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THE DATE OF REVELATION
Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Preterists teach that the Book of Revelation is primarily a prophecy about the Roman war against the Jews in Israel that began in A.D. 67 and ended with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. In order for Revelation to be a prediction of the future (Rev. 1:1, 3, 11, 19; 22:6-10, 16, 18-20) and if it was fulfilled by August A.D. 70, then it had to have been written by A.D. 65 or 66 for the preterist interpretation to even be a possibility. Preterist Ken Gentry has noted this major weakness when he said of fellow early date advocate David Chilton, "if it could be demonstrated that Revelation were written 25 years after the Fall of Jerusalem, Chilton's entire labor would go up in smoke."¹ Actually, all one would have to do is to show that Revelation was written *any* time after the destruction of Jerusalem.

The futurists interpretation is not dependant upon the date of Revelation since it does not matter when these events take place since they are still future to our own time. However, the date of Revelation is essential to the preterist position and explains why they are so focused upon defending an early date. There are two lines of evidence: external (evidence from outside the Revelation) and internal (evidence from inside the Revelation).

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Today, the overwhelming consensus of scholarship believes that Revelation was written well after A.D. 70. Most have concluded that Revelation was written around A.D. 95, primarily because of the statement by early church father Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) around A.D. 180.

We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen not very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign.²

It is important to note that Irenaeus was from Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Apostle John was also from Ephesus in Asia Minor. Irenaeus was discipled in the faith by Polycarp who was discipled by the Apostle John. Thus, there is a direct link between the one who wrote Revelation and Irenaeus. This strongly supports the credibility of Irenaeus and his statement. Significantly, no other tradition relating to the date of Revelation developed or gained a following in this part of the world. This is the very area to which the Revelation was given. Later, other traditions developed in the territories of Christendom of a different time of the writing of Revelation. However, these were areas where Revelation was not taken as literally as in Asia Minor. It appears logical that if the theory teaching an earlier date of Revelation were genuine, then it should have had a witness to it in Asia Minor and would have begun earlier than the fifth and sixth centuries. If the early date were really true, then it would have had a 30-year head start to establish itself within early church tradition. However, that is not what happened. Such reality argues against the early date view and is a strong support for the late date view.

Further support for Irenaeus' statement is seen in some of the early enemies of Irenaeus' interpretation of Revelation. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Eusebius, to name just a few, support Irenaeus' statement of a Domitian date. They did not believe that the statement of Irenaeus was not clear and should be doubted, as many contemporary preterists desperately contend. Yet all the ancients who were on record concerning this matter accept our understanding of Irenaeus, as do modern translators. It is also not true that early date support goes back to a single individual (although there would be nothing wrong with that since the truth of a matter is often traced back to a single source), since Hegesippus' (A.D. 150) testimony pre-dates Irenaeus.³

"The first clear, accepted, unambiguous witness to the Neronian date is a one-line subscription in the Syriac translation of the New Testament in a.d. 550," notes Mark Hitchcock. "Only two other external witnesses to the early date exist: Arethas (c. 900) and Theophylact (d. 1107)." This is scant "evidence," needless to say, upon which to draw such dogmatic conclusion, as is often done by many Preterists. On the other hand, Hitchcock notes that the late date "has an unbroken line of support from some of the greatest, most reliable names in church history, beginning in A.D. 150. . . . The external evidence from church history points emphatically to the a.d. 95 date for the composition of Revelation."⁴

INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Many Preterists contend that there are two major reasons from the Book of Revelation itself that provide proof for their earlier date. First, they argue that since John refers to a Temple in Jerusalem (Rev. 11:1-2), then it must have been standing at the time of writing. If still standing, then Revelation was written before the Temple's destruction in A.D. 70. Next they contend that the seven kings of Revelation 17:1-16 refer to a succession of Roman kings in the first century. Preterists contend that "one is" (Rev. 17:10) would be a reference to Nero Caesar and "the other is not yet come" (Rev. 17:10) would be Galba. Thus, while John wrote, Nero was still alive and Galba was looming in the near future. This would mean, according to Preterists, that Revelation was written while Nero was still alive.

In rebuttal to the first Preterists argument, it must be remembered that in the Book of Revelation John is receiving a vision about future things. He is transported in some way to that future time in order to view events as they will unfold. The word "saw" is used 49 times in 46 verses in Revelation because John is witnessing future events through a vision. It does not matter at all whether the Temple is thought to be standing in Jerusalem at the time that John sees the vision since that would not have any bearing upon a vision. John is told by an angel to "measure the temple" (Rev. 11:1). Measure what Temple? He is to measure the Temple in the vision. Even if there were a temple still standing in Jerusalem, John was on the Island of Patmos and would not have been allowed to go and measure that Temple. Ezekiel, during a similar vision of a Temple (Ezek. 40—43) was told to measure that Temple. When Ezekiel saw and was told to measure a Temple there was not one standing in Jerusalem (Preterists agree). Thus, there is no compulsion whatsoever to conclude that just because a temple is referenced in Revelation 11 that it implies that there had to be a physical Temple standing in Jerusalem at the same time.

