

HOLY GHOST WRITER

Who Wrote the Apocalypse and When?

Will the Real John Please Stand Up?¹

One of my father's favorite musical groups is a Christian vocal ensemble called "Acappella." I remember listening to their incredible harmonies as a teenager—fascinated by just how low their voices could go. The bass parts sounded as deep as any instrument I have ever heard. If you turned it up loud enough, everything would rumble. My favorite song was probably "John the Revelator."

But who is this John the Revelator, who authored the Book of Revelation? Some modern scholars challenge the notion that John was the "revelator." Others, while agreeing that John is the author, disagree as to the identity of this John. Was it John the Apostle, or was there another John who merely shared the same name?

The proponents of the "other John" theory of authorship point to several passages in the works of the early Church Fathers that appear to speak of another John. For example, Eusebius of Caesarea, the great historian of the early Church, quotes Papias (AD 60 or 70–c. 125): "And again, if anyone came who had been a follower of the Elders—what was said by Andrew, or by Peter, or by Philip, or by Thomas or James, or by John or by Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, and what Aristion and the *Elder John* say . . ."² In this passage Papias seems to identify two separate Johns who were active in the leadership of the Church.³

Eusebius (c. 206–c. 339) accepts the existence of another John, but he bases his conclusions primarily on the writings of Papias. Saint Jerome also accepts the existence of the other John. However, he believes that John the Apostle is the author of the Apocalypse.⁴

Saint Dionysius of Alexandria (*c.* 190–*c.* 265) argues for authorship by a John other than the disciple.⁵ Yet his conclusion is based not on history, but on his analysis of the style of the Gospel of John, in contrast with the Book of Revelation. This stylistic difference will be discussed in more detail later.

To say that this second John was the author of Revelation is problematic, however, for even many of those who knew of John the Elder still held that the Apostle John wrote the Apocalypse. Concluding that this second John wrote the Book of Revelation does not necessarily follow from the ancient evidence.

In fact, the earliest Christian sources tell us that John the Apostle wrote the Book of Revelation. These include authors such as Saint Justin (AD *c.* 100–*c.* 165), Saint Irenaeus (*c.* 140–*c.* 202), Saint Clement of Alexandria (*c.* 150–*c.* 215), Origen (*c.* 185–*c.* 254), Tertullian (*c.* 160–*c.* 220), Saint Hippolytus (*c.* 170–*c.* 236), Epiphanius of Salamis (*c.* 315–402), and Saint Jerome (*c.* 340–*c.* 420).⁶

A Johnny Come Lately?

Moreover, it seems highly unlikely that anyone other than an apostle could write with such authority to seven different churches in Asia Minor. This is especially true if John the Apostle had authority over the churches in this region at the time, as a well-attested ancient tradition suggests.⁷ Indeed, who would dare write to John's churches, overstepping the apostle, to explain how things should be set in order?

The Book of Revelation is very different from the other writings of the New Testament. It is the only work of an apocalyptic genre that is in the New Testament. There were other apocalyptic writings, such as the Apocalypse of Peter, in circulation at the time. Yet, only the Apocalypse of John was widely accepted, because it was commonly seen as having apostolic authority. Other apocalyptic works, which were deemed not to have been written by an apostle, were discarded.

It is hard to believe, then, that the writer of Revelation, who assumes a position of authority over seven different churches, and who presents himself as one with special authority from the Lord, is not an apostle.⁸

A Matter of Style?

Many scholars argue that Revelation is significantly different from the Fourth Gospel; therefore, the same John could not have written it. The first scholar who made this case was the third-century theologian Dionysius. As we shall see below, this position is not sufficient to dismiss the book as authentically Johannine—that is, written by John the Apostle.

For one thing, authors often employ different styles when writing. Before Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II, he wrote a story called *The Jeweler's Shop*. This work is absolutely nothing like *Fides et Ratio*, his encyclical on the relationship between faith and reason. Yet no one concludes that different men must have written these two works. Likewise, if a journalist, while out in the field, wrote a love letter to his wife, we would certainly hope it would not read like typical newspaper prose. Stylistic differences between the two works, then, are not sufficient to deny that they are written by the same author.

