

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO REVELATION

### I. INTRODUCTION

From the notes on the introductory matters, I concluded that the Apostle John wrote Revelation from the island of Patmos at the end of Domitian's reign. Since Domitian was assassinated in AD 96, we can date the book roughly at AD 95. Following Domitian's death, John returned to Asia where he resided in Ephesus until the times of the emperor Trajan (who reigned AD 98-117).

### II. GENERAL STATE OF THE EMPIRE

#### A. The Roman Emperors of the Latter First Century

1. Nero (54-69)
2. Vespasian (69-79)
3. Titus (79-81) - son of Vespasian
4. Domitian (81-96) - son of Vespasian
5. Nerva (96-98)
6. Trajan (98-117)

#### B. The Period Before Domitian (54-81)

During Nero's reign, there was a mild outbreak of persecution against Christians following the fire of Rome in AD 64. Although the persecutions were quite brutal, they seem to have been limited primarily to the capital city of Rome.<sup>1</sup> Tradition testifies to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul at Rome during Nero's reign. Other persecutions during the first 30 years after Christ were local, either at the hands of jealous Jews or for purely local reasons such as at Ephesus, where Christians were charged with interfering with the worship of Artemis (Acts 19:23ff.).

Following Nero's despotic reign, Vespasian brought a more civilized order to the Empire, for which he won the admiration of many. His son Titus, likewise, was a wise and popular ruler. During the reign of these two men (AD 69-81), there are no recorded persecutions against Christians. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, ending the Jewish revolt.

#### C. The Reign of Domitian (81-96)

Domitian, Vespasian's 2nd son, was a strong contrast to his predecessors. Merrill Tenney states, "By disposition he was aloof, humorless, avaricious, and cruel."<sup>2</sup> His rule began with some sense of justice, but he eventually turned to being a capricious ruler. With hostility to the Roman Senate, his rule became a reign of terror. Although a few previous emperors had been "deified" after their death, Domitian was the first of the emperors to demand that he be saluted as *Dominus et Deus* . . . "Lord and God."

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<sup>1</sup>F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc.), 399-403.

<sup>2</sup>Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 311.

A revolt by Germany in AD 88-89, although quelled, made him strongly suspicious of any hint of disloyalty. His latter years were marked by perpetual censorship. Domitian had himself made *censor perpetuus*, or censor for life. As such, "he demanded the first vote in the Senate, which gave him the opportunity of declaring his preference on every legislative question and consequently of swaying the policies of state."<sup>3</sup>

The Roman Empire was to be worshipped, and Domitian was "Lord." The national religion, the establishment of emperor worship, and the suppression of any group that resisted state policies or that was even suspected of being hostile to the existing order placed the Christians in a disadvantageous position. For Christians to worship privately and be constantly devoted to an invisible deity laid them open to charges of conspiracy and atheism. However, there was no widespread persecution of Christians as such (at least none that is recorded by historians of that era).<sup>4</sup> By and large they were tolerated, although occasionally their leaders were arrested, interrogated, and executed or banished. Eusebius testifies of Domitian, "He was the second that raised a persecution against us, although his father Vespasian had attempted nothing to our prejudice."<sup>5</sup> For the most part, this was cruelty in the form of punishment by exile or confiscation of property. John's statements reflect that his presence on Patmos was due to imperial banishment (Rev 1:9) and that the churches of Asia were facing some opposition (2:9, 10, 13; 3:10). Admittedly, some of this may have been at the hands of the unbelieving Jews, not just the State (2:9; 3:9).

D. The Reign of Trajan (98-117)

After a brief reign by Nerva (96-98), Trajan came to the throne in AD 98, and became one of the ablest and most efficient rulers of all. There was spotted oppression during his reign, but no wholesale persecution. A "carefully guarded tolerance" is reflected in his correspondence with Pliny the Younger.<sup>6</sup>

### III. THE APOSTLE JOHN AND THE ISLE OF PATMOS

That John wrote the Revelation from an island called Patmos is clearly stated in Rev 1:9. Eusebius (who quotes from Tertullian) supports the fact that he was indeed an exile during Domitian's reign:

But after Domitian had reigned fifteen years, and Nerva succeeded to the government, the Roman senate decreed, that the honours of Domitian should be revoked, and that those who had been unjustly expelled, should return to their homes, and have their goods restored. This is the statement of the historians of the day. It was then also, that the apostle John returned from his banishment in Patmos, and took up his abode at Ephesus, according to an ancient tradition of the church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 323.