The other Preterist argument is polluted by the same assumption that underlies their previous contention about the Temple. Preterists assume that the line of kings refer to a first century succession of Roman kings and then pronounces Nero as the one to which Revelation 17:10 refers. This is just an assumption and begs the question. John is

seeing, recording, and commenting on a vision of the future. Thus, the time frame that he is referencing would be that of whatever time he was viewing the future. This cannot then be used as a proof that he was viewing a particular time frame, without having previously, in some other way, established the period of time that he views in the vision. Preterists have not previously established when such a time frame is to take place. This line of reasoning by Preterists is not an internal proof for a Neronian date for Revelation. All of the alleged proofs for an early date presuppose a preterist interpretation (this certainly has not been established) as a false starting point in which they attempt to argue from.

Regardless of the interpretation of this passage, it cannot be used as a proof for when Revelation was written. This passage is providing a landscape of biblical history of those kingdoms, not individual kings, which have persecuted Israel. The five that are fallen refer to the kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medes/Persia, and Greece. The sixth empire that was reigning at the time when John wrote was Rome. The seventh that is to come will be the future kingdom of the antichrist, known in Revelation as the Beast. This view is consistent with the way in which kings (i.e., kingdoms) are used throughout both Daniel and Revelation. Revelation 17:10, says that the future leader and his empire will have a short life according to the words, "when he comes, he must remain a little while." The adjective "little" has the idea of brevity (Rev. 12:12). God is saying that He has decreed the time of this final empire will be shorter than the six previous. This factor alone would eliminate the possibility of the seven kings being first-century Roman emperors.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES

One of the key internal evidences, which does not require positing a particular interpretative approach, is the condition of the seven church in Revelation 2 and 3. Do these churches look more like first-generation churches, which would appear to support an early date, or do they favor a second-generation church, which would support the late date? There are some key evidences that strongly favor a second-generation depiction of the churches.⁵

If John wrote early (A.D. 64–66) then it is likely that Paul's two letters to Timothy, who was in Ephesus at the time, would overlap with John's writing of Revelation and his letter to the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7). It would also mean that, "Paul likely wrote 2 Timothy after John wrote to the church."⁶ The problem is that the error that Christ points out to the Ephesians in Revelation should have surfaced in Paul's epistles if they were written around the same time. However, these problems are not evident in Paul's writings. Further, it is unlikely that John had moved to Ephesus until after Peter and Paul had passed from the scene. Philip Schaff tells us: "It was probably the martyrdom of Peter and Paul that induced John to take charge of the orphan churches, exposed to serious danger and trials."⁷

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, said that no church existed during the ministry of Paul. Paul died around A.D. 66–67. Thus, there was not even a church in existence at Smyrna when the early daters say John wrote to them. Needless to say, this strongly favors the late date.

The church of Laodicea would not have had time to develop into the church described in Revelation 3:14–22 if the early date is the true one. An earthquake devastated the city in A.D. 60. History tells us that it took them 25 years to rebuild. Only the late date view makes sense of Christ's statement to church that says, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17). Ten years would

have been enough time for such a condition to develop, but it could not have been said of them when they were in the early stages of rebuilding.

John is said to be on the island of Patmos (1:9) when writing Revelation because he was banished there. Yet, Nero put to death Peter and Paul. If Revelation were written during the reign of Nero, then why wouldn't John have been killed like Peter and Paul? Banishment was Domitian's favorite way to persecute Christians. "Moreover, we have no evidence of Nero's use of banishment for Christians."⁸

CONCLUSION

Since a preterist interpretation of Revelation requires an early date of the final book in the Bible, preterists go to great lengths in their attempts to make their view appear viable. The Domitianic date is the overwhelmingly accepted view of scholarship in our day and throughout most of church history. Nothing in Revelation itself contradicts such a conclusion. It appears the major reason that preterists believe in an early date for Revelation is that their system requires it. In this instance the saying is true that necessity is the mother of invention. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Days of Vengeance: A Review Article", *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, Vol. IX, No. 4., p. 11.

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, v. xxx. 3

³ See Mark Hitchcock, "The Stake in the Heart—The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation," in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, editors, *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), pp. 126–28.

⁴ Mark Hitchcock, "Date of Revelation," in Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson, editors, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2004), p. 337.

⁵ The following points are gleaned from Mark Hitchcock's, "Date of Revelation," pp. 337–38.

⁶ Hitchcock, "Date of Revelation," p. 337.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1910], 1971), vol. I, p. 425.

⁸ Hitchcock, "Date of Revelation," p. 338.