

# The Date of

## THE APOCALYPSE

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MILTON has spoken of the Apocalypse as "the majestic image of a high and stately tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn scenes and acts with a seven-fold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies." [1] In this aspect of the book - though the notion of its dramatic form must be rejected - we may perhaps be content with the arrangement which places it as the last book of Holy Writ. But the whole weight of evidence now tends to prove that it is *not* the last book in chronological order ; that it was written nearer the beginning than the end of St. John's period of apostolic activity amid the Churches of Asia ; [2] that the last accounts of revelation which fall upon our ears are not those of a treatise which, though it ends in such perfect music, contains so many terrible visions of blood and fire, but are rather those of the Gospel which tells us that "the Word was made flesh," and of the Epistle which first formulated the most blessed truth which was ever uttered to human hearts - the truth the "God is Love." [3]

This then is the order which we here shall follow. In the Apocalypse the New Testament seems to be still speaking in the voice and in the tones of the Old Testament. In trying to see something of the meaning of the Apocalypse, we shall see the mind of St. John when he first emerged from the overshadowing influence of St. James and the Elders of Jerusalem ; when, from the narrowing walls of the metropolis of Judaism, he passed forth into the Christian communities which had grown up in the heathen world. We shall see how he wrote and what he thought while under the guidance indeed of God's Holy Spirit, but before he had profited by his thirty last years of continuous education, and while yet he was but imperfectly acquainted with the language in which his greatest message was to be delivered. The Apocalypse was written before he had witnessed the Coming of Christ and the close of the Old Dispensation, in the mighty catastrophe which, by the voice of God in history, abrogated all but the moral precepts which had been uttered by the voice of God on Sinai. The moral conceptions of the Gospel transcend the symbolism of visions, and the kabbalism of numbers. We do not pass from the purest and more ethereal region of thought to dim images of plague and was, foreshadowed by fire-breathing horses and hell-born frogs. When we have grasped the abstract and absolute forms in which the Gospel and the Epistles set forth to us the eternal

conflict of life with death, and light with darkness, we have learnt higher and deeper lessons than when we gaze on the material symbols of scarlet dragons and locust-horsemen, and the warring of Michael with the devil and the beast.

A few words from one of our latest and best students of the writings of St. John, though not written with this purpose, may serve to show what we lose by our customary reversal of the proper order.

"In the Apocalypse," Canon Westcott, "the thought is of an outward coming for the open judgment of men ; in the Gospel, of a judgment which is spiritual and self-executing. In the Apocalypse, the scene of the consummation is a renovated world ; in the Gospel, the Father's House. In the former, the victory and the transformation are from without, by might, and the 'future' is painted in historic imagery ; in the latter, the victory and the transformation are from within, by a spiritual influence, and the 'future' is present and eternal ... The Apocalypse gives a view of the action of God in regard to men in a life full of sorrow, and partial defeats and cries for vengeance ; the Gospel gives a view of the action of God with regard to Christ, who establishes in the heart of the believers a presence of completed joy... In a word, the study of the Synoptists, of the Apocalypse, and of the Gospel of St. John in succession, enables us to see under what human condition the full majesty of Christ was perceived and declared, not all at once, but step by step, and by the help of the old prophetic teaching." [4]

## SECTION I.

### DATE OF THE APOCALYPSE.

But before we enter on the difficult task of attempting to see the significance of the Apocalypse, we must once more pause to cast a glance over the condition of the world at the time when it was written.

The chief obstacle to the acceptance of the true date of the Apocalypse, arises from the authority of Irenaeus. Speaking of the number of the Beast, and repeating those early conjectures which, as I shall show elsewhere, practically agree with what is now known to be the true solution, he remarks that he cannot give any positive decision since he believes that, if such a solution had been regarded as necessary, it would have been furnished by "him who saw the Apocalypse. For it is not so long ago that *it* (the Apocalypse) was seen, but almost in our generation, towards the close of the reign of Domitian." Three attempts have been made to get rid of this evidence. Guericke proposes to take "*Domitianou*" as an adjective, and to render the clause "near the close of the Domitian rule," *i.e.*, the rule of *Domitius Nero*. [5] But the absence of the article on which he relies gives no support to his view, and no scholar will accept this hypothesis, though he may admit the possibility of some *confusion* between the names Domitius and Domitian. [6]

