

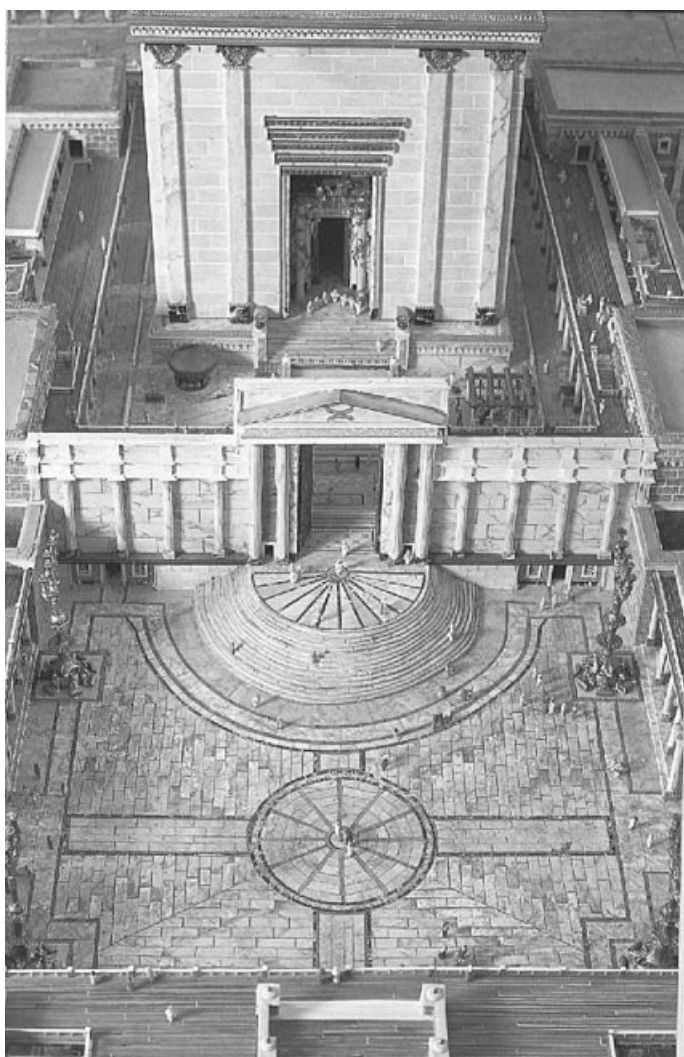


THE LAST DAYS

5

RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

‘Eschatology’ is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological ‘system’ scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular “Left Behind” system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.



REVELATION & ESCHATOLOGY

PART ONE

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In this presentation I will deal with the Book of Revelation. I will particularly speak to the issues of its date of composition and theme. In that establishing Revelation’s time of origin is a crucial issue for the proper interpretation of the book, I will begin with a brief presentation of the case for the early dating of Revelation. In that understanding the flow and purpose of Revelation should be among the interpreter’s leading goals, I will deal a little more at length with the question of the book’s theme. Once the question of when Revelation was written is resolved, I believe the question of what it is about becomes more evident.

The Date of Composition

There are two basic positions on the dating of Revelation, although each has several slight variations. The current majority position is the late-date view. This view holds that John wrote Revelation toward the close of the reign of Domitian Caesar—about A.D. 95 or 96. The minority viewpoint today is the early-date position. Early-date advocates hold that Revelation was written by John prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70.

I hold that Revelation was produced prior to the death of Nero in June, A.D. 68, and even before the formal engagement of the Jewish War by Vespasian in Spring, A.D. 67. My position is that Revelation was written in A.D. 65 or 66. This would be after the outbreak of the Neronian persecution in November, 64, and before the engagement of Vespasian’s forces in Spring of 67.

Though the late-date view is the majority position today, this has not always been the case. In fact, it is the opposite of what prevailed among leading biblical scholars a little over seventy-

Revelation is not a book about how terrible the Antichrist is, or how powerful the devil is.

It is “The revelation of Jesus Christ.”

It tells us about His lordship over all, it tells us about our salvation and victory in the New Covenant.