Furthermore, although the two books are very dissimilar stylistically, there are many interesting literary parallels. In fact, many concepts and ideas found in the Fourth Gospel are also found in the Apocalypse:

- Jesus as the Word (Jn. 1:1, 14; Rev. 19:13)
- Jesus as the Lamb (Jn. 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:6, 8, 12, etc.)
- Christian worship as something done “in the Spirit” (Jn. 4:23; Rev. 1:10)
- Salvation as the gift of “living water” (Jn. 4:14; Rev. 21:6)
- Jesus as the Giver of true manna (Jn. 6:48–50; Rev. 2:17)
- The Mother of Jesus as the Mother of all believers (Jn. 19:26–27; Rev. 12:17)
- The Bridegroom and the Bride (Jn. 3:29; Rev. 19:7, 21:2, 9)

- The call to love not our lives even unto death (Jn. 12:25; Rev. 12:11)
- Satan being “cast out” (Jn. 12:31; Rev. 12:9)
- The Mother of Jesus being called “Woman” (Jn. 2:4; Rev. 12:1, 5)
- Jesus as the true temple (Jn. 2:21; Rev. 21:22)
- Christ as Shepherd (Jn. 10:1–16; Rev. 7:17)⁹

One can understand, then, why those who lived closest to John knew him as not only “Saint John the Evangelist” (the Gospel writer) but also “Saint John the Revelator.”

Double Dating

Determining the date of the writing of the Apocalypse is of critical importance to interpreting it. Today, most hold that the book was written in the 90s during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, who ruled from AD 81 to 96.¹⁰ A growing number of scholars, however, have come to the conclusion that it was written decades earlier, sometime before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70.

Those who espouse the view that the Apocalypse was written in the 60s, during the reign of Nero, also have ancient evidence to support their hypothesis. The Syriac version of the Book of Revelation begins by stating that it was “written in Patmos, to which John was sent by Nero Caesar.” Also, another Syriac work, *The History of John, the Son of Zebedee*, asserts that Nero exiled John.¹¹

Since proponents of the variant dates for the writing of the Apocalypse can point to early Church writings to champion their views, other factors must be examined to fix an accurate date.

Seizure by Caesar

While Revelation scholars disagree about the date the book was written, there is strong agreement that it was written in a time of persecution (see Rev. 1:9; 2:10; 12:11; 13:15). This is supported in the writings of the Church Fathers. For example, Clement of Alexandria says that John wrote the Apocalypse while on the island of Patmos, where he had been banished by a “tyrant.”¹²

Although the political situation for Christians was difficult in the 90s under Domitian, some scholars believe that there is no evidence that any widespread imperial persecution took place under him.¹³

A Little Caesar Story

While there are questions concerning the extent of Domitian's persecutions, it is clear that Nero, who reigned from 54 to 68, was notable for his tyrannical persecutions. Numerous writers from the period document Nero's unquenchable thirst for blood. The Roman writer Pliny describes him as "the destroyer of the human race," "the poison of the world," and "the enemy of mankind."¹⁴ According to Apollonius of Tyana, he was "commonly called a tyrant."¹⁵ Tacitus relates that he "put to death so many innocent men."¹⁶

Death and destruction followed Nero from his rise to his fall. He came from a family known for its cruelty. Another Roman historian, Suetonius, tells us that Nero's father was "hateful in every walk of life."¹⁷ At the age of twelve, Nero sought the prosecution and ruin of his own brother and aunt. His mother, Agrippina, schemed to advance him into high places of power, and she may have been the one who poisoned the previous emperor, Claudius.¹⁸

When he came to power at the age of seventeen, Nero poisoned his own brother. He later had his mother killed and was responsible for the deaths of his childhood tutors. He had his first wife exiled and then beheaded. While his second wife was pregnant with his son, he kicked her to death. His perverse sexual appetites are also well documented.¹⁹

In the year 68, a fire broke out in Rome; it was commonly believed that Nero himself set it. He blamed the Christians for the fire and launched the first major imperial persecution of the Church. Saints Peter and Paul were among those martyred during his persecution.²⁰ In a chilling description, Tacitus relates how Nero amused himself with the torture of early believers: "Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to

crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as nightly illumination, when day had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus. . . . [T]here arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good that they were being destroyed.”²¹

Nero eventually committed suicide, lamenting in self-pity, “What an artist the world is losing!”²²

Although Domitian was a tyrant, he failed to reach the levels of cruelty set by Nero. Since scholars agree that Revelation was written during a time of persecution, and since there are questions about Domitian’s actions, the evidence indicates that the book was likely written during the Neronic period.