Others again make the word *ἐωράθη* mean "he, *i.e.*, St. John, was seen," since no nominative is expressed. Now Irenaeus, in the same passage and elsewhere, dwells so much on the fact of

testimony given by those who had *seen* John face to face, that we cannot set aside this suggestion as impossible. [7] It has the high authority of Wetstein. Again, the Latin translator of Irenaeus renders the verb not "*visa est*," "the Apocalypse was seen," but "*visum est*," "The Beast (*τὸ Θῆριον*) was seen." The language is, unfortunately, ambiguous, and as, in uncritical times, it would naturally be understood in what appears to be the most obvious sense, it is not surprising that St. Jerome follows the supposed authority of Irenaeus in dating the Apocalypse from the later epoch. Eusebius says that St. John was banished to Patmos in the reign of Domitian, but, even if he be not misunderstanding the meaning of Irenaeus, his evidence goes for little, since he leans to the view that the Apocalypse was written by John the Presbyter, and not by the Apostle. But the authority of Irenaeus was not regarded as decisive, even if his meaning be undisputed. Tertullian places the banishment to Patmos immediately after the deliverance from the cauldron of boiling oil, and Jerome says that this took place in the reign of Nero. [8] Epiphanius says that St. John was banished in the reign of Claudius, and the earliest Apocalyptic commentators, as well as the Syriac and Theophylact, all place the writing of the Apocalypse in the reign of Nero. To these must be added the author of the "Life of Timotheus," of which extracts are preserved by Photius. Clemens of Alexandria and Origen only say that "John was banished by the tyrant," and this on Christian lips may mean Nero much more naturally than Domitian. [9] Moreover, if we accept erroneous tradition of inference from the ambiguous expressions of Irenaeus, we are landed in insuperable difficulties. By the time that Domitian died, St. John was, according to all testimony, so old and so infirm that even if there were no other obstacles in the way, it is impossible to conceive of him as writing the fiery pages of the Apocalypse. Irenaeus may have been misinterpreted; but even if not, he might have made a "slip of memory," and confused Domitian with Nero. I myself, in talking to an eminent statesman, have heard him make a chronological mistake of some years, even in describing events in which he took one of the most prominent parts. We cannot accept a dubious expression of the Bishop of Lyons as adequate to set aside an overwhelming weight of evidence, alike external and internal, in proof of the fact that the Apocalypse was written, at the latest, soon after the death of Nero. [10]

Did St. John ever see that frightful spectacle of a monster in human flesh? Was he a witness of the scenes which made the circus and the gardens of Nero reek with the fumes of martyrdom? We have already observed that tradition points in that direction. In the silence which falls over many years of his biography, it is possible that he may have been compelled by the Christians to retire from the menace of the storm before it actually burst over their devoted heads. St. Paul, we believe, was providentially set free from his Roman imprisonment just in time to be preserved from the first outburst of the Neronian persecution. [11] Had it not been for this, who can tell whether St. Paul and St. John and St. Peter might not have been clothed in the skins of wild beasts to be torn to pieces by the bloodhounds of the amphitheatre? or have stood, each in his pitchy tunic, to form one of those ghastly human torches which flared upon the dark masses of the abominable crowd? But even if St. John never saw Rome at this period, many a terrified fugitive of the "vast multitude" which Tacitus mentions must have brought him tidings about those bloodstained orgies in which the Devil, the Beast, and the False Prophet -- "that great Anti-Trinity of hell" -- were wallowing through the mystic Babylon in the blood of the martyrs of the Lord.

Supposing that St. John had written an apocalyptic book at this time, is it not *a priori* certain that these events, and the appalling figure of the Antichrist who then filled the world's eye, would have been prominent in such a book? Do not contemporary events and contemporary persecutions figure in every one of the numerous Apocalypses in which Jews and Christians at this epoch expressed their hopes and fears? Is it not a matter of certainty to every reasonable man, that the Apocalypse must be interpreted by laws similar to those which regulate every other specimen of that Semitic form of literature to which it avowedly belongs? Does not the fact that the anticipated Antichrist of Daniel is the persecutor Antiochus Epiphanes, make it in the highest degree probable that the incarnate Antichrist of St. John is the persecutor Nero?

