

The Historical Setting of the Writing of Revelation

(unfinished)

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When we combine these names with the yet outstanding stature of Schaff, Terry, Lightfoot, Westcott, and Hort, we can feel the severity of Beckwith's understatement when in 1919 he described the Neronian dating for Revelation as "a view held by many down to recent times." By many indeed! It has been described, as we saw above, as "the ruling view" of critics," by "the majority of modern critics," by "most modern scholars," and by "the whole force of modern criticism." The weight of scholarship placed behind the Neronian option for the dating of Revelation has been staggering. (p. 8 below)

When Was Revelation Written?

Research into the historical context of the book of Revelation is necessary in order to understand the message of this book properly. The reader ought to appreciate the concrete setting of the book and the historical perspective which its author would have had. It is true that in the case of *any* Biblical book we should ask at the outset of study under what circumstances it was written, but in the case of the book of Revelation the answer to such a question will *more* significantly affect one's interpretation of the text of the book than it would for virtually any other portion of Scripture. One's understanding of the historical *setting* for Revelation will be absolutely crucial in the determination of one's understanding of the *message* of the book.

We can see this if we but consider the reference in Revelation to the city of Jerusalem, its temple, and the Roman Empire – all of which, in their own order, are prophesied to be destroyed. Now in 70 A.D. the Romans leveled Jerusalem and the temple, as we know from history. What one thinks of the prophecies in Revelation will naturally be affected, then, by the choice of a date for the writing of the book either prior to, or subsequent to, this event in 70 A.D. Milton Terry observed:

The great importance of ascertaining the historical standpoint of an author is notably illustrated by the controversy over the date of the Apocalypse of John. If that prophetic book was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, a number of its particular allusions must most naturally be understood as referring to that city and its fall. If, however, it was written at the end of the reign of Domitian (about A.D. 96), as many have believed, another system of interpretation is necessary to explain the historical allusions.¹

An interpreter who is committed to the unerring authority of God's word and to the reality of predictive prophecy must ask whether John was speaking in Revelation of the ancient city of Jerusalem, the Herodian temple, and the Roman Empire of the Caesars, *or rather* of a "restored" Jerusalem, a rebuilt temple, and a "revived" Roman Empire sometime in the distant future to John (and yet future to us today). If John wrote *before* 70 A.D., then he would obviously have been speaking of the Jerusalem, temple, and Empire of his day – the first two of which, as prophesied, were destroyed just a few years following the temple in 70 A.D., then the interpreter would be inclined to *infer* from Revelation's *prophecy* of their destruction that they must first be *rebuilt*. (It is important to realize that Revelation's text does not explicitly *teach* the rebuilding of the temple, for instance, but some interpreters infer such a rebuilding from their understanding of the text in conjunction with their understanding of the book's date.) The

¹ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (BK: Zondervan Publishing House, reprint 1974), p. 237.

alternative would be to deny that Revelation had any historical reference to an empirical city or temple whatsoever (i.e., to thoroughly “spiritualize” the references to Jerusalem and the temple there), or to follow many liberal critics in contending that John wrote after the fact but *pretended* to prophesy what happened.

So then, if one reads “the holy city shall they tread under foot” (Rev. 11:2) in a natural sense and as genuine prophecy he will need to decide whether John was speaking of the Jerusalem that is now past to us *or* rather contemporaneous (perhaps future) to us. There is no question about the superabundance of eager prophecy popularizers in our day who jump at the “obvious” opportunity to make Revelation relevant today by choosing the second option. But the question is one of historical warrant and fact, not popular imagination. If responsible scholarship should support a date for Revelation prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., there would be no need to imply the rebuilding of the city and temple so that they could be destroyed again – an implication taken by some to manifest exegetical “double vision.”

To postulate a “revived” Roman empire and a “restored” Jewish temple and community, when the contemporary facts fit every requirement perfectly, seems to be a work of supererogation.... The disease of exegetical diplopia alone can account for such needless duplication in the face of such simple, clear-cut internal evidence given by the writer to help date and identify the prophecy and its subjects.²

It is quite evident from this example that one’s understanding of the historical setting of Revelation – in particular, the date of its composition – will affect in one way or another the interpretation of the book (in contrast to liberal critics) have differed greatly. In order to understand the various proposals, the reader would do well to remember the history of the Roman/rulers, as here listed for the relevant periods:

First Triumvirate 60-46 B.C.
Julius Caesar 46-44 B.C.
Second Triumvirate 43-32 B.C.
Augustus Caesar 31 B.C.-14 A.D.
Tiberius 14-37 A.D.
Caligula (Gaius) 37-41 A.D.
Claudius 41-54
Nero 54-68
Galba 68-69 (7 months)
Otho 69 (3 months)
Vitellius 69 (8 months)
Vespasian 69-79
Titus 79-81
Domitian 81-96
Nerva 96-98
Trajan 98-117

² Jay E. Adams, *The Time is at Hand*, (revision of *I Will Tell You the Mystery*) (Rop: P&R Publ. Co., [1996] 1970), p. 54.

Early and late extremes for the date of Revelation have been proposed occasionally. If we accept his words at face value, (Epiphanius (d. 403) placed the book in the time of Claudius (*Haereses* 51.12) – Edinburgh, 19872), which dated Revelation between 50 and 54 A.D., on the assumption that John’s exile to Patmos was occasioned by the banishment of Jews from Rome by Claudius in 51 [49] A.D. (cf. Acts 18:2). Such a view might explain why Paul was forbidden to go into Asia (Acts 16:6) – since John was already laboring there – and why Revelation 1-3 mentions only seven churches in Asia (as yet). These two “advantages” work against each other, however, when we remember that one of those seven Asian churches (at Ephesus) was clearly founded by Paul! Moreover, Epiphanius seems to have spoken carelessly, many scholars believe; he probably was referring to Nero (whose full name was Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus) as “Claudius.”³ At the other extreme for dating Revelation, Trajan’s reign was advanced by the 6th century ascetic, Dorotheus (*Synopsis de vita et morte prophetarum*), and in the commentary at Matthew 20:22 by Theophylact, an 11th century exegete. Such opinions are far too late and unargued to warrant serious attention. The correct date for the writing of Revelation lies somewhere between the extremes of Claudius and Trajan.

Throughout the history of the church only two general views regarding the date of Revelation have been credible and consistently forwarded. These, the dominant positions, call for study and careful scrutiny. Harrison says:

Two periods for the origin of the Revelation have won considerable scholarly support, and only these two need be considered. One is the reign of Domitian, preferable the latter part, around the year 96.... an earlier dating fixes the end of Nero’s reign or shortly thereafter.⁴

In what follows “the late date” for Revelation will denote the end of Domitian’s reign as emperor (viz., the mid to late 60’s of the first century).

The early date is elastic enough to encompass the first year of Vespasian’s reign, which has been suggested by some of the scholars who disagree with the Domitian dating of the book (e.g., Hort/Dusterdieck, F. F. Bruce).⁵ The thought here would be that, counting from Augustus and omitting the three brief rulers during the anarchy of 68-69, Vespasian is the sixth king (“the one is,” Rev. 17:10) who brought recovery to the empire from the threat of civil war (“the death-stroke” of the beast “was healed,” Rev. 13:2) and was followed by the two year reign of Titus (“the other,” seventh king who will “continue a short while,” Rev. 17:10). The counting on this view commences with Augustus since he was the first official emperor, and the three rules of the anarchy are skipped because Seutonius wrote of their period as a mere interval and the provinces never recognized them as emperors. The difficulty with this view, even if one is not struck with the artificiality of the counting technique, is that martyrdoms can be definitely placed with the reign of Vespasian,⁶ and the relative calm of his reign (which is out of line with the tumultuous picture in Revelation) was not marked by his pressing of claims to deity or by his persecuting of the church⁷ – both of which characterize the beast in Revelation 13. Some

³ F.J.A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of St. John I-III*, (London: Macmillon & Co., Ltd., 1908), p. XVIII.