<sup>4</sup>For a different view, see Wm. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (New York: Putnam, 1893).

<sup>5</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 3.17.

<sup>6</sup>See Tenney, 329-331, for a copy of these documents discussing the "Christian situation."

<sup>7</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 3.20.

Little is known of Patmos. It is a rocky island off the coast of Asia Minor, some 35 miles SW of Miletus, and it served as a place of banishment during the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Ramsay thinks John's punishment was quite harsh, but little evidence is available.<sup>9</sup>

John's release from Patmos was followed by his residence at Ephesus, from which he carried out his ministry in the province of Asia. Eusebius (quoting Clement) informs us:

For after the tyrant was dead (i.e. Domitian), coming from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus, he went also, when called, to the neighboring regions of the Gentiles; in some to appoint bishops, in some to institute entire new churches, in order to appoint to the ministry some one of those that were pointed out by the Holy Ghost."<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. THE RELATIONSHIP OF REVELATION WITH THE ROMAN EMPIRE OF JOHN'S DAY

There seems to be little doubt that the historical setting of Domitian's reign gave rise to the book of Revelation. Indeed, John himself suffered, and the seven churches to whom he wrote experienced "trying times." The crucial question for us is this: do we attribute all the details of the book to Domitian's reign, i.e., do we expect the fulfillment in John's own time? At least for Rev 4--22, I think we would have to say "no."

##### A. Reasons why Rev 4--22 was not fulfilled in John's day

1. The Old Testament specifies that the time of God's wrath would be in the "latter days" (see e.g., Deut 4:25-31; Jer 30:3-8,24).
2. The events of Rev 4--22 are connected with the rise of the Antichrist and his "kingdom", which Daniel envisioned as following the Roman Empire (Dan 7:23-25).
3. Even within Revelation, the destruction of the "beast" (the Antichrist) does not happen until the Second Coming of Christ (Rev 19:20).
4. Those closest to the Apostle John (who would have learned from him) expected a future fulfillment in which Christ would return to rule on the earth.

##### B. The Tradition of John's Teaching with his Disciples

Did John mean to suggest that the beast was a reference to Domitian or Imperial Rome? The traditions preserved among his disciples seem to suggest that he did not. We shall now examine the association between the Apostle John and several close associates in Asia in order to understand how they understood these matters.

That John did dwell in Ephesus after his release is significant, for the Ephesian center became a stronghold of orthodoxy and the Johannine tradition. Eusebius (quoting Irenaeus) states, "But the church in Ephesus also, which had been founded by Paul, and where John continued to abide until the times of Trajan, is a faithful witness of the apostolic tradition."<sup>11</sup> If this is true, what can we learn from those who were connected with the Ephesian center that carried on John's teachings? Interestingly, three figures from Asia who were very closely associated with the Apostle John stand out:

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<sup>8</sup>See Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, 4.23.

<sup>9</sup>Wm. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (1904; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1963), 85.

<sup>10</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 3.23.

<sup>11</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 3.23.

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|----|----------------------------|--|
| 1) | Papias (c. 60 - c. 130)    | Disciple of John<br>Bishop of Hierapolis (east of Ephesus) |
| 2) | Polycarp (c. 70 - 155/160) | Disciple of John<br>Bishop of Smyrna                       |
| 3) | Irenaeus (c. 120 - 202)    | Native of Smyrna (disciple of Polycarp)<br>Bishop of Lyons |

1. Papias (c. 60 - c. 130)

a. Close associate of John

- 1) "Irenaeus and others record that John the Divine and Apostle survived until the times of Trajan; after which time Papias of Hierapolis and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, his hearers, became well known."<sup>12</sup>
- 2) "These things Papias, who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp, an ancient worthy, witnesseth . . ."<sup>13</sup>

b. Papias's Millennial Expectations

- 1) "The same writer (i.e. Papias) has recorded other notices as having come down to him from oral tradition, certain strange parables of the Savior and teachings of His, and some other statements of a rather mythical character. Among which he says that there will be a period of some ten thousand years after the resurrection, and that the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth."<sup>14</sup>
- 2) "This (Papias) is said to have promulgated the Jewish tradition of a Millennium, and he is followed by Irenaeus, Apollinarius and the others, who say that after the resurrection the Lord will reign in the flesh with the saints."<sup>15</sup>
- 3) "In these (i.e. the writings of Papias) he says there would be a certain millennium after the resurrection, and that there would be a corporeal reign of Christ on this very earth; which things he appears to have imagined, as if they were authorized by the apostolic narrations, not understanding correctly those matters which they propounded mystically in their representations."<sup>16</sup>

Papias was clearly premillennial in his eschatology, even though Eusebius (writing much later) disagrees with this perspective.