The Neronian persecution, then, was one of the two events which awoke in Christian hearts those thundering echoes of which the Apocalypse of St. John is the prolonged and perpetuated reverberation. The other event was the outbreak of the Jewish war and the siege of Jerusalem. If we succeed in fixing the date of the Apocalypse, we shall be able to know what was the exact condition of the Empire and of the Holy Land, of Judaism, Heathendom, and Christianity -- of the world and of the Church of Christ -- when St. John saw and wrote.

But while the date may be fixed with much probability, it cannot be fixed with certainty. All that can be asserted is that the book was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, and the burning of the Temple. This is clear from the beginning of the eleventh chapter. The Temple is there spoken of as still standing, in language which closely resembles, and indeed directly refers to, the language of our Lord in his great Eschatological discourse. Such language, and the whole sequel of it, would have been unreal and misleading, if, at the time when it was penned, nothing remained of the Temple and city of Jerusalem but heaps of bloodstained stones. But though Jerusalem was not yet taken, there are signs that the armies had already gathered for her anticipated destruction, and that the whole length of the land had been deluged and drenched with the blood of its sons. We cannot tell the exact year in which the Christians -- warned, as Eusebius says, "by a certain oracle given to their leaders by revelation ;" [12] or, as Epiphanius tells us, "by an angel" [13] -- left the doomed and murderous city and took refuge across the Jordan, in the Peraean town of Pella. [14] There can be little doubt that their flight took place before the actual blockade of Jerusalem by Titus, and probably in A.D.68. It seems to be alluded to in Rev. xii. 14. Now the first threatening commotions in Judaea began in A.D.64, shortly after the fire of Rome. The actual revolt burst forth at Caesarea in A.D.65. Vespasian was despatched to Judaea by Nero during his visit to Greece in A.D.66. He arrived in Palestine early in A.D.67. The years 67 and 68 were spent in suppressing the brave resistance of Galilee and Peraea. Nero died in June, 68. Political uncertainties caused a suspension of the Roman measures during the year 69, but when Vespasian felt himself secure of the throne, in A.D.70, he sent Titus to besiege Jerusalem. The siege began early in March, 70, and was brought to its terrible conclusion in August of the same year.

But there are two passages, Rev. xiii. 3, and xvii. 10,11, which might seem to give us the very year in which the book was written. The former tells us about the Wild Beast, and how "one of his heads was smitten to death and his deathstroke was healed ;" the other, explaining the previous symbols, tells us that the seven heads of the Beast "are *seven kings* ; the five are fallen ; *the one is* ; the other is not yet come." Now we shall see hereafter, with perfect certainty, that the Wild Beast, and the wounded head of the Wild Beast, are interchangeable symbols for

Nero. The five "kings" then can be no other than Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero. The reckoning of the "kings" [15] from Augustus is the natural reckoning, and is the one adopted by Tacitus. If Suetonius begins his Twelve Caesars with the life of Julius, the greatest of them all, the reason is that he wishes to give an account of the Caesarean family, and of the *hero eponymus* who raised them to the summit of earthly power. [16] So far then it might be regarded as certain that Galba is the sixth emperor, and therefore that the Apocalypse was written between June, 68, when Nero committed suicide, and January, 69, when Galba was murdered. And since the news of Galba's successful rebellion could not have been known without a little delay, we might fix the date of the Vision in the summer or autumn of A.D.68.

This is, indeed, the all but certain date of the book. We have already seen reason to set aside the notion of its having been written in the reign of Domitian, as due partly to the mistake of Irenaeus, [17] and partly to idle repetition and idle inference. It is not, however, *impossible* that Vespasian and not Galba may have been regarded by the Apostle, no less than by others, as having been in reality the sixth emperor. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius passed like phantoms across the imperial stage. The Sibyllist dismisses them in the single line -- "After him three kings shall be destroyed by one another." [18] They neither belonged to the old imperial family, nor did they found a new one. Between them they barely covered the space of a year and a half. It is true that they are spoken of as "Caesars" both by Tacitus and Suetonius, though Vitellius refused the name. But when Vespasian succeeded the murdered Vitellius, at the end of A.D.69, it was believed that the Flavian dynasty would be secure and lasting, and the fashion arose of regarding the reigns of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius as a mere "*rebellion of three military chiefs.*" [19] If this were the view of the seer, the date of the Apocalypse would be brought down to A.D.70. The earlier date accords better with his own indications.