It tells us that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever.

David Chilton, author of *The Days of Vengeance*

five years ago. Late-date advocate William Milligan conceded in 1893 that "recent scholarship has, with little exception, decided in favour of the earlier and not the later date." [1] Two-decades later in 1910 early-date advocate Philip Schaff could still confirm Milligan's report: "The early date is now accepted by perhaps the majority of scholars." [2]

In the 1800s and early 1900s the early-date position was held by such worthies as Moses Stuart, Friederich Dhsterdieck, B. F. Westcott, F. J. A. Hort, Joseph B. Lightfoot, F. W. Farrar, Alfred Edersheim, Philip Schaff, Milton Terry, Augustus Strong, and others. Though in eclipse presently, the early-date view has not totally faded away, however. More recent advocates of the early-date include Albert A. Bell, F. F. Bruce, Rudolf Bultmann, C. C. Torrey, J. A. T. Robinson, J. A. Fitzmeyer, J. M. Ford, C. F. D. Moule, Cornelius Vanderwaal, and others.

But rather than committing an *ad verecundiam* fallacy, let us move beyond any appeal to authority to consider very briefly the argument for the early date of Revelation. Due to time constraints, I will succinctly engage only three of the internal indicators of composition date. The internal evidence should hold priority for the evangelical Christian in that it is evidence from Revelation's self-witness. I will only summarily allude to the arguments from tradition before concluding this matter. Generally it is the practice of late-date advocates to begin with the evidence from tradition, while early-date advocates start with the evidence from self-witness.

The Temple in Revelation 11

In Revelation 11:1, 2 we read:

And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein. But the court which is without the temple leave out, and measure it not; for it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months.

Here we find a Temple standing in a city called "the holy city." Surely John, a Christian Jew, has in mind historical Jerusalem when he speaks of "the holy city." This seems necessary in that John is writing scripture and Jerusalem is frequently called the "holy city" in the Bible. For example: Isaiah 48:2; 52:1; Daniel 9:24; Nehemiah 11:1-18; Matthew 4:5; 27:53. In addition, verse 8 informs us that this is the city where "also our

Lord was crucified." This was historical Jerusalem, according to the clear testimony of Scripture (Luke 9:22; 13:32; 17:11; 19:28). Interestingly, historical Jerusalem is never mentioned by name in Revelation. This may be due to the name "Jerusalem" meaning "city of peace." In Revelation the meanings of specific names are important to the dramatic imagery. And so it would be inappropriate to apply the name "Jerusalem" to the city upon which woe and destruction are wreaked.

Now what Temple stood in Jerusalem? Obviously the Jewish Temple ordained of God, wherein the Jewish sacrifices were offered. In the first century it was known as Herod's Temple. This reference to the Temple must be that historical structure for four reasons:

It was located in Jerusalem, as the text clearly states in verse 8. This can only refer to the Herodian Temple, which appears over and over again in the New Testament record. It was the very Temple which was even the subject of one of Christ's longer prophetic discourses (Matt. 23:37-24:2ff).

Revelation 11:1, 2, written by the beloved disciple and hearer of Christ, seems clearly to draw upon Jesus' statement from the Olivet Discourse. In Luke 21:5-7, the disciples specifically point to the Herodian Temple to inquire of its future; in Revelation 11:1 John specifically speaks of the Temple of God. In Luke 21:6 Jesus tells His disciples that the Temple will soon be destroyed stone by stone. A comparison of Luke 21:24 and Revelation 11:2 strongly suggests that the source of Revelation's statement is Christ's word in Luke 21.

Luke 21:24b: "Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." Revelation 11:2b: "it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot for forty and two months." The two passages speak of the same unique event and even employ virtually identical terms.

According to Revelation 11:2 Jerusalem and the Temple were to be under assault for a period of forty-two months. We know from history that the Jewish War with Rome was formally engaged in Spring, A.D. 67, and was won with the collapse of the Temple in August, A.D. 70. This is a period of forty-two months, which fits the precise measurement of John's prophecy. John's prophecy antedates the outbreak of the Jewish War.

After the reference to the destruction of the "temple of God" in the "holy city,"

John later speaks of a "new Jerusalem" coming down out of heaven, which is called the "holy city" (Rev. 21:2) and which does not need a temple (Rev. 21:22). This new Jerusalem is apparently meant to supplant the old Jerusalem with its temple system. The old order Temple was destroyed in August, A.D. 70. Thus, while John wrote, the Temple was still standing, awaiting its approaching doom. If John wrote this twenty-five years after the Temple's fall it would be terribly anachronous. The reference to the Temple is hard architectural evidence that gets us back into an era pre-A.D. 70.

The Seven Kings in Revelation 17

In Revelation 17:1-6 a vision of a seven-headed beast is recorded. In this vision we discover strong evidence that Revelation was written before the death of Nero, which occurred on June 8, A.D. 68.

John wrote to be understood. The first of seven benedictions occurs in his introduction: "Blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein" (Rev. 1:3). And just after the vision itself is given in Revelation 17:1-6, an interpretive angel appears for the express purpose of explaining the vision: "And the angel said unto me, Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns" (Rev 17:7). Then in verses 9 and 10 this angel explains the vision: "Here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space."

Most evangelical scholars recognize that the seven mountains represent the famed seven hills of Rome. The recipients of Revelation lived under the rule of Rome, which was universally distinguished by its seven hills. How could the recipients, living in the seven historical churches of Asia Minor and under Roman imperial rule, understand anything else but this geographical feature? But there is an additional difficulty involved. The seven heads have a two-fold referent. We learn also that the seven heads represent a political situation in which five kings have fallen, the sixth is, and the seventh is yet to come and will remain but a short while. It is surely no accident that Nero was the sixth emperor of Rome, who reigned after the deaths of his five predecessors

and before the brief rule of the seventh emperor.

Flavius Josephus, the Jewish contemporary of John, clearly points out that Julius Caesar was the first emperor of Rome and that he was followed in succession by Augustus, Tiberius, Caius, Claudius, and Nero (*Antiquities* 18; 19). We discover this enumeration also in other near contemporaries of John: 4 Ezra 11 and 12; Sibylline Oracles, books 5 and 8; Barnabas, Epistle 4; Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*; and Dio Cassius' *Roman History* 5.

The text of Revelation says of the seven kings "five have fallen." The first five emperors are dead, when John writes. But the verse goes on to say "one is." That is, the sixth one is then reigning even as John wrote. That would be Nero Caesar, who assumed imperial power upon the death of Claudius in October, A.D. 54, and remained emperor until June, A.D. 68.

John continues: "The other is not yet come; and when he comes, he must continue a short space." When the Roman Civil Wars broke out in rebellion against him, Nero committed suicide on June 8, A.D. 68. The seventh king was "not yet come." That would be Galba, who assumed power in June, A.D. 68. But he was only to continue a "short space." His reign lasted but six months, until January 15, A.D. 69. Thus, we see that while John wrote, Nero was still alive and Galba was looming in the near future. Revelation could not have been written after June, A.D. 68, according to the internal political evidence.

The Jews in Revelation

The final evidence from Revelation's self-witness that I will consider is the relationship of the Jew to Christianity in Revelation. And although there are several aspects of this evidence, we will just briefly introduce it. Two important passages and their implications may be referred to illustratively.

First, when John writes Revelation, Christians are tensely mingled with the Jews. Christianity is deemed the true Israel and Christians the real Jews. In Revelation 2:9 we read of Jesus' word to one of His churches of the day: "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

Who but a Jew would call himself a Jew? But in the early formative history of Christianity, believers are everywhere in the New Testament presented as

"Abraham's seed," "the circumcision," "the Israel of God," the "true Jew," etc. We must remember that even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, took Jewish vows and had Timothy circumcised. But after the destruction of the Temple (A.D. 70) there was no tendency to inter-mingling. In fact, the famed Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel II, put a curse on Christians in the daily benediction, which virtually forbade social inter-mingling.

In Revelation the Jews are represented as emptily calling themselves "Jews." They are not true Jews in the fundamental, spiritual sense, which was Paul's argument in Romans 2. This would suggest a date prior to the final separation of Judaism and Christianity. Christianity was a protected religion under Rome's *religio licita* legislation, as long as it was considered a sect of Judaism. The legal separation of Christianity from Judaism was in its earliest stages, beginning with the Neronic persecution in late A.D. 64. It was finalized both legally and culturally with the Temple's destruction, as virtually all historical and New Testament scholars agree. Interestingly, in the A.D. 80s the Christian writer Barnabas makes a radical "us/them" division between Israel and the Church (Epistle 13:1).

Second, at the time John writes, things are in the initial stages of a fundamental change. Revelation 3:9 reads: "Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you."

John points to the approaching humiliation of the Jews, noting that God will vindicate His Church against them. In effect, He would make the Jews to lie down at the Christian's feet. This can have reference to nothing other than the destruction of Israel and the Temple, which was prophesied by Christ. After that horrible event Christians began making reference to the Temple's destruction as an apologetic and vindication of Christianity. Ignatius (A.D. 107) is a classic example of this in his *Magnesians* 10. There are scores of such references in such writers as Melito, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius, and others.

There are other arguments regarding the Jewish character of Revelation, such as its grammar, its reference to the twelve tribes, allusions to the priestly system, temple worship, and so forth. The point seems clear enough: When John writes Revelation, Christianity is

not divorced from Israel. After A.D. 70 such would not be the case. This is strong socio-cultural evidence for a pre-A.D. 70 composition.

Conclusion

I have surveyed the political evidence regarding the Seven Kings, the architectural evidence of the standing Temple, and the socio-cultural evidence of the uneasy Jew/Christian mixture. These suggest Revelation was written prior to the destruction of the Temple in August, 70, and even before the death of Nero Caesar, which occurred on June 8, 68. I believe we can even press it back before the formal engagement of the Jewish War in 67, though not before the outbreak of the Neronic persecution beginning in November, 64.

Were time available we could consider the external evidence. I believe a case may be made for the reconstruction of Irenaeus' famous statement, which is the major evidence from tradition. This would allow for an early-date for Revelation by applying his reference about the reign of Domitian to John himself regarding his active ministry, rather than to John's writing of Revelation.

With a great number of biblical scholars, I am convinced that the Shepherd of Hermas shows dependence on Revelation. I also believe there is evidence for the Shepherd's date of writing in the late 80s. The Muratorian Canon says John wrote letters to seven churches before Paul finished his church letters, which were to seven different congregations. Tertullian relates a tradition that seems to indicate John was banished at about the same time as Peter and Paul were martyred. Clement of Alexandria informs us that all revelation ceased under Nero's reign. He makes this claim while elsewhere holding that John's Revelation was inspired of God. Epiphanius dates Revelation under Claudius' reign. This is either a wild, unaccountable, and unique error, or it is a reference to Nero by his other name. Nero's full adoptive name was Nero Claudius Caesar. Various Syriac manuscripts specifically assign John's banishment to the reign of Nero. Arethas interprets many of the prophecies of Revelation as being fulfilled in the Jewish War and Andreas has to combat such interpretations in his day.

I believe the early-date of Revelation may be firmly established in the seventh decade of the first century, not the last.

Having come to this conclusion, let me

now turn to consider:

The Theme of Revelation

When interpreting any book of the Bible, it is important for us to understand the audience to which it was originally directed. There are at least three factors in Revelation that emphasize the original audience and their historic circumstances. These begin to move us toward the preterist position. When these are combined with the matter of the expectation of Revelation (with which I will deal in a moment), the preterist approach becomes justified on the basis of sound hermeneutical principle.

Audience Relevance

First, in Revelation we have clear evidence that John is writing to particular, historic, individual churches that existed in his day. Revelation 1:4a reads: "John to the seven churches which are in Asia." In verse 11 he specifically names the seven churches to whom he speaks. We know these are historical cities containing historical churches. These churches are specifically dealt with in terms of their historically and culturally unique circumstances in chapters 2 and 3. Real first century Christians are being addressed.

Second, as I indicated previously, John writes to these churches in order to be understood. Revelation 1:3 reads: "Blessed [is] he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein." Real first century Christians are expected to understand and to heed

John's message as something most relevant to themselves.

Third, in Revelation John notes that he and the seven churches have already entered "the tribulation" (Rev. 1:9a): "I John, who also am your brother, and companion in the tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." In Revelation 2 and 3 there are allusions to greater problems brewing on the world scene. Real first century Christians were to have a deep and personal concern with the era in which they lived.

Contemporary Expectation

It is terribly important that the interpreter of Revelation begin at the first verses of the book and let them lead him to the proper interpretive approach. The truth of the matter is: John specifically states that the prophecies of Revelation, which were written to seven historical churches, would begin coming to pass within a very short period of time. He emphasized this truth in a variety of ways. Let us briefly note his contemporary expectation from two angles.

First, we should note that he varies his manner of expression, as if to avoid any potential confusion as to his meaning. The first of these terms we come upon in Revelation is the Greek word *tachos*, translated "shortly." John is explaining the purpose of his writing in Revelation 1:1, which reads: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things

which must shortly [*tachos*] take place." This term also occurs in Revelation 2:16; 3:11; and 22:6, 7, 12, 20.

Another term John uses is *eggus*, which means "near." This term is found in Revelation 1:3 and 22:10. In Revelation 1:3 we read: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heeds the things which are written in it; for the time is near (*eggus*)." Revelation 22:10 reads: "And he saith unto me, 'Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand (*eggus*).'" The import of *eggus* in our context is clearly that of temporal nearness.

Second, John emphasizes his anticipation of the soon occurrence of his prophecy by strategic placement of these time references. He places his boldest time statements in both the introduction and conclusion to Revelation. The statement of expectancy is found twice in the first three verses: Revelation 1:1 and 3. The same idea is found four times in his concluding remarks: Revelation 22:6, 7, 12, 20. It is as if John carefully bracketed the entire work to avoid any confusion. It is important to note that these statements occur in the more historical and didactic sections of Revelation, before and after the major dramatic-symbolic visions.

With the particularity of the audience emphasized in conjunction with his message of the imminent expectation of the occurrence of the events, I do not see how a preterism of some sort can be escaped.

Is Jesus' return "imminent"?

One of the teachings of premillennialism, especially the Dispensational variety, is that Jesus may return at any moment, the so-called imminence doctrine. This is actually untrue and quite meaningless according to their own theories. They believe that Jesus would not return until the Jews had been regathered as a nation, and the Great Tribulation had first occurred. How can this theory be called imminent with such preconditions? Certainly most Christians who have lived for the last 1900+ years would not have considered such a coming as imminent.

The Bible actually predicts a long period of time before Christ's return (Matt. 24:48; 25:5,12; Luke 19:11-27). Given that God works gradually in unfolding His plan of salvation, there is no reason to believe that Christ may not delay His return for thousands more years. The gradual development of the kingdom is a fact of scripture (Dan. 2:35ff; Eze. 17:22-24; 47:1-9; Matt. 13:31-33; Mark 4:26-29).

What will happen when Christ returns?

Jesus' second coming is at the end of time, not in the middle as premillennialists believe (I Cor. 15:25a). At the end of time, Christ will return (Acts 1:11), all men will be physically resurrected at once (John 5:28,29; Acts 24:15; I Cor. 15:51,52; I Thess. 4:16,17;), and all men will stand before the judgement seat of Christ (Matt 25:31ff; Acts 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11). The saints of God will receive their eternal reward and enter into the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1ff). The wicked will be sentenced to eternal torment in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11-15).

Contrary to the "secret rapture" theory, the rapture will be anything but secret (I Cor. 15:52). I Thess. 4:16, which supposedly describes the secret rapture, has been described by Bahnsen and Gentry as, "the noisiest verse in Scripture!" —TOM ALBRECHT