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<sup>12</sup>Eusebius, *Chronicon*. Eusebius later denies that Papias was a disciple of John (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39), suggesting that there was *another John*, but this may have been a reflection of his bias against chiliasm.

<sup>13</sup>Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 5.33.3-4.

<sup>14</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 3.39.

<sup>15</sup>Jerome, *de vir. illust.*, 18.

<sup>16</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 3.39.

## 2. Polycarp (c. 70 - 155/160)

## a. Personal Information

- 1) A "hearer" of John, along with Papias
- 2) Noted for his faithfulness:

"He is depicted in the sources as a faithful pastor, champion of apostolic tradition, and pillar of catholic orthodoxy."<sup>17</sup>

- 3) Ascribed by non-Christians at his martyrdom:  
"the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians"
- 4) Teacher of Irenaeus

## b. Prophetic Expectations

"For if we be well pleasing unto Him in this present world, we shall receive the future world also, according as He promised us to raise us from the dead, and that if we conduct ourselves worthily of Him we shall also reign with Him, if indeed we have faith."<sup>18</sup>

## 3. Irenaeus (c. 120-202)

## a. Personal Information

He received the traditions from John through Polycarp. ". . . Irenaeus, who had been a disciple of the holy Polycarp . . . In these (writings) he makes mention of Polycarp, saying that he was taught by him. And he ably refuted every heresy, and handed down the catholic rule of the Church just as he had received it from the saint."<sup>19</sup>

"As I have heard from a certain Elder, who had heard from those who had seen the Apostles, and from their scholars . . ." (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 4.27).

## b. Prophetic Expectations

"The blessing thus foretold belongs undoubtedly to the times of the Kingdom, when the righteous shall rise from the dead and reign, when too creation renewed and freed from bondage shall produce a wealth of food of all kinds from the dew of heaven and from the fatness of the earth; as the elders, who saw John the disciple of the Lord, relate, that they had heard from him, how the Lord used to teach concerning those times . . ."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>J. D. Douglas, ed., *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 791.

<sup>18</sup>*The Epistle of S. Polycarp* (section 5), cited in J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 96-97.

<sup>19</sup>Note attached to *The Martyrdom of S. Polycarp* (see Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 116-17).

<sup>20</sup>Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 5.33.3-4.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Our historical investigation does shed light upon an understanding of Revelation. What John wrote did have a connection to the experiences of the early church, and certainly to that of the churches of Asia. Under Domitian's reign, oppression and persecution of Christians did surface, often in the form of exile. The time had come for the church of Jesus Christ to brace herself for a long period of "off and on" persecution, a period which would continue until Constantine. It was fitting that God would give His church another inspired book that would help His people through this period. This need not demand that the details of the prophecies of Rev 4–22 were ever meant to have their fulfillment in John's day. In fact, there is a very close parallel of Revelation with the book of Zechariah. In the case of the latter, the book was written to encourage the Israelites of that day to continue on in the work of completing the post-exilic temple. Yet, details of the latter days and Israel's final salvation under the Messiah were included in that encouragement. The same is true of Revelation. The details of the Great Tribulation, the rise of the antichrist, and the Lord's return to reign with His saints are included to encourage believers under oppression. These details could have their realization in the much distant future and still be relevant to believers of John's day. Yet from their standpoint, the realization could have been in their lifetime. The point is simply that in either case, the book was quite relevant to them.

What is remarkable is the closeness of agreement by those who were in the immediate audience of John, namely, Papias, Polycarp and Irenaeus. That many others were chiliasts is interesting, but that these three were is worthy of our attention. Every indication is that they had first-hand access to John, and there is no doubt that they understood that Christ would return to set up His Kingdom in material form and reign with the saints on earth. Of course, others eventually departed from this view, particularly due to the influence of Origen and the Alexandrian school. Yet, I would think that one was in good company to side with those who sat under John!