The tension of feeling caused by the tremendous conflict of the Antichrist against the Saints must have been still further strained by the imminent destruction which seemed to threaten the existence of the Jewish race. To minds already glowing with expectations of the Coming of Christ, and the close of the ages, the signs of the times must have worn a portentous aspect. The sunset sky of the ancient dispensation was red and lowering with the prophecy of storm. The "woes of the Messiah" -- the travail throes of the Future Age -- the pangs which were to accompany the new birth of the Messianic kingdom -- were already shaking the world. [20] There were wars and rumours of wars. There were famines and earthquakes. The Church had barely passed through the anguish of the great tribulation. Christians had realised what a tremendous thing it was to be "hated of all men," and to be treated as the offscourings of the world. Hundreds of martyrs had been baptized in blood. The name of "Christian" was regarded as the synonym for malefactor ; and all the world hated Christians, on the false charge that Christians hated all the world. Many were faltering in the faith; many had proved false to it. Even within its sacred fold many regarded each other with suspicion and hatred. There were false Christs and false Prophets. The powers of heaven were being shaken. Suns and moons and stars -- from Roman Emperors down to Jewish Priests -- were one after another waxing dim, and shooting from their spheres. Clearly the day must be at hand of which the Lord had said that it would come *ere that generation passed away*, and that all the things of which He had spoken would be fulfilled. Men were not expecting it. They were eating and drinking, as in the days of Noah, marrying and giving in marriage, drinking with the drunken, and beating their fellow servants in all the security of greed, in all the insolence of oppression. But, none the less

were the powers of vengeance nursing the impatient earthquake, and a belief in the eternal laws of morality was alone sufficient to make every Christian feel that the fiat had gone forth --

"ROME SHALL PERISH ! write that word  
In the blood that she hath spilt :  
Perish hopeless and abhorred,  
Deep in ruin as in guilt."

The fields were white for the harvest, the grapes were purple for the vintage of the world. The carcasses of a corrupt Judaism and a yet corrupter heathendom seemed already to be falling in the wilderness ; and on the distant horizon were visible the dark speks which the seer knew to be the gathering vultures of retribution, which would soon fill the air with "the rushing of their congregated wings."

## Notes

[1] Reasons of Church Government

[2] Modern criticism tends more and more to the conclusion that the Apocalypse is a genuine work of the Apostle St. John. Even Baur and Zeller regard it as one of the most certainly authenticated of the Apostolic writings. The Alogi at the close of the second century rejected it only on internal grounds, and their judgment is of no importance. Gaius (circ. 200) appears to attribute it to Cerinthus. Dionysius of Alexandria (A.D. 247) was inclined, on the grounds of style, to assign it to some other John, but speaks of it with reverence. [Eusebius](#) wavers about it, placing it among the spurious books in one passage, and among the acknowledged books in another. Cyril of Jerusalem (386) deliberately excludes it from the Canon. The Council of Laodicea (A.D. 381) omits it. Amphilochius, in his *Jamb. ad Selecus*, says that "most" regard it as spurious. Junilius, even in the sixth, says that among the members of the Eastern Church it was viewed with great suspicion. Theodore of Mopsuestia (429) never cites it. Theodoret (457) alludes to it very slightly. It is not found in the Peshito. The Nestorian Church rejected it. It is not mentioned in the sixth century by Cosmas Indicopleustes. Nicephorus (ninth century) in his *Chronographia* omits it. Even in the fourteenth century Nicephorus Callistus, while accepting it, thinks it necessary to mention that some held it to be the work of "John the Presbyter," regarded as a different person from "John the Apostle." But, on the other hand, these adverse views are to some extent accounted for by dislike to the difficulty and obscurity of the book, and by the dangerous uses to which it was often turned. Dislike to chiliastic fanaticism, as well as obvious critical difficulties, also led to its disparagement in many quarters. The *positive* evidence in its favour is very strong. It was accepted by Papias, [Justin Martyr](#), Dionysius of Corinth, Hermas, **Melito of Sardis**, Theophilus of Antioch, Apollonius, and [Irenaeus](#), the Canon of Muratori, and the Vetus Itala, in the second century ; by [Clemes of Alexandria](#) and [Origen](#) in the third ; by [Victorinus of Pettau](#), Ephraem Syrus, [Epiphanius](#), Basil, Hilary, [Athanasius](#), Gregory of Nyssa, Didymus, and Ambrose, in the fourth. Besides this, the internal evidence, in spite of differences and difficulties, is too clear to be overlooked, and too subtle to have been forged.

