” king (17:11), which he interprets as a numerical symbol of resurrection. While the number may well have this symbolic value, it does not by itself justify a resurrection enduring through indefinite future kings. While possible, Chilton’s proposal does not attempt to justify the incongruity of counting emperors literally up to Galba and then understanding “eighth” in a nonliteral way, discounting subsequent historical sequence. There appears no reason why the beast as an eighth king should not be identified with Galba or one more king after Galba, but no more.

(1) and (2) also are not problematic for Wilson, who believes that John, though recording history up through the narration of the sixth king (who reigned during the time of writing), was merely wrong when he tried to prophesy about the future seventh king (whether Galba or Otho). Therefore, a lack of correspondence between John’s portrayal of the seventh king and the actual historical events transpiring during the reign of that king should be no argument against a pre-70 date. Among the problems with this view is that of the canonicity of the Apocalypse. John makes such an emphatic point that he is writing the word of the Lord (e.g., 2:7, 17, 29; 19:9; 22:18–19) that it would be incongruous for immediately succeeding generations to accept the book as the divine word if John were so obviously wrong in his prophecy about the seventh king. A possible response to this is that the Rev. 17:9–11 prophecy was interpreted early on in a symbolic manner, so that the prophecy would not have been construed as erroneous. However, if early interpreters could interpret the passage symbolically, perhaps that is an argument that this was the original intention as well. Already in the second century the church was careful in rejecting writings that were pseudonymous or that contained material contradicting their purported claim to be the word of God. It is true that Revelation’s canonicity was challenged in some sectors of the early church, but the questions arose only from the chiliastic sectarian view of Revelation 20, which interpreted the millennium in a crassly literal manner.

More likely the seven kings are not to be identified with any specific historical rulers but represent rather the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God’s people. This conclusion is indicated by (a) the figurative and telescopic use of Dan. 7:4–7, (b) the understanding of the same Daniel text in Jewish writings, (c) the use of the sea beast metaphor throughout the OT to symbolize different wicked kingdoms spanning centuries, (d) the NT’s trans-temporal understanding of the Antichrist figure from Daniel 11 (2 Thess. 2:6–8; 1 John 2:18), and (e) Revelation’s identification of the seven-headed sea

beast as the malevolent alter ego of the Lamb, who also exercises authority not merely in any one historical epoch but throughout history.

For more in-depth discussion of these problems see on 17:9–10 and excursus on Rev. 17:10. It is possible that seven specific Roman emperors were originally in mind and that they were symbolic for all evil kingdoms throughout history.

“666”

Some contend that the numerical value of the name Nero(n) Caesar was intended to be calculated according to Hebrew transcription, since it adds up to 666, the number of the beast’s name in 13:18. This would suggest that the book was written before 70 A.D., since the beast of Revelation appears to be active at the time of writing (though some view ch. 13 as purely prophetic).

But identifying the name with Nero mistakenly assumes a knowledge of Hebrew and of the Hebrew system of gematria among native Greek readers. Furthermore, to choose the name “Caesar Nero” is too convenient for the Neronic dating, since there were many possible titles and names for Nero. Also, in transliteration of foreign names into Hebrew there was considerable latitude in treatment of vowels and three possible equivalents for *s*. And why would the author not use a Greek form instead of a Hebrew form? Is it coincidence that the numerical value in Hebrew of the Greek word θηρίον (“beast”) is 666?

The other numbers in Revelation are probably used figuratively without specific reference to one historical reality at one particular point in history. The word ἀριθμός (“number”) is elsewhere always used figuratively for an uncountable multitude (5:11; 7:4, 9 [the cognate verb]; 9:16 [2x]; 20:8).

Rev. 13:9 employs the metaphor of hearing to exhort believers to perceive spiritually the deceptive nature of the satanic, beastly institutions to which they are being tempted to accommodate. The exhortation in v 18 has the identical meaning, except that the metaphor of an intellect able to calculate is used instead of the ear metaphor. If the exhortation to exercise intellect by calculating is taken literally, then the exhortation to “have ears to hear” absurdly must be taken in literal fashion to refer to hearing with physical ears! This is not some riddle to be solved by the intellectually superior but an exhortation to discern spiritual danger.