⁴ Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (GR: William B. Eerdmann, Publ. Co., 1964), pp. 446, 447.

⁵ Friedrich Dristerdreck, *Critical & exegetical handbook to the Rev. of John*, 3rd ed., tran. Henry E. Jacobs, Meyer’s Comm. on the N.T. (NV: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887). F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 411, and *The Spreading Flame* (GC: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., [1958] 1970), p. 166. Others who promoted this view include B. Weiss (1869), J. V. Bartlet (1907), C. A. Scott (1902).

⁶ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The First Five Centuries, A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, [1937] 1970) p. 140; and James Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, 3rd Edition (Edinburgh: T & T Cla? 1918), pp. 503-504. Both Latourette & Moffatt cite Linsenmayer’s *BeKampfung des Christentums in der römischen Zeit*.

⁷ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, (Dover’s Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p. 961.

scholars (e.g., F.W. Farrar, Weigall and C.C. Torrey)⁸ who cannot persuade themselves to ignore the three, brief claimants to the throne, but who do commence counting the kings of Revelation 17:10 with Augustus, have suggested that Galba was the emperor when John wrote Revelation (i.e., the king who “is”). But this hardly differentiates the sixth and seventh kings in terms of the shortness of the latter’s reign (Rev. 17:10, “a little while”) since *both* Galba and his successor, Otho, reigned for only 2 matter of months.

At any rate, even though I do not favor the preceding two specific interpretations of the internal evidence in Revelation, the suggestions of Galba’s or Vespasian’s reigns for the date of Revelation would fall within that general period which we will call “the early date” for the Book’s composition. Revelation 17:10 is the interpretation of a symbol (and thus not *itself* symbolic), indicating among other things that John was writing during the reign of a sixth ruler of Rome. *However* one calculates the identity of this emperor, those holding to an *early* dating for Revelation would together recognize that by no stretch of the imagination could Domitian be reckoned the sixth emperor of Rome, without resorting to artificial and arbitrary starting points and methods of counting (dictated by a preconceived end point). The essence of the “early date” for the writing of Revelation is the belief that John composed the book sometime *prior* to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Philip Schaff, once an advocate of the later (post-70 A.D., Domitian) dating of Revelation⁹ who subsequently publicized how strong internal evidence from Revelation had persuaded him to amend his outlook and advocate the early date,¹⁰ summarized the view in this way:

The early date is best suited for the nature and object of the Apocalypse, and facilitates its historical understanding. Christ pointed in his eschatological discourses to the destruction of Jerusalem and the preceding tribulation as the great crisis in the history of the theocracy and the type of the judgment of the world, and there never was a more alarming state of society.... The tribulation of the six years preceding the destruction of Jerusalem extended over the whole Roman empire and embraced wars and rebellions, frequent and unusual conflagrations, earthquakes and famines and plagues, and all sorts of public calamities and mysteries untold. It seemed, indeed, that the world, shaken to its very centre, was coming to a close, and every Christian must have felt that the prophecies of Christ were being fulfilled before his eyes.¹¹

It was at this unique juncture in the history of mankind that St. John, with the consuming fire in Rome and the infernal spectacle of the Neronian persecution behind him, the terrors of the Jewish war and the Roman interregnum around him, and the catastrophe of Jerusalem and the

⁸ Fredric W. Farrar, *Texts Explained* (NY: Dodd, Mead, & Co. 1899), p. 365; Arthur Weigall, *Nero* (NY: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1930), p. 395; cf. *The Meaning of the Books* (NY: E. Drotto) *The Early Days of P* (NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), p. 413.; Charles C. Torrey, *The Apocalypse of John* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 58ff. Others: Ewald (1838), Lucke (1832), DeWet (1848), Crednor Volkman 1862).

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., vol. I. Apostolic Christianity (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910 [1890]), p. 834.

¹⁰ Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb* (Nashville & Broadman Press, 1951) p. 82. Martin Rist arrives at Domitian by counting only those emperors deified by the Roman *Senate: The Interpreter’s Bible* XII (NY: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 495; Such deli??? ??? is not mentioned by John, nor would it have been obvious, or even reletant, to his readers in Asia. In similar fashion, artificial ingenuity that works backward from a preconceived conclusion is used to arrive at Domitian by claiming that we should begin counting only after the death of Christ (A Strobel, “Abfassung und Geschiclots – theologic der Apocalypse Nach”, Kap. XVII. 9-12, *N.T.S.* 10 (1964): 443-445) or begin with Calugula as the first emperor to provoke a crisis over emperor worship (L. Brun, “*Zeischrift fur die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 26 (1927): 28 ff.)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 836-837.

Jewish theocracy before him, received those wonderful visions of the impending conflicts and final triumphs of the Christian church. His was truly a book of the times and for the times...¹²

The “early” date for Revelation (often considered the “Neronian date”)¹³ would roughly span the years 64-70 A.D., placing John’s writing at the end of Nero’s rule or briefly following it – but at any rate prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple, even if Galba or Vespasian should be identified as the emperor under whom John suffered and wrote.

Ground-Rules And Principles For Debate

We have, then, two proposals for the date of Revelation: the later reign of Domitian *or* the earlier period before Jerusalem’s fall (i.e., the reign of Nero or Shortly following). As Sanday saw, “It is a Choice of evils, and a choice also of attractions.”¹⁴ There will be no benefits and drawbacks to each proposal (otherwise the voice of the church would be basically unified on this point by now), and the student will need to weigh the relative merits of each option with clarity and cogency of relative merits of each option with clarity and cogency of thought before settling responsibility on one position or the other. It cannot be stressed enough today that responsible scholarship must undergird one’s choice concerning the time when Revelation was written. Knee-jerk conformity to one’s church or school traditions and leaping at preconceived conclusions cannot honestly take the place of open-minded, diligent analysis of the evidence available to us. What is taken for granted in Biblical scholarship about such things as the date of Revelation turns out to vary from one generation to another, or from one area of the church to another, even though students and parishioners rarely are informed that this diversity exists (much to the ease of their teachers and pastors). It is simply inadequate to rest in the (unfounded) claim that virtually “everybody” knows that Revelation dates from this or that time. That would be a comfortable illusion.

A number of distinguished authors can be cited as supporters of the late date for Revelation. Cohen and Hendriksen list Alford, Godet, Hengstenberg, Lenski, Zahn, Lange, Swete, Holtzmann, Moffatt, Ramsey, Warfield, Barnes, Orr, Porter, Theissen, and Hoyt.¹⁵ We could easily swell the list by adding the names of Elliott, David Brown, Milligan, Harmack, Bousset, Beckwith, Tenney, Ladd, Summers, Caird, Walvoord, Mooris, Mounce, and others. There is no question but that some very respectable scholars have favored the Domitian date for the writing of Revelation, and that fact should motivate us to be thorough and cautious in our research and analysis. Our esteem for such writers should *also* lead us to hear those among them who, like Leon Morris, say “the evidence is far from being so conclusive that no other view is possible.”¹⁶ Ray Summers asserts that “all critics agree that Revelation was written during a period of severe persecution in the first century”;¹⁷ yet G.E. Ladd admits “there is no evidence that during the

¹² Perhaps John was using an earlier oracle: R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2 vol., International Critical Comm. (Edinburgh: T & T Clerk, 1920), II:69. Summers, p. 82; Andre Feuillet, “Fossai d’interpretation du clopître XI l’apocalypse,” *New Testament Studies*, 4, (1957-8_) 183ff/*SymbolicW*. Michaelis, *Einleitung in das New Testament*, 3rd ed. 1961, pp. 316-317. E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung der Johannes*, 2nd ed. 1953, pp. 143 ff. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1953). Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary, pp. 348-351 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940). Mounce, pp. 36, 315, 316, Caird, 218-219, Beckwith, pp. 704-8

¹³ E. G. Hort, pp. x, xxvi-xxxii.

¹⁴ Ibid, “Preface,” p. v.

¹⁵ Gary B. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978 [1968]), p. 20; William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (GR: Baker Book House, 1939), p. 258. Others at turn of century are listed by James Moffatt, *The Historical New Testament*, 2nd 3d. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clerk, 1901), p. 461.