[3] It is hardly worthy while to mention the Apocryphal writings attributed to St. John, such as the one on the Descent from the Cross, on the Death of the Virgin Mary, &c. See Lampe, *Prolegomena*, p. 131 ; Fabricus, *Cod. Apocr. N.T.* pt. iii. p. 200.

[4] Introd., pp. lxxxv-lxxxvii.

[5] Guericke, *Einleit. ins N. Test.* p. 285

[6] This is the view of Niermeyer.

[7] μαρτυροῦντων ἐκείνων των κατ' ὄψιν Ἰωάννην ἑωρακότων ([Iren.](#) *ad Haer.* v.30)

[8] [Tert.](#) *De Praescr.* 36, *Jer. c. Jovin.* i. 26

[9] See [Epiph.](#) *Haer.* li 23 and 33 ; [Andreas](#) on Rev. vi. 12 ; [Arethas](#) on Rev. vii. 1-8 ; Syriac MS. No. 18 ; [Theophylact.](#) *Comment. in Joann.*

[10] This result is now accepted, not only by Lücke, Schwegler, Baur, Züllig, De Wette, [Renan](#), Krenkel, Bleek, Reuss, Réville, Volkmar, Bunsen, Düsterdieck, &c., but also by such writers as [Stier](#), [Neander](#), Guericke, Auberlen, F.D. Maurice, [Moses Stuart](#), Neirmeyer, [Desprez](#), S. Davidson, [the author](#) of [The Parousia](#), Aubé, &c.

[11] See my *Life of St. Paul*, ii. 604-607

[12] Euseb. *H.E.* iii. 5 (κατά τινα Χρησμόν κ.τ.λ.). Probably the leading Presbyters of the Church pointed out that the signs of the times indicated by our Lord, as He sat two days before His death on the Mount of Olives (*Matt. xxiv. 15, seq.*), now clearly required obedience to His warning.

[13] Epiph. *De Mensuris*, 15. In *Haer.* xxix. 7, he refers directly to the command of Christ. Jerusalem might be said to be "circled with armies" (*Luke xxo. 20*), long before its actual circumvallation by Titus.

[14] Which might well be described as in "the mountains." Pella is in a lofty position, and is on one side surrounded by precipices. It was the nearest city to Jerusalem which was at once safe and neutral. Though a free city, it had placed itself more or less under the protection of Agrippa II., and by so doing had severed its fortunes from those of the Jews. By their flight to this town, the Jewish Christians cast in their lot with the opponents of Jewish fanaticism. It was one of the steps in that Divine education which showed them that the days of Mosaism and of the synagogue were past.

[15] "Kings" was a common title for the Roman Emperors in the Eastern provinces (see Ewald, *Gesch.* vi. 604, *seqq.*)

[16] "*Imperator*" was a title which Julius Caesar bore, in common with Cicero and other private persons. He never was "Princeps." The last private Imperator was Junius Blaesus, in the reign of Tiberius.

[17] The Commentary of Andreas, Bp. of Cappadocian Caesarea, in the fifth century, rightly says, in contradiction of Irenaeus, that it was supposed to have been written before A.D.70

[18] *Orac. Sib.* v. 35.

[19] The language of Suetonius is very remarkable, and certainly lends some sanction to the views of those who regard Vespasian as the sixth Emperor. He says, "*Rebellione trium principum et caede incertum diu et quasi vagum Imperium suscepit firmavitque tandem gens Falvia*" (*Vesp.* 1).

[20] This is the term used not only by the Rabbis, but also by the Evangelists, ἀρχὴ ὀδίνων (Matt. xxiv. 8; Mark xiii. 8). It is a rendering of the Hebrews *Chebeli hammeschiach*. (See Hos. xiii. 14; Isa. xxxvii. 3; Mic. iv. 9, v.2, &c.)