“Babylon”

“Babylon” is thought to represent Jerusalem in Revelation for at least two reasons. First, 11:8 refers to the place “where their Lord was crucified” as “the great city,” and in the following chapters “the great city” is also called “Babylon” (18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21; cf. 14:8; 17:5). However, this is a correct identification only if the crucial reference to Jerusalem in 11:8 is to be understood literally. This is unlikely, since “where also their Lord was crucified” is introduced by “which spiritually is called.” The place names

“Sodom and Egypt,” which directly precede the reference to Jerusalem, are also clearly figurative. Furthermore, the “where” (ὅπου), with which the reference to Jerusalem begins, is used everywhere else in the book to introduce spiritual or symbolic geography.

The adornment of Babylon with “fine linen and purple and scarlet ... gold, precious stones, and pearls” (18:16; cf. 17:4) is seen as alluding to the Israelite high priest’s attire, so that the image in Revelation refers to apostate Israel. While this is possible, and likely included to some degree, the allusion also includes the clothing of the pagan king of Tyre, who himself reflects the attire of Adam in Eden.

As noted earlier, the use of “Babylon” may be one of the strongest pieces of internal evidence that the book is to be dated after 70 A.D., since after that date the name is typically applied in Judaism to Rome. On the other hand, there is not one example of “Babylon” ever being a symbolic name for Israel, either before or after 70 A.D. This does not mean such an application is impossible, but the burden of proof rests on those maintaining the Babylon = Jerusalem identification. Indeed, there is a general OT precedent in that a few of the prophets sometimes refer to Israel as “Sodom” or “Egypt” (e.g., Isa. 1:10; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Ezek. 16:44–58).

The Initial Thematic Focus of 1:7

Rev. 1:7 refers to Jesus “coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the tribes of earth will mourn over him.” Some preterist commentators take this as referring to Jesus’ coming in judgment on Jerusalem at 70 A.D., using the Romans as his punishing rod. The second part of the verse cites Zech. 12:10, where those who mourn are “the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” On this basis it is concluded that “earth” means the land of Israel, as in Zech. 12:12, and that the “tribes” in Rev. 1:7 must be the literal Israelite tribes, who are being judged in 70 A.D. in fulfillment of the Zechariah 12 prophecy.

But there are difficulties with this perspective. First, Zechariah 12 does not prophesy Israel’s judgment but Israel’s redemption. Furthermore, the Zechariah citation is combined with Dan. 7:13, which also refers to the eschatological deliverance, not judgment, of Israel.

Second, “tribes of the earth” never refers to Israelite tribes; “all the tribes of the earth” refers to all nations in every one of its Septuagint occurrences (πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς, Gen. 12:3; 28:14; Ps. 71[72]:17; Zech. 14:17). “All the tribes of *Israel*” occurs repeatedly in the OT (about twenty-five times). By using “all the tribes of the earth” Rev. 1:7b transfers what is said of Israel in Zechariah 12 to the peoples of the earth, who now assume the role of Israel, repentant after having rejected God’s messenger. The change was likely motivated by the use of “all the tribes of the earth” in Zech. 14:17 and perhaps by “every ... tribe” in Dan. 7:14, where universal designations are intended. Along with the change to “all the tribes of the earth,” Rev. 1:7 also universalizes with “every eye.” The mourners are not those who have literally crucified Jesus but those who are guilty of rejecting him. This is probably not a reference to every person without exception but to

all among the nations who believe, as indicated clearly by the universal scope of “tribe” in 5:9 and 7:9, where redemption of the nations is the main theme.

Some believe that the Zechariah quotation is utilized contrary to its original intention to denote the grief of the nations over their impending judgment. But John typically adheres to and consistently develops the contextual ideas of his OT references. Proposed exceptions to this rule must bear the burden of proof. Indeed, the nations in 1:7b do not mourn over themselves but over Jesus, which fits better into an understanding of repentance than judgment. And the extended application of the mourning from the nation Israel to the believing nations is not an inconsistent development since the latter now are understood to be true Israel.

Conclusion

Sweet’s conclusion about the issue of Revelation’s date reflects a balanced judgment: “To sum up, the earlier date *may* be right, but the internal evidence is not sufficient to outweigh the firm tradition stemming from Irenaeus.”