Beast of Burden

Another source for determining which tyrant was responsible for banishing John is the very text of the Book of Revelation. Exploration of the internal data of the document helps us best set the date of Revelation during Nero’s reign.

For example, in Revelation 17, we read about seven hills, which symbolize seven kings: “The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain a little while” (Rev. 17:9–10). The seven hills clearly refer to Rome, which was built on seven hills. The seven kings likely refer to seven Roman emperors. Josephus, Suetonius, and other ancient historians list the first seven emperors as follows:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Julius Caesar | 46–44 BC |
| 2. Augustus | 27 BC–AD 14 |
| 3. Tiberius I | AD 14–37 |
| 4. Gaius Caesar (Caligula) | 37–41 |
| 5. Claudius I | 41–54 |
| 6. Nero | 54–68 |
| 7. Galba | 68–69 ²³ |

Interpreting the passage in the light of this list, I believe that Nero was reigning at the time Revelation was written. Galba, then, is the seventh king, the one whom John prophesied would reign for only “a little while” (Rev. 17:10).

Another possible indication that the Book of Revelation was written in Nero’s time is the number of the beast, the infamous “666” (Rev. 13:18). Just as the Romans used letters for numbers (e.g., I = 1, V = 5, X = 10), the Israelites used the Hebrew alphabet for numbers. When the Greek form of the name “Nero Caesar” is transliterated into Hebrew and converted into numerals, it adds up to 666. Further evidence that the early Christians understood “666” to indicate Nero can be seen in the fact that some ancient manuscripts of Revelation have the variant numeral 616 instead of 666. This number also points to Nero because when the Latin form of the name “Nero Caesar” is transliterated into Hebrew and converted into numerals, it adds up to 616.²⁴

Here Comes the Judge

There is another compelling argument for the early dating of the Book of Revelation that can be found in reading the text. The sacred writer conveys a sense of urgency, giving a clear message that Jesus is coming soon. Saint John writes:

- “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants *what must soon take place*” (Rev. 1:1).
- “[T]he time is *near*” (Rev. 1:3).
- “The Lord . . . has sent his angel to show his servants *what must soon take place*. And behold, *I am coming soon*” (Rev. 22:6–7).
- “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, *for the time is near*” (Rev. 22:10).
- “Behold, *I am coming soon*” (Rev. 22:12).

Yet we still await the Second Coming two thousand years later. Was Jesus wrong? The answer to this question is key to understanding Revelation and will help us understand when the book was written and why.

Multiple Choice

1. Scholars generally agree that the Book of Revelation was written during a time _____.

- (a) of persecution
- (b) of great famine
- (c) of peace
- (d) of a solar equinox

2. The Caesar who persecuted the Church with the most hatred was _____.

- (a) Julius
- (b) Galba
- (c) Domitian
- (d) Nero

3. “666” is the numeric value of the Hebrew name of _____.

- (a) Satan
- (b) Nero
- (c) Magog
- (d) it doesn't equal the value of any name

4. According to the way ancient historians counted the Caesars, Nero was the _____ Emperor.

- (a) first
- (b) second
- (c) sixth
- (d) last

5. The city of seven hills is _____.

- (a) Jerusalem
- (b) Ephesus
- (c) Rome
- (d) Egypt

Answers 1. a; 2. d; 3. b; 4. c; 5. c

Discussion/Study Questions

1. How does understanding the original situation of those who read the Book of Revelation help us better apply it to our lives? (See pages 1–2)

2. Name some of the similarities between John's Gospel and the Apocalypse. (See page 3)

3. Why do some scholars think that the Book of Revelation was written during the 90s, during the reign of Domitian? What reasons are there for dating the book to the reign of Nero (the 60s)? (See pages 4–6)