¹⁶ ??? Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, v. 20, ed. R. V. G. Ta, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 40, and??

¹⁷ Ray Summers, *Worthy is the Lamb* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 79.

last decade of the first century there occurred any open and systematic persecution of the church.”¹⁸ Turning the other direction for evidence, Merrill Tenney observes that “internal evidence for the late date is confused and not very clear.”¹⁹ The late date has notorious weaknesses. On the other hand, having studied the case for the *earlier* date, Swete conceded that but for one ungranted assumption, it “would be nearly conclusive.”²⁰

By contrast, there are a number of supporters of the late date who *fail* to offer their readers a fair assessment of the genuine extent of evidential support for that position. Many simply assert – without qualm or qualification – that Revelation was definitely written during the last decade of the first century under Domitian,²¹ or else they assume it without any reservation or question as a premise in further studies.²² Despite the extensive and clear counter-evidence which has often been cited against the late date for Revelation, there are authors who suppress, prejudicially characterize, or merely ignore the true state of the debate on this subject, telling their unwary readers that the Domitian date “can hardly be doubtful”²³ since “most evidence”²⁴ favors it and since “not a single, really cogent argument” can be found for the early date,²⁵ (or simplistically dismissing the early date by calling it “unlikely”).²⁶ The early date is even (mindlessly) called an “immoral heresy” in at least one polemic!²⁷ One could easily get the impression from such categorical statements and indictments (as I did early as a student) that the late date for Revelation is virtually an *established fact* among true scholars; granted that the relevant evidence *all* points to a Domitian date for the book. Indeed, attempting to sway their readers with an all too easy appeal to a (selective) “consensus” on the question, Summers says that “the Domitian period is the date most generally accepted by New Testament criticism for the writing of Revelation,”²⁸ and it is described as “the majority opinion” by Walvoord,²⁹ while Mounce claims that it is “accepted by most writers”³⁰ and Boer says it is “favoured by most students of the book.”³¹

Such sweeping claims are initially implausible. Are we to believe that Boer knows or has interviewed “Most students” of the book? Has Mounce really read “most writers”? If New

¹⁸ George Elden Lodel, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Cox: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), p. 197).

¹⁹ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 19.

²⁰ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. CV. [1908]).

²¹ e.g., Herman Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), p. 33; Harry Buir, *The Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Puritan & Reformed Publishing Co., 1960), p. 93; J. B. Smith, *H.Revelation of Jesus Christ*, ed. S. O. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961), p. 29; Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming*, (Santa Ana, California: Vision House Publishers, 1973), p. 19.

²² e.g., Simon J. Kestermaker, “The Canon of the New Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society*, 20 (March, 1977):12.

²³ Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House [1919] 1979).

²⁴ Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, ed. T.R.W. Stott (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 22.

²⁵ Hendriksen, p. 19.

²⁶ Todd, p. 8.

²⁷ Peter S. Ruckmon, *The Book of Revelation*, (Pensacola, Florida: Pensacola Bible Press, 1970), pp. 1-2.

²⁸ Summers, p. 83.

²⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1966), p. 13.

³⁰ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, ed. F.F. Bruce, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), p. 32.

³¹ Harry R. Boer, *The Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdman Publishing Co., 1979), p. 19.

Testament criticism has “most generally accepted” the late date for Revelation, how do we account for the fact that debate over the date for Revelation, *continues* in scholarly circles even today? (Indeed, uncharacteristically, those arguing for the early date are not always the conservative scholars!)³² Why is the early date *still* given so much attention and analysis in reputable works on Revelation? Besides, are we to think that questions of truth can be decided by a census of personal opinions rather than an analysis of the evidence pro and con? Even if we were to fall into such a logical fallacy, can we accept a census of secondary opinions which is limited in its scope (say, to the commentaries read by one author)?

Questions could be multiplied regarding the common, exaggerated claims about the scholarly support for the late date of Revelation. But this much should be made clear to the reader. One need only get beyond the cocoon of his own circles of contact and his own lifetime to find that the preceding overstated claims for the late date of Revelation are unbelievable. We need only go back to the turn of the present century to find (to our surprise) that what was then taken for granted as the scholarly conclusion about the date of Revelation was just the opposite of the claims made above. Consider, for instance, the standard reference work found in most theological libraries, the *Dictionary of the Bible* edited by James Hastings in five large volumes. This work was published 1898-1904, when the dominating opinion regarding the book of Revelation was indicated in these words: “the majority of modern critics are of the opinion that the book was written in the time of Nero.” That Nero is denoted by the beast and its number is “the almost a fixed assumption of critics,” “the ruling critical opinion,” and “almost a fixed assumption of critics.” Having endorsed the preterist approach to the book as most correct, an author says “In general these [preterist] writers date the book before 70”; indeed, as to the date for Revelation, the “ruling view of critics” has been 66-69 A.D.³³ The conclusion maintained at the turn of this century regarding the date when Revelation was written was decidedly in favor of the early date. C.C. Torrey observes that, if there are few dissenting voices from the late date in our *current* generation,

It was not so in former years, Swete... notes how “the great Cambridge theologians of the last century, Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort, held the book to be a unity and assigned it to the time after Nero’s death and before the destruction of Jerusalem. Many of the foremost German scholars of the same period were in essential agreement with this dating, as is well known. The evidence seemed to permit no other conclusion.”³⁴

If one is willing to do a little research, an amazing list of advocates for the early date of Revelation can be discovered. At the turn of the century not only were the three most renowned Biblical scholars of the day – Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort – agreed as to the Neronian date for Revelation, the same conclusion was reached by the superb church historian, Philip Schaff, and by the acclaimed expert in hermeneutics, Milton Terry.³⁵ An all-star cast of Christian scholars defended the early date for Revelation! Terry asserted in 1898: “The preponderance of the best modern criticism is in favour of this view.”³⁶

³² e.g., John A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 69-71.

³³ T. B. Strong, “John Apostle” and Frank C. Porter, “Revelation, Book of,” *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vol., ed. James Hastings (New York, New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1899, 1902), II:690; IV:242,243,257,259.

³⁴ Torrey, p. 76.

³⁵ Schaff, *History of the Protestant Church*, p. 834; Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 237-242, 467; *Biblical Apocalypies* (New York, New York: Eaton & Mains, 1909), pp. 256-60.

³⁶ Torrey, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 467.

The early date has always enjoyed important scholarly support. In the 6th century, Andreas, the Greek commentator on Revelation who resided in Cappodocian Caesarea, had to take note of the fact that there was then no want of interpreters who applied chapters 6 and 7 to the fall of Jerusalem. Emerging from a millennium of mystical, medieval interpretation, the revival of Biblical studies found proponents of the early date in the 17th century scholars Alcasar (1614), Grotius (1644), and Hammond (1653), as well as in the meticulous and brilliant thinker who spanned the 17th and 18th centuries, Sir Isaac Newton (posthumously published 1732). The early date continued to be favored in important 18th century works by Abauzit (1730), Herder (1799), Herrensneider (1786), and “the father of modern criticism,” Eichhorn (1791). The 19th century blossomed with advocates for the early date of Revelation. The respected scholar, Guerike, in his 1843 *Introduction to the New Testament*, retracted his strenuous arguments for the late date and, based upon analysis of internal evidence in the book, advanced the Neronian date instead.³⁷ In his 1845 commentary, Moses Stuart observed: “most of the recent commentators and critics have ... placed the composition of the book at an earlier period, viz. before the destruction of Jerusalem”; according to him the Domitian date “is now out of question.”³⁸ The German scholar, Bleek, wrote in his *Introduction to the New Testament* (English translation 1874): “most modern scholars ... place it before the destruction of Jerusalem.”³⁹ In 1892 F.W. Farrar could say that “the whole force of modern criticism tends to correct the ancient error” of assigning Revelation to Domitian’s reign.⁴⁰ The research and analysis of these diligent students of the Bible made them as confident of the Neronian date as are recent authors who promote the Domitian date. In 1872 James Glasgow asserted that the defenders of the early date “have so established the early date of the Apocalypse as no writer of the Domitianic school can successfully meet. They find it much easier to speak lightly of what they cannot answer.”⁴¹

A partial list of scholars who have supported the early date for Revelation, gleaned unsystematically from my reading, would include the following 18th and 19th writers not already mentioned just above: John Lightfoot, Harenbert, Hartwig, Michaelis, Tholuck, Clarke, Bishop Newton, James MacDonald, Gieseler, Tilloch, Bause, Zullig, Swegler, De Wett, Lucke, Bohmer, Hilgenfeld, Mommsen, Ewald, Neander, Volkmar, Renan, Credner, Kernkel, B. Weiss, Reuss, Thiersch, Bunsen, Stier, Auberlen, Maurice, Niermeyer, Desprez, Aube, Keim, De Pressence, Cowles, Scholten, Beck, Dusterdiek, Simcox, S. Davidson, Beyschlag, Salmon, Hausrath. Continuing on into the 20th century we could list Plummer, Selwyn, J.V. Bartlet, C.A. Scott, Erbes, Edmundson, Henderson, and others. If one’s reading has been limited pretty much to the present and immediately preceding generations of writers on Revelation, then the foregoing names may be somewhat unfamiliar to him, but they were not unrecognized in previous eras. When we combine these names with the yet outstanding stature of Schaff, Terry, Lightfoot, Westcott, and Hort, we can feel the severity of Beckwith’s *understatement* when in 1919 he described the Neronian dating for Revelation as “a view held by many down to recent times.”⁴² By many indeed! It has been described, as we saw above, as “the ruling view” of critics,” by “the majority of modern critics,” by “most modern scholars,” and by “the whole force

³⁷ Cited in John Peter Lange, *The Revelation of John*, ed. E.R. Craven, Trans. E. Moore (New York, New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Company, 1874), pp. 59-60; Moser Stuart, *A Co????? or the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: Maclochen, Stewart & Company, 1848 edition), pp. 283 ff., 531 ff.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 216, 783.

³⁹ Friedrich Bleek, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2 vol., ed. J.F. Bleek, trans. William Urwick (Edinburgh: T.O.T. Clark, 1874), p. 202.

⁴⁰ Farrar, *The Messenger at the Books????*, p. 511.

⁴¹ James Glasgow, *The Apocalypse Translated and Expounded*, (Edinburgh: T.O.T. Clark, 1982), p. 41.

⁴² Beckwith, p. 207.

of modern criticism.” The weight of scholarship placed behind the Neronian option for the dating of Revelation has been staggering. In our own day it has gained the support of such worthies as C.C. Torrey, J.A.T. Robinson, and F.F. Bruce and has been popularized by Jay Adams.⁴³ In 1956 Torrey could write about the number 666, “It is now the accepted conclusion that the beast is the emperor Nero.”⁴⁴

The indolent and invalid argumentation which claims that the Domitian date is “most generally accepted” (Summers) by “most writers” (Mounce) and “most students” (Boer), being the “majority opinion” (Walvoord), is incredible, unverifiable and subject to serious challenge. When one notes that it was in 1937 – just a generation away from the heyday for the earlier dating of Revelation – that Pieters said, “there is now general agreement that it was written during the reign of the emperor Domitian,”⁴⁵ one sees how shallow and suspect such short-sighted generalizations have been. The *proliferation* of such remarks in the present day, of course, does nothing to remove their factually erroneous and logically fallacious character. Writers who make these sweeping claims to persuade their readers, whether they are aiming to support the Domitian *or* the Neronian dating of Revelation, only stain their scholarship thereby. The utter futility of such propaganda is well illustrated by the fact that, when Stuart claimed in 1848 that “most of the recent commentators and critics” dated Revelation before the destruction of Jerusalem, just four years earlier (1844) Elliott had claimed that “the most approved modern ecclesiastical historians and biblical critics” adopted the Domitian date for Revelation!⁴⁶ In 1899 T.B. Strong stated that “the majority of modern critics are of the opinion that the book was written in the time of Nero,” but in 1901 James Moffatt claimed just the opposite: “one of the surest results of modern research on the New Testament is the Domitianic situation of the Apocalypse.”⁴⁷ In each of these two illustrations it is impossible to believe *both* of the conflicting claims, *unless* one inclines to the view that the majority opinion among Biblical scholars (throughout all countries, schools, and denominations) was given to erratic, lurching, shifts back and forth every two to four years concerning the date of evaluate the easy claims about “the majority” of scholars supporting this or that hypothesis as unreliable enthusiasm for the speaker’s own outlook *or* as poorly researched over-generalizations. All such claims must be discounted, bring us finally to an honest and open consideration of the external and internal *evidences themselves*, upon which all scholarly opinion must finally be based. When we get down to such considerations, the appeal to the number of writers who agree with this or that conclusion is an informal logical fallacy anyway. Nose counts are irrelevant to the extent and character of evidence for the truth.

In analyzing the evidence concerning the date when Revelation was written, another consideration which is argumentatively irrelevant is the motivation which is (was) operative in a scholar who argues for one conclusion or another. No writer or researcher is completely impartial or neutral, and doubtless his or her inclinations will affect the kinds of evidence adduced and the distribution of weight or importance given to each. Proponents of the early date have properly perceived that many futurists, especially of the dispensational school, find it necessary to maintain the *late* date for Revelation in order to bolster their eschatological opinions, many of which rest only on passages in Revelation taken as written after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.⁴⁸ On the other hand, advocates of the Domitian dating for

⁴³ Noted above.

⁴⁴ Torrey, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Albertus Pieters, *The Lamb, the Woman and the Dragon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1937), p. 23.

⁴⁶ Stuart, p. 216; Elliot, p. 45.

⁴⁷ Strong in Hasting’s *Dictionary*, II:690; Moffatt, *Historical New Testament*, p. 461.

⁴⁸ e.g., Adams, p. 76.

Revelation have noted that some critics (e.g., Baur, Hausrath) support the *early* date because of its utility for the Tübingen hypothesis.⁴⁹ Then again, it can be justly said that because Revelation as it stands (with internal indications of an early date) appears to conflict sharply with preconceptions held by modern Biblical critics that the book must be dated *late*, hypotheses concerning early fragments and redactors have been postulated in order to preserve the Domitian dating.⁵⁰

Back and forth the charges of suspect motivation can be furled, but such charges are beside the point. The motivation which a writer has is irrelevant to the truth of his conclusion and the strength (or weakness) of his evidence. If an author is predisposed to favor dispensationalism or the Tübingen hypothesis (etc.) and for that reason deems certain lines of evidence decisive for the late or early date of Revelation, it still falls to the reader to determine whether those putative lines of evidence genuinely do or do not substantiate the desired conclusion. If they do, the evidence is telling – regardless of what one feels about dispensationalism or Tübingen, and regardless of one’s hopes for the establishment or demise of dispensationalism or Tübingen, if the evidence set forth for the late or early date of Revelation by some author turns out to be faulty, the desired conclusion will still be unsubstantiated. Thus we will do well to stick to the pro’s and con’s of the specific evidence which various authors set forth concerning the dating of Revelation, ignoring the personal motives which they may or may not have had in advancing the arguments which they do. Weak arguments are not improved by good motives, and good arguments are not impaired by weak motives.

In evaluating the variety of cases which are set forth for the early and late datings of Revelation, then, we ought to disregard appeals made to any (alleged) *consensus* of scholarly opinion and dispense with appeals made against (or for) any scholar’s *motivation(s)*. Both exemplify fallacious reasoning. In addition to these rules for debate, certain *reversible* lines of argumentation should be ruled out of serious consideration. What is in mind here are those sorts of arguments which depend for their strength and direction on a large number of other disputable variables and assumptions and which, for that very reason, can be used equally well by the advocates of either the early or the late date for Revelation.

For instance, from time to time one will find a writer who seeks to substantiate his proposed date for Revelation by appealing to its chronological relationship to other New Testament writings. Some authors, observing literary parallels between Revelation and the gospels of Matthew and Luke,⁵¹ have held that Revelation draws from these other books, which are themselves dated after the fall of Jerusalem (usually between 80 and 85 A.D.).⁵² Revelation would perforce be dated subsequent to the period postulated by the early date for the book.⁵³ However, since these parallels may be nothing more than verbal echoes of a common oral tradition (or of common first-hand acquaintance) which *precedes both* Revelation and the Gospels, there is no sure ground for asserting literary dependence. Moreover, the asserted dating for Matthew and Luke is at best conjectural; it is more likely just wrong (e.g., Gundry dates both in the 60’s).⁵⁴ Thus this line of reasoning is at least “precarious” (to use Guthrie’s

⁴⁹ E.B., Moffatt, *Introduction to Literature of the New Testament*, p. 507.

⁵⁰ e.g., Torrey, pp. 76-77.

⁵¹ For examples see R. H. Charles, *Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., Intern.??? Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1920), I:lxxxiii.

⁵² Guthrie, p. 956.

⁵³ e.g., Mounce, p. 35; cf. Torrey, pp. 77, 79.

⁵⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pp. 85, 96-97, 110).

term).⁵⁵ But more importantly, such reasoning is *reversible*. If one assumes that there must be literary dependence involved, it could just as well be that the direction of borrowing is from Revelation to the Gospels (rather than vice versa) – which would make Revelation earlier, instead of later, than Matthew and Luke, and would as such *preclude* a Domitian dating for the book!

The proponents of the early date for Revelation have also resorted at times to the use of arguments pertaining to chronological relationship between Revelation and other New Testament books. Terry argued: “There are, finally, several allusions to the Apocalypse in other New Testament writings which indicate that it must have been one of the earliest written productions of the apostolic times.”⁵⁶ Using copious illustrations of conceptual and literary parallels, Glasgow contended that Revelation was earlier than *any* of the New Testament epistles, if not also the Gospels.⁵⁷ Elliott, defender of the late date, noted the “exceeding danger” of such arguments, however, for the literary parallels might simply be explained by common dependence on the Old Testament or as the result of the common authorship of New Testament books by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸ Again, though, if one insists that there *must* be literary dependence involved, then it could just turn out – contrary to the aim of the polemicist – that Revelation has drawn *from* these other works, rather than being drawn *upon* by them. So much depends on variable assumptions and personal feelings. Westcott felt that Revelation must have been “the necessary germ” out of which grew John’s Gospel,⁵⁹ but David Brown saw it as just the opposite.⁶⁰ The tenuous and reversible character of such considerations disqualify them as telling indications of the date for Revelation. They offer no sure footing whatsoever.

Another example of reversible argumentation concerning the date for the writing of Revelation would be the variety of appeals which are made to the literary style and quality of the Greek prose in the book. A long series of scholars have noticed the rugged, solecistic grammar of John’s writing in Revelation⁶¹– especially when it is compared to the smooth, elegant style of his Gospel. Revelation is full of crude Hebraisms and rough Greek idiom. For some scholars this points to an early date for Revelation, many years prior to the Gospel, before John would have enjoyed extended exposure to the Greek of Asia Minor and have developed greater command of the language and a more polished style.⁶² Of course, there are some writers who do not grant the premise of this argument, but observe that a rough style is not evident throughout the book; in fact, the author seems to be able to coin words in Greek with skill.⁶³ However, even among those who grant the premise of relatively uncouth greek in Revelation, there is some question as to what *inference* can be made from it concerning the date of composition. Guerike first took it as

⁵⁵ Guthrie, p. 956.

⁵⁶ Terry, *Biblical Apocalypitics*, pp. 259-60. Terry used illustrations from Galatians and Hebrews. A similar argument based on Hebrews & 2 Peter, was advanced by Henry Cowles, *The Revelation of John*, (New York, New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1992), pp. 22-23.

⁵⁷ Glasgow, pp. 16-37.

⁵⁸ Elliott, pp. 41-43.

⁵⁹ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1971 [1881]), p. lxxxiv.

⁶⁰ David Brown, *The Apocalypse: Its Structure and Primary Predictions*, (New York, New York: Christian Literature Company, 1891), pp. 13-18. A similar dispute over the chronological relationships between John’s gospel and Revelation, based on references (or lack thereof) from one to the other, is broached by Stuart, p. 230.

⁶¹ e.g., Hort, pp. xxvii-xxviii; Alford, pp. 224-226; R. H. Charles, I:xliv cxliii., Swete, cxiii-cxxv

⁶² e.g. Guerike, cited in Lange, p. 60; Lightfoot, *Supernatural Religion*, p. 132 (cited in Swete, p. ciii); Westcott, *Gospel According to St. John*, p. lxxxvi; Farrar, *Messages of the Books*, p. 512; Terry, *Biblical Apocalypitics*, p. 259; *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 240.

⁶³ Brown, p. 10; cf. Alford, p. 226; Morris, pp. 29-30,39.

an indicator of the *late* date, reasoning that Hohn was removed to Patmos (away from a Greek-speaking district) and there lapsed back into the style of his former tongue. Stuart replied: "Much more probable is the reverse of all this."⁶⁴ He reasoned that John would not likely forget a language he had used for over half a century (which Guerike would imply by dating the book late); rather, John had not yet enjoyed a long period of exposure to Greek speaking in Asia Minor (pointing then to an *early* date for Revelation). Before Stuart's commentary was published, Guerike had reversed his own reasoning and conclusion, arguing now for the early date on the same basis of Greek style!⁶⁵ It is obvious that this is a slippery piece of evidence, rendering arguments based on it "precarious" (to use Tenny's word):

Dating the writing from its style of language is precarious, however. The content of the visions would make description difficult no matter when it was written, and an amanuensis could smooth out the written style at an early date as well as a late date. The apparent awkwardness of expression in some of its language is therefore not a final criterion for judging the time of publication.

John's likely use of an amanuensis indicates, says Morris, that "nothing can be concluded from the standard of Greek as to the⁶⁶ dates of the two writings" [the Gospel and Revelation].⁶⁷ There are too many variables affecting the consideration of the Greek style in Revelation for this to be anything but a reversible sort of argument for either conclusion, and as such this kind of argument offers us no sure footing.

Similar remarks could be made regarding the lively imagination, fiery writing, and thundering agitation characteristic of the literary style of Revelation. Some have argued that such is more likely in a 60-year-old writer than in one who is quite elderly, as John would have been in 96 A.D. (on the assumption of the Domitian dating for Revelation).⁶⁸ By contrast, the Gospel of John has a more sedate style, suggesting that it is the later of the two writings. However, apart from the fact that the difference in literary styles of these two works can be accounted for psychologically rather than chronologically,⁶⁹ the crucial point is that there is *no necessity* to the presumption that an author's literary evolution will be in the direction of more, rather than less, sedate style. Under circumstances like John's there is no reason why a calm style would not have given way to an impassioned one in the face of widespread and renewed persecution. Again, then, arguments premised on the literary quality of Revelation provide no sure warrant for dating the writing; they are easily *reversible*, given variable assumptions.

We must also set aside arguments for an early *or* late date of Revelation which appeal to an alleged use by the book of the *Nero redivivus* legend, for there are simply too many variable and disputed assumptions which affect one's treatment of the legend and its relationship to the book of Revelation. Roman authors (Seutonius, Tacitus, Dio Cassius) and Jewish writings (*Sibylline Oracles*, *Ascension of Isaiah*) testify to a story which was concocted about Nero and given wide circulation.⁷⁰ In 68 A.D. Nero, having been condemned by the Roman Senate to die as a public

⁶⁴ Stuart, pp. 230-231.

⁶⁵ This reversal is evident from Lante's reply to Guerike's later writing; Lange, p. 60 (cf. Sturt, p. 233).

⁶⁶ Torrey, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Morris, p. 39.

⁶⁸ e.g., Stuart, p. 231; Farrar, *Messages of the Books*, pp. 512-513; *Early Days of the Protestant Church*, p. 408.

⁶⁹ Alford, p. 234.

⁷⁰ A thorough discussion of its literature can be found in W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Gootingen: Vandenoebch & Rrynecht, 1906), p. 410-418; cf. Stuart, pp. 769 ff.; R. H. Charles, I: xcvi, II.81. The myth is described by Swete, pp lxxxiii-iv, ci-cii., Beckwith, pp. 400-402; Moffatt, *Introduction to Literature of the New Testament*, p. 506 and others.

enemy, fled to his private suburban villa and committed suicide; subsequently he was given a public funeral. However the story arose that he did not really die back and reconquer Rome; in later versions of this legend Nero was said to have fled to the Parthians of the East in order to win support and gather an army with which to repossess his throne. In much later forms of the myth (after Nero could be thought still surviving) it was expected that Nero would arise from the other world to regain his power. Now then, some students of Revelation claim that that use of the *Nero redivivus* legend in the book (allegedly in 13:3, 12 and 17:8, 11-12) demonstrates that the date for the book must be Domitian,⁷¹ while others use the *same* evidence to show that the book must be dated under Nero or Galba.⁷²

A swarm of questions have not believed that he did, or (stronger) believed that he did not.⁷³ Philip Schaff expressed his conviction strongly:

A radical error, such as the belief in the absurd heathen fable of the return of Nero, is altogether incompatible with the lofty character and profound wisdom of the Apocalypse, and would destroy all confidence in its prophecy. If John, as these writers maintain, composed it in 68, he lived long enough to be undeceived, and would have corrected the fatal blunder or withheld the book from circulation.⁷⁴

I, for one, do not see adequate evidence of the *Nero redivivus* legend in the literature of Revelation. There are too many discrepancies. John speaks of a death-stroke in one of the heads of the beast (Rev. 13:3), but for him it is *not* the *head* (emperor) which is healed, but the *beast itself* – indicating that the empire survives the loss of its individual emperor(s) (13:3, 12).⁷⁵ Thus we have no indication of an emperor reviving, much less of Nero reviving, in the first place. In Revelation 17 John speaks of *the beast* ascending from the abyss (vs. 8), the beast as personified in its head(s) (17:11; cf. 13:18). Thus the beast is itself “an eighth” head (meaning it *has* an eighth head?). Those who find the *Nero redivivus* myth in Revelation see this eighth head as John’s portrayal of Nero returned from the dead.⁷⁶ However John does *not* say that the eighth is “one of the seven” previous heads, but merely that he is “of the seven” (17:11) – that is, continuous with them in his character and practices. Therefore, exact exegesis does *not* find Revelation *claiming* that any Roman emperor will be healed of a death-stroke and return to reign again. And certainly we do not read anything in Revelation which even suggests that a head of the beast escapes to the East (instead of dying) and leads the Partians army. Mounce is correct in commenting that what John set forth in Revelation “requires no reliance upon the Nero Redivivus myth.”⁷⁷ There are no points of definite contact with the myth *any* of the stages of its development (Nero’s escape, Parthian return, or resurrection).

Nevertheless, not all commentators have seen or agree with this assessment. Swete said, “It is impossible to doubt that the legend of *Nero redivivus* is in full view of the Apocalyptist.”⁷⁸

⁷¹ e.g., Swete, pp. ci-cii; Beckwith, p. 207; Summers, p. 85; Mounce, p. 34, Alexander Ramsay, *The Revelation and the ??? Epistles*, The Westminster New Testament, ed. A.E. Garvie (New York, New York: Fleming H. Revell, [1910]). p7.

⁷² Stuart, pp. 769 ff; Torrey, pp. 61-76.

⁷³ e.g., E.W. Benson, *The Apocalypse: An Introductory Study*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1900), pp. 173-174.

⁷⁴ Schaff, p. 847. Note that Schaff is reacting to appeal to the myth by advocates of the *early* date. Today advocate of the late date also appeal to it.

⁷⁵ Morris, p. 167; Mounce, p. 253; Schaff, p. 390; cf. of G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper’s new Testament Commentaries, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 164.

⁷⁶ cf. Schaff, p. 390.

⁷⁷ Mounce, p. 316.

⁷⁸ Swete, p. ci.

Torrey remarked that “The Apocalyptist makes express and repeated use of the superstition of Nero *redivivus*, as is now well recognized.”⁷⁹ Now, even if this were true, crucial questions would remain. What was the order and direction of influence between the legend and the book of Revelation? Some early-daters hold that John simply *borrowed from* a story which previously had wide circulation on its own.⁸⁰ For purposes of dating Revelation we would obviously need to know the causal relation between the book and the legend, but that is quite disputable.

There is also a question as to what phase in the legend’s history and development would be indicated by John’s alleged use of the legend. Those who date Revelation under Domitian would argue that according to John the beast portraying Nero already “is not” (Rev. 17:8, 9, 11) – that is, is already dead. The coming, revived beast will be Nero risen from the dead, and thus Revelation would be dated (according to this phase of the myth’s development) at a time when people were quite sure that Nero no longer survived and would need to be resurrected in order to rule again; thus the book must be dated within Domitian’s reign, at least twenty years after Nero’s reported (and now confirmed) death.⁸¹ As Guthrie recognizes, however, such reasoning “would be extremely inconclusive for a Domitianic date.”⁸² The original myth was already common talk as early as 69 A.D., and even as late as Trajan’s reign some believed that Nero was still living.⁸³ Indeed, if we need to go to a time when everyone would have been sure that Nero had finally died, we would actually push the date of Revelation well into the second century, since at 100 A.D. Nero would only have been 63 years old!⁸⁴

Those who favor the early date for Revelation note that the beast is spoken of in the past tense in Revelation 17 for the same reason that Old Testament prophecies of future events are expressed in the past tense – indicating the certainty of what is prophesied.⁸⁵ Indeed, if we recognize Revelation as genuine, supernatural *prophecy* of future events, the alleged prediction that Nero “is about to come up out of the abyss” (Rev. 17:8) – reincarnated as Domitian’s reign (not during or after it)! The late-dater, Moffatt, oracle which was updated in Domitian’s time,⁸⁶ thereby showing the *Nero redivivus* argument to favor an *early* date for the book actually. Early-daters for Revelation also point out that the *redivivus* story originated with a prediction of soothsayers to Nero himself, and this took place early in his reign (see Suetonius, *Nero* 40), so that rumors and expectations were *already available* to John as he wrote at the end of Nero’s reign.⁸⁷ Torrey has argued that, since John believed the *Nero redivivus* myth and asserted it without proviso, Revelation must be dated sometime *soon* after the time of Nero’s presumed escape. The reason for this is that the myth was not credible for very long; indeed, it was pretty well discredited in 69 A.D. when the first pretender to being the revived Nero was suitably crushed by the Italian army. By 79 A.D., when a second pseudo-Nero fizzled in Parthia, the myth was as good as dead.⁸⁸ Tacitus (Histories I:2) said that by the time of Domitian the *Nero Redivivus* myth was a

⁷⁹ Torrey, p. 61.

⁸⁰ e.g., Beckwith, p. 402.

⁸¹ G.R. Beasley – Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, rev., New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Matthew Black (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1978 [1974]) p. 38; Moffatt, *Historical New Testament*, p. 460, and *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, p. 503; Alexander Ramsay, p. 7; Beckwith, p. 207; Mounce, pp. 34, 252.

⁸² Guthrie, p. 954; cf Beckwith, p. 402.

⁸³ Swete, p. cii.

⁸⁴ T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 3 vols., trans. M.W. Jacobus (New York, New York: Scribner, 1909), III: p. 444.

⁸⁵ Stuart, p. 782.

⁸⁶ Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, p. 506.

⁸⁷ Stuart, pp. 769-770.

⁸⁸ Torrey, pp. 69, 71-72.

“joke” among the populous. Thus the *early* date for Revelation would seem to be preferred, if John used the legend.

But this brings us to yet another crucial question pertaining to *Nero redivivus* arguments for dating Revelation. Is Torrey correct that John actually believed the legend? Did John intend to speak literally, if he used the legend in Revelation at all? The early-dater, Stuart, held that John was not literally describing the expected course for Nero to take, but was merely *identifying* the ruling emperor as the one who was expected in popular imagination to revive after the end of his reign.⁸⁹ Swete would have agreed that John was not literally predicting Nero to revive; John did not credit the wild legends floating around, but merely worked them into his *symbolism*.⁹⁰ Yet Swete dated the book late, unlike Stuart. If taken non-literally, the use of *Nero redivivus* in Revelation is interpreted by many late-daters as speaking of a revival of Nero’s persecuting personality in Domitian.⁹¹ However, as thus weakened, the legend could as easily have been utilized by John during the *early* period, when he predicted a resurgence of persecution under a later (“an eighth”) emperor to come. Again we see, then, how inconclusive any argument from the *Nero redivivus* myth must be when we try to date the writing of Revelation.

There is a question as to whether John even reflects any such expectation in his book. If he did, there is a question about the causal relation between his book and the legend. Even if Revelation was affected by the legend, there is a question as to whether we see it being utilized well after it was clear that Nero was dead (viz., turn of the century, if not later) or before expectations of Nero’s return were discredited (viz., well before Domitian). Finally, there is a question whether we are to read John literally on this score, and if not, whether a symbolic use of the myth can determine anything as to the date of Revelation one way or the other. With so many variables being juggled by arguments for the date of Revelation (late *or* early) from a consideration of the *Nero redivivus* myth, we must recognize the reversible and tenuous character of such arguments. Like others of this character, they will provide us with not sure footing for determining when Revelation was written.

To this point, in summary, we have decided with good reason to discard arguments concerning the date for Revelation which appeal to an alleged consensus of Scholarly opinion, or appeal against the motivation of a writer who argues in a particular way, or appeal to disputed and variable considerations like Revelation’s relation to other New Testament books, the literary style of Revelation, or its reflection of the *Nero redivivus* myth. These various forms of argumentation are either logically fallacious or materially weak and indecisive. I have aimed to show the unacceptability of such arguments as they are used by advocates of both the early and the late dates for Revelation, and thus I trust that dismissing these lines of thought here will not be evaluated as a partisan move. The simple fact is that the kind of arguments we have surveyed above are poor arguments, no matter which school of thought presses them into service. The *reversibility* of these arguments points to the conclusion that they do not genuinely support either the early or the late date for Revelation. At best they would function for a person as (indecisive) corroborations of a decision that he made on completely other grounds, for they have no independent strength. Thus they will be ruled out of the subsequent discussion of the dating of Revelation.

In addition to observing this regulation on the debate, there are certain principles which I believe need to be kept in mind as we come to analyze the arguments for the early and late dates of Revelation. It seems best to broach these general principles at the outset, not only so that the

⁸⁹ Stuart, pp. 774-775, 776-777.

⁹⁰ Swete, pp. cii, lxxxiv.

⁹¹ e.g., Swete, pp. lxxxiv, 163,164; Summers, p. 192; Caird, p. 165; cf. Morris, p. 208.

reader can clearly recognize this author's operating assumptions for what they are, but also in order that they can be evaluated on their own merits (or demerits), removed from the more biased consideration which would be given them at the time of their specific application in the debate over dating Revelation. These general observations or principles relevant to the determination of Revelation's date should be found worthy of acceptance – in advance – by all participants to the discussion, regardless of where they later lead us in dating this (or any other) New Testament book. I trust that adherents of the early and late dates will, upon reflection, grant that such principles should be acknowledged and allowed to influence the course of our reasoning about Revelation. If we strive to be relatively objective about such matters, these insights will commend themselves to us all.

The first principle which should be applied to the debate over the date for Revelation is that reasonably clear *internal* evidence from the book itself must be given greater weight than *external* evidence, *especially* if the external evidence is open to various challenges. This policy stems directly from an evangelical view of Scripture as the inspired word of God. What God says through His human spokesmen is unerring and ultimately authoritative; nothing can deprive it of its validity, undermine its veracity, or subject it to emendation or correction. Such epistemic claims cannot be made for any other human writing, not even those of our most cherished church fathers – or even those of all the church fathers speaking in unison! This fact alone demonstrates that various lines of evidence which are external to the Scripture itself (most of which are far *less* impressive than unambiguous or united testimony from early Christian writers) must give way in our reasoning to evidence from within Scripture itself. It is, in abstract, a matter of the relatively trustworthy versus the absolutely trustworthy. Granted, when we move from the abstract principle to the concrete application, the situation is complicated by the fact that the identification and interpretation of the alleged internal evidence is itself a fallible undertaking for us. Especially with the book of Revelation we will find disputes over how to take what this internal evidence (i.e., the text of the book at particular points) means to say. Nevertheless, even here we will want to remember the direction and priority given to our thinking by the principle that internal evidence outweighs external evidence. When we have reasonably clear internal indications of a date for a Biblical book, they should be preferred to any conflicting external indications.

Evangelicals acknowledge this general principle all the time. Consider their treatment, for instance, of the book of 2 Peter. Gundry points out that “Widespread doubt exists among modern scholars that the Apostle Peter wrote this epistle.”⁹² Yet there is no serious manuscript evidence against the text of 2 Peter 1:1 and a number of other internal indicators (e.g., 1:14; 1:16-18; 3:1) of Petrine authorship. In such a case what does the evangelical scholar do? Does he presume that the external and internal evidences are on an equal footing, or does he rather incline in favor of the Biblical claim and seek to reconcile it with (if not defend it against) the external counter-evidences? His priorities will be clear. In all honesty it would have to be observed that the early church was hesitant about receiving this book, which it would not have been if there was widespread confidence about Peter's authorship. Origen and Jerome both tell us that many people disputed the book's authenticity. It is history (probably in 303) that the book was not received as canonical. Guthrie has to concede: “it must be admitted that the external evidence is not strongly favorable in the case of this Epistle.”⁹³ Nevertheless, this external evidence with its fallibility of opinion is not determinative for evangelical writers on the subject. They pursue other evidences and defenses on the strength of their prior commitment to the internal testimony of the book itself, which is believed to be inerrant. It is this same kind of

⁹² Gundry, p. 353.

⁹³ Guthrie, p. 818.

priority of internal over external evidence which we, in all consistency, should observe regarding the book of Revelation, whether we are considering its authorship or date, etc.

Once they get enmeshed in the details of the debate over the date for Revelation, some authors tend to forget the foregoing general principle. For instance, when he examines the internal evidence for the early dating of Revelation, Guthrie exposes that in his thinking this evidence “cannot be regarded as at all conclusive,” and the explicit reason for this is that such evidence must be considered “in view of the strong external evidence for a later date.” Indeed, Guthrie’s operating policy at this point is candidly stated: “a strong tradition must be allowed to stand unless internal evidence *makes it impossible*” (emphasis added).⁹⁴ This gives the priority to external, fallible opinion over against internal evidence from God’s word itself (or reasonable interpretation thereof). It is *external* opinion that cannot be regarded as conclusive in light of contrary internal indicators, and it is *internal* evidence which must be allowed to stand until our interpretation of it is rendered to be granted to internal evidence (as Guthrie *practices* throughout his *New Testament Introduction* on other questions), and external evidence made subordinate to it. Moses Stuart argued for a particular date for Revelation from certain internal evidences, and to those who countered by citing alleged ancient (external) testimony against that dating Stuart properly replied:

“But no testimony, circumstanced as this is, can well establish such a point. The *internal* evidence of any writing which is not suspicious must always outweigh testimony of such a nature, provided such evidence is more telling than is external evidence which is, by nature or circumstance, subject to challenge.”⁹⁵

The first principle pertaining to the debate over the date for Revelation which we have enunciated, then, is a policy concerning the relationship of internal and external evidence. The second observation that should be made about arguments relating to the date when Revelation was written concerns external evidence itself. What should be appreciated by the student of the New Testament (especially its introductory or background questions) is that external evidence derived from the testimony of the early Christian writers is far from being conclusive on any question. We must, of course, be deeply grateful for the beneficial and basically reliable information which has been preserved for us in the literature of these early Christians. Their testimony is illuminating, comparatively trustworthy, and a tremendous resource for determining historical questions related to the New Testament, its circumstances and teaching. Nevertheless, as helpful as this material usually is, its accuracy is a whole order of magnitude less than what would be demanded of critical historians today. To receive the testimony of the early Christian writers with the same confidence that might be afforded a studied, analyzed, and corroborated opinion of a modern scholar would be a momentous mistake. The fact is that we – even we evangelicals whose apologetic for the New Testament’s authenticity has profited greatly from the church fathers – must receive the opinions of these writers with a serious measure of caution. They were not beyond notorious errors.

The early Christian writers, from which New Testament scholars derive their external evidence relating to the questions of New Testament introduction, failed often in their reasoning, theology, interpretation of Scripture, and historical accuracy. These failures remind us, as we should be reminded in the context of our respect for these teachers, of the fallibility of the fathers and the need to put their opinions to appropriate tests. These authors did not always distinguish between authentic (authoritative) and spurious (non-authoritative) works. With undisciplined credulity Justin Martyr (born c. 100) relied upon the apocryphal *Act of Pilate*,

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 957, 960.

⁹⁵ Stuart, p. 231.

Tatian (flourished c. 240) cited as authoritative the *Psalms of Solomon*. In their theological reasoning the early fathers were led to a number of regrettable errors. Clement of Rome (flourished c. 95) defended the resurrection, in part, by appealing to the ancient myth of the phoenix. Justin Martyr maintained the salvation of Socrates as on an equal footing with that of Abraham. Origen (born c. 185) taught the doctrine of the preexistence of souls. So if we were to afford confidence in everything taught by the early Christian writers, we would end up relying on spurious works and believing erroneous doctrines. In their Biblical interpretation the fathers of the church could be equally unreliable. Note for instance the weakness in the exegesis of Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 107) who understood the Biblical phrase “son of man” to refer to the humanity of Jesus Christ as the God-man. Or consider the interpretation of Daniel offered by Hippolytus (born c. 170) whereby he fixed the date of the consummation at 500 A.D. And even in simpler matters of historical fact the early Christian writers cannot be deemed unquestionably sure guides, any more than in reasoning, theology, and exegesis. The very early character of the testimony of the sectarian, Basilides (flourished c. 140), does not convince us of the truthfulness of his claim that Simon of Cyrene not only carried the cross for Jesus, but was miraculously substituted for Jesus upon the cross. But, some might think, this is the kind of historical error you would expect of a heretic. The more acceptable fathers made their own historical mistakes, however. Papias (c. 60 – c. 130) offered the unlikely miracle story that Justus Barsabas (cf. Acts 1:23) drank poison without receiving harm. And downright erroneous was the testimony of Clement of Alexandria (born c. 150) that the public ministry of Jesus lasted but one year.

What we learn from the preceding list is not to disregard the external evidences which can be found in the testimony of the early Christian writers, always assuming them to be lacking in any credibility, but rather to understand why the student of Scripture cannot automatically accept what these writers said as true and beyond question. The fathers offer us extensive and beneficial testimony to matters of New Testament interest, but their testimony is at times impeachable. That fact cannot be forgotten whenever one engages in study of the issues pertaining to New Testament introduction. The situation, moreover, does not become substantially different even though there may be a number of early Christian writers who unite in testifying to a particular claim. New Testament scholars of repute do not place complete confidence in some premise just because it is given the support, not only of one, but of many more church fathers. For instance, there is (to use Guthrie’s words) an “unbroken tradition” among the early Christian writers that Matthew wrote his gospel originally in Hebrew;⁹⁶ external evidence of this claim can be found in Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaenus, and Origen. Nevertheless, after study of the issue, reputable scholars like Ned B. Stonehouse have come to the conclusion that this unbroken tradition “is obviously mistaken.”⁹⁷ So we see through all of these illustrations that external evidence from early Christian writers – whether pertaining to theology, exegesis, or historical fact, and whether idiosyncratic or unanimous in character – may only be received with a measure of caution and intelligent cross-examination. In the nature of the case we cannot fully trust external evidence on questions of New Testament introduction, for it is often flawed. All participants to the debate over the date of a New Testament book, like Revelation, should begin with this healthy recognition. External evidence is important, but not at all decisive.

The third general observation which should be made prior to analyzing the evidence concerning the date for Revelation pertains now to the internal evidence taken from the book itself. Our insight stems from a recognition of the prophetic intent of the book and the non-punctiliar,

⁹⁶ Guthrie, p. 39.

⁹⁷ Ned B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1963), p. 91; cf. Guthrie, pp. 37, 38.

crescendoing character of some of its prophesied events. Because evangelicals believe that Revelation was genuine prophecy of upcoming events, they will accordingly need to distinguish between the date of the book's composition and the date of the events prophetically predicted by the book. John writes sometimes of things which he saw or experienced as though they were present tense realities, for within the framework of his visions they were actually present to him. However, the chronological setting of the events internal to John's vision into the future (whether proximate or remote) does not determine the chronology of the external reception of the vision. Therefore, internal testimony to some event, E, does not automatically help us date the composition of the book, as though we need only find the time when E actually occurred and thereby find the time when E was prophesied. The two times need not correlate so simply just because of the prophetic character of the literature in Revelation. In such a case the internal evidence which is proposed for dating the book must be handled with discriminating care, not confusing the time of anticipation with the time of fulfillment – even if both should happen to be past to us now.

Furthermore, with respect to those things mentioned in Revelation which we can be reasonably sure are portrayed as contemporaneous with John's writing of the book (and not simply portrayed as future events presently seen by the writer) we still need to be aware of the fact that the referent of John's words could be an *extended* historical phenomenon with a crescendoing character. John could have been experiencing the *beginning* of events which would continue to develop into something far greater in magnitude or intensity at the *end*. Thus he could well have described a torrential rainfall, even though only the first sprinkles of the storm were falling upon him and the church at that very time. He infallibly knew what the outcome of those present raindrops would be in the future, and for that reason he could speak of what was happening in terms of its fully developed character. This consideration has been, and should be, acknowledged by proponents of the early date as well as those of the late date. Revelation may at times be dealing with developing events and not necessarily punctiliar instances. Writers who support the late date have pointed to this fact, observing that while some suffering seems to have begun by the time John wrote Revelation, the storm of widespread persecution was only on the brink of breaking.⁹⁸ By saying this, the supporters of the Domitian date release themselves from the obligation of showing that conditions under Domitian were as fully terrible as those portrayed by John in Revelation. John's Domitian setting, it turns out, was but the beginning of woes that grew out of it. Thus Hailey states without rationalization or apology that the great trial spoken of in Revelation "expanded into the political-religious war extending from the days of Domitian through Diocletian"⁹⁹ – for all students of Roman history must testify that the persecution under Domitian did not come close to matching the intensity of persecution under later emperors, the intense persecution portrayed within the literature of Revelation itself. Likewise, in speaking of the enforcement of the Imperial cult under Domitian as favoring the late date for Revelation, Beckwith is constrained to explain:

"it is true that the picture of the universal enforcement of the worship... which is given in Rev. 13, belongs to a time still in the future of the Apocalyptist.... On the other hand it is clear that the Apocalyptist foresees the ultimate consequences, the awful peril which must certainly arise when the movement then present shall have reached its final development."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ e.g., Swete, pp. xcvi-vii; Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, p. 504; Mounce, p. 33.

⁹⁹ Hower Hailey, *Revelation:: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 34.

¹⁰⁰ Beckwith, p. 201.

Similarly, an advocate of the early date for Revelation, C. C. Torrey, held that the book was written in description of the terrible days of Nero's persecution, but that at the time of writing the Christians in Asia were awaiting the *repercussions* of that