

THE APOCALYPSE WHEN WRITTEN, AND BY WHOM.

(1871) by Enoch Pond,
Professor at the Theological Seminary, Bangor, Maine.

INTRODUCTION: Preterists maintain that the events of Revelation were fulfilled by AD70. For this to be true they maintain that the book of Revelation was written in 66-68 AD and they do some interesting tricks to try to make people believe it was. The common school of thought is that Revelation was written around 95AD which brings the Preterist point of view to a grinding halt. This paper written in 1871 was one of many I read that made strong arguments as to why Revelation was written in 95AD. Please enjoy it. TFCDR Joe>>

No one of our sacred books has excited so many questions, and led to such diverse interpretations, as the Apocalypse. It is not my purpose to notice all of these, or any considerable part of them, but I shall content myself with showing what I conceive to be its true history, design, and interpretation.

I begin with inquiring as to the author of the book, and the date of it.

The Apocalypse is repeatedly said to have been written by John. It commences with a declaration to this effect: 'And He sent and signified it, by His angel, to His servant John.' Also: 'John to the seven Churches of Asia.'—'I John, saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven.'

But what John was this? Was it John the beloved disciple and apostle, or some other man? Papias speaks of a presbyter of the name of John, who lived in Asia Minor in the latter part of the first century; and by some critics, the Apocalypse has been ascribed to him. But of this John we know little or nothing except the name; and the supposition that he wrote the Apocalypse is a mere conjecture, got up two hundred years after his death, by those who wished to destroy the canonical authority of the book. We dismiss the suggestion, therefore, as not worthy of serious consideration, and adopt heartily the commonly received opinion, that the author of this wonderful book was no other than the apostle John.

In proof of this, we cite, first, the circumstances of the writer, as detailed by himself. He says (chap. 1:9), 'I John, who also am your brother, and companion in 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 other words, the writer, whoever he may have been, was, at the time, suffering persecution or the truth's sake, and was in banishment on the isle of Patmos. But, according to the united testimony of the early fathers, the apostle John, in a time of severe persecution, was banished to the isle of Patmos. I hardly need quote their language on this point. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Victorinus, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Sulpicius, Severus, Jerome, and a great many others,[1] tell us (to use the very words of Origen), 'that a Roman emperor banished the apostle John into the isle of Patmos, for the testimony which he bore to the word of truth.' This shows that it was John the apostle, and not another, who wrote the book under consideration.

And to this fact, we have the direct testimony of many of the early fathers. Justin Martyr, who flourished from forty to sixty years after the death of John, says, 'A certain man, John by name, who

was one of the apostles of Christ, prophesied,' etc.[2] Melito, bishop of Sardis, a contemporary of Justin, wrote a book concerning 'the Apocalypse of John.'[3] Apollonius, a distinguished writer of Asia Minor, in a book against the Montanists, appeals, in like manner, to 'the Apocalypse of John.'[3] Irenaeus, in his work against Heresies (book 4, chapter xx.), speaks repeatedly of John—the same who wrote the gospel—as the author of the Apocalypse. Clement of Alexandria, speaking of the righteous man, says, 'He shall sit among the twenty-four thrones, judging the people, as John saith in the Apocalypse.'[4] Tertullian, the first of the Latin fathers, speaks often of the Apocalypse as the work of the apostle John. In his book against Marcion, referring to Rev. 1:16, he says, that the apostle John, in the Apocalypse, describes the sword proceeding from the mouth of God.'

Hippolytus, bishop of Ostia, testifies abundantly to the Johannean origin of the Apocalypse. In his book, 'De Antichristo,' section 9, he says, 'Blessed John, apostle and disciple of the Lord, tell me what thou didst see and hear respecting Babylon?' and then he quotes Revelation, chapters 17. and 18., as the testimony of the apostle.

Origen, the most learned of the early fathers, who was born only seventy-eight years after the death of John, speaks continually of this apostle as the author of the Apocalypse. I hardly need quote passages. In his commentary on Matthew, he says, "John has left us one gospel. He also wrote the Apocalypse.' Again, he quotes what 'John, the son of Zebedee, says in the Apocalypse.'

But if the Apocalypse was so generally regarded, in the first ages of the Church, as the work of John and of canonical authority, how came it to be, after a time, disputed? What could have led some of the fathers of the third and fourth centuries, as Dionysius, and Nepos of Alexandria, and Caius of Rome, and even Eusebius, the historian, to entertain doubts respecting it? To this I answer: These doubts were entertained, not at all on historical grounds, but for reasons purely doctrinal. The historical proof of the apostolical and canonical authority of the Apocalypse was ample; but the millenarians laid hold of a passage in the 20th chapter—that which speaks of the binding of Satan for a thousand years—and urged it in proof of their peculiar sentiments. And the fathers above mentioned though that, perhaps, the best way to be rid of the troublesome passage was to discard the book which contained it. Thus Luther reasoned, for a time, in regard to the Epistle of James, because he did not know how to interpret it; he was, at the first, inclined to reject it.

After the revolution under Constantine, the Millenarianism of the primitive times fell into disrepute. And from that period, the authority of the Apocalypse was fully restored, and, with few exceptions, has been maintained to our own times.

During the last century, the critics of Germany have assailed the Apocalypse, denying, in the most positive terms, that it can have been written by the apostle John. Thus De Wette says: 'Nothing stands so firm as that the apostle John—if he be the writer of the Gospel, and the first Epistle—did not write the Apocalypse;' and Ewald says: 'That the Apocalypse was not written by the same hand which wrote the Gospel and the Epistle, is clear as the light of the sun.' The principal objection to the Johannean origin of the Apocalypse grows out of its style—its peculiar words and phrases; an argument by which this class of critics have shown themselves able to prove or disprove almost anything; by which they have proved that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, nor Daniel his prophecies, nor the Evangelists the Gospels which bear their names; by which they have proved that Homer did not write his poems, nor Plato his dialogues, nor Cicero but a part of his orations.

The style of the Apocalypse is not more different from that of the other writings of John, than is the

subject, the method, the object of the composition. How is it possible, in writing such a book as that before us,—made up, in great part, of visions, types, and symbolic representations,—that the style should not differ from that of a plain historic narrative, or a familiar loving epistle? Any competent critic would decide before hand that there must be peculiar expressions, and wide diversity of style.

And yet there are found many characteristic resemblances. Professor Stuart has drawn out a long list of these, filling several pages of his learned commentary, showing that many of the favourite expressions of John, occurring in his Gospels and Epistles, are also found in the Apocalypse.[5]

But if John wrote the Apocalypse, when did he write it? And what is the proper date of the book?

That John saw his visions while a persecuted exile on the isle of Patmos, he has himself declared. He either wrote them while on the island, or shortly after his return.

But when was John banished to the isle of Patmos? Under which of the emperors did his exile occur?

On this question, modern interpreters are divide, some supposing that he was exiled in the persecution under Nero about the year 66; while others insist that he was banished by Domitian as late as the year 96. If the former of these suppositions is correct, then John was banished and saw his visions previous to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. And those who adopt this view insist that the greater part of the Revelation, all between the 4th and 20th chapters, relates to the approaching destruction of Jerusalem, and the death of Nero; or, at farthest, to the fall of the Pagan Roman empire.

This scheme of interpretation was first invented by the Jesuits,[6] with a view to rescue Popery from the blasting visions and denunciations of the Apocalypse. It was earnestly adopted by the Rationalists of Germany. It has since found favour with a class of interpreters in England and this country, among whom we are sorry to include the late Professor Stuart of Andover, and Professor Cowles of Oberlin. I shall go into a brief examination of this scheme of interpretation in my next chapter. At present we have merely to do with the date of the Apocalypse, or the time when it was written.

It has been thought to favour the early date of the Apocalypse, and the interpretation growing out of it, that the things therein predicted were to be fulfilled quickly: ‘The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things that must shortly come to pass’ (Rev. 1:1.) But it is admitted by all, that, among the things predicted in this book, are, the resurrection, the general judgment, and the final state of the righteous and the wicked, and of these things it is said repeatedly in the closing chapter, that they ‘must shortly be done:’—‘The time is at hand.’—‘Behold I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be’ (Rev. 22:6,10,12).

How, then, is this phraseology to be understood? How was it understood by the author of the book and by the Spirit who indited it? Not, surely, according to our estimation of time, but rather as God estimates it, to whom ‘one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.’

It is assumed by some writers, that the coming of Christ, spoken of in Rev. 1:7, is His coming to destroy Jerusalem, because of the intimation, that some who were actually concerned in His crucifixion would be present: ‘Every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him.’ But, in the sense in which the murderous Jews pierced the Saviour, we all have pierced Him by our sins. He was literally pierced by only one man, and he a Roman soldier (John 19:34). In the same sentence with that above quoted, it is said, that ‘all the kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him’ (Rev. 1:7). Were ‘all the

kindreds of the earth' present, with their wailings and lamentations, when Jerusalem was destroyed? Or, is this scene reserved to the final coming of Christ to judge the world?

It is further urged, that the Apocalypse must have been written as early as the time of Nero, since only seven Churches are mentioned in it, which, probably, was the whole number at that time existing in Asia Minor. But it would be easy to show that there were many Churches in Asia Minor before the deaths of Peter and Paul. In addition to those addressed in the Apocalypse, there were Churches certainly in Iconium, in Lystra, in Derbe, in the Pisidian Antioch, in Hierapolis, in Pontus, in Cappadocia, in Bythinia, in Cilicia, in Galatia, in Colosse, and probably in many other places. Why messages were sent to only seven of these Churches, I pretend not to say. Perhaps these were the only ones with which John was particularly acquainted; or the number, seven, may have been taken, because it was a favourite perfect number among the Jews.

On the whole, we find nothing, in the Apocalypse or out of it, which should lead us to think that it was written during the persecution under Nero, and that the most of it relates to his death and to the destruction of Jerusalem, or to the fall of pagan Rome. We adopt the other supposition; that it was written during the persecution under Domitian, near the close of the first century, and that it takes a much wider range of signification than that referred to.

It does not appear that John could have become domiciliated among the Churches of Asia Minor until near the close of the Neronian persecution. These Churches had been chiefly planted by Paul, and were under his particular care and inspection. He often visited them while he had his liberty; and after his confinement, he frequently wrote letters to, and kept up a constant communication with them; yet, in none of his letters, even to the last, do we find any mention of John, or any reference to him as residing in that quarter. Accordingly, Professor Schaff says: 'It was probably the martyrdom of the apostle to the Gentiles, and the attendant dangers and distractions, that led John to take this important step, and build his structure on the foundation laid by Paul.' [7] Neander also says: 'After the martyrdom of Paul, it is probable that John was called upon by the better part of the Churches to transfer the seat of his activity to this quarter.' [8]

Nero put an end to his life, and the persecution ceased in the year 68. Some two or three years after the death of Paul, John would hardly have removed to Asia Minor during the violence of this persecution, and he must have resided there some considerable time before he had become intimately acquainted with the Churches, and acquired such an influence and authority, as would justify him in directing such messages to them as we find in the Revelation. The probability therefore is, that John was not in Asia Minor, or, if there, was not in circumstances to present them with such a book as that before us, until long after Nero was dead, and his bitter persecution of the Christians had ceased.

A variety of evidence, drawn from the Apocalypse itself, goes to assure us that it could not have been written until near the close of the first century.

It was not till this time that the first day of the week began to be called 'the Lord's day,' yet it was on 'the Lord's day' that John was in the Spirit, and saw the opening vision of the Apocalypse (Rev. 1:10).

It was not till near the close of the first century that there was presiding elder, an angel, in each of the Churches. Previous to this the elders of a Church were always classed together, but each of the seven Churches of Asia seems to have had a presiding officer, or elder, when the Apocalypse was written.

The Gnostic errors had begun to show themselves in the time of Paul, but they had not been matured and organised under heresiarchs before the close of the first century; yet we hear of the Nicolaitanes, a sect of Gnostics, in two of the messages to the Churches of Asia (Rev. 2:6,15). Near the close of the first century, and not earlier, the Gnostic leaders commenced the work of mutilating the sacred books of the Christians. It was this practice, probably, which led to the closing denunciations of the Apocalypse: 'If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things that are written in this book.' There had been no occasion for language such as this until near the close of the first century.

It is obvious that the seven Churches of Asia were in a very different condition, when the Apocalypse was written, from what they were in the time of Nero and of Paul. The Church at Ephesus had 'lost its first love.' The Church at Smyrna had those in its communion who belonged to 'the synagogue of Satan'. The Church at Pergamos harboured not only the Nicolaitanes, but those who held 'the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel.' The Church at Thyatira suffered 'the woman Jezebel' to teach, to seduce its members to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. The Church at Sardis had only 'a few names' left which had not defiled their garments; while the members of the Church at Laodicea had become so lukewarm and offensive to Christ, that He was ready to 'spue them out of His mouth.'

In short, these Churches had all of them declined—sadly declined, from what they were when Paul wrote his Epistles to some of them; and time must be allowed—a considerable time, in which to account for their defections. If we suppose the Apocalypse written during the persecution under Nero,—only a few years subsequent to the writing of Paul's Epistles,—the requisite time is not furnished. But if the book was written thirty years later, in the persecution under Domitian, the declension can be accounted for, at least on the score of time.

The testimony of the Fathers on the point before us is just what, in view of the facts above detailed, we might expect. With few exceptions, it is unanimous in ascribing the exile of John, and the writing of the Apocalypse, to the time of Domitian. We commence with Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, in Gaul. He had been a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. He must have been familiarly acquainted with the circumstances of John's banishment, with the time of it, and the person by whom it had been decreed. He could not have been mistaken on these points, nor is there any mistake or ambiguity in his testimony. 'The Apocalypse,' he tells us, was seen not long ago, but almost in our own generation, near the end of the reign of Domitian.' [9] This testimony has never been set aside, and never can be. It is enough of itself, considering the circumstances, to decide the question before us.

But this testimony does not stand alone. It is concurred in by nearly all the more distinguished Fathers. Victorinus says repeatedly, that John was banished by Domitian, and in his time saw the Revelation. Hippolytus speaks of John as having been exiled to Patmos under Domitian, where he saw the Apocalypse. [10] Eusebius, speaking of the persecution, says: 'In this persecution, John the apostle and evangelist, being still alive, was banished into the isle of Patmos.' [11] Jerome, in his book of illustrious men, says: 'Domitian, in the fourteenth year of his reign, raised the next persecution after Nero, when John was banished to the isle of Patmos, where he wrote the Revelation.' In another work, he says: 'John was a prophet. He saw the Revelation in the isle of Patmos, where he was banished by Domitian.' [12] Sulpicius Severus says, that 'John, the apostle and evangelist, was banished by

Domitian to the isle of Patmos, where he had visions, and where he wrote the Revelation.’[13]

It would be needless to multiply quotations like these, and pursue them to a later period. It has been said that these testimonies are of little value, since they are all based one upon another, and ultimately upon that of Irenaeus. But this is not true; at least, no one has any right or reason to affirm that it is true. They go to show what was the settled conviction of the Church on the point before us, from the second century to the sixth,—the very time when the question could best be settled; and, in the judgment then formed, and so unanimously expressed, it becomes us of the nineteenth century to acquiesce. It cannot be reversed but upon vastly weightier reasons than any that have yet been urged.

It will be seen that the question here discussed has a vital bearing on the interpretation of the Apocalypse. If this book was written near the close of the first century, almost thirty years after the death of Nero and the fall of Jerusalem, then it is vain to look for its fulfillment in either of these events. There is not the slightest allusion to either of them, from one end of the book to the other.

Footnotes:

[1] See *Lardner's Credibility*, vol. v. pp. 414-416.

[2] *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 80,81.

[3] In *Euseb. Ecc. Hist.* iv. 24 and 28, v. 18.

[4] *Strom.* iv. 4.

[5] See *Stuart's Comment. on the Apocalypse*, vol. i. p. 406.

[6] By Alcazar, a Spanish Jesuit, who flourished near the commencement of the seventeenth century.

[7] *Hist. of Apostolic Churches*, p. 399.

[8] *Planting and training the Apostolic Churches*, p. 219.

[9] *Contra Haeres*, v. 20.

[10] *Works*, p. 90.

[11] *Ecc. Hist. Lib.* 3, cap. 18.

[12] *Works*, vol. vi. p. 446.

[13] *Works*, vol. iv. chap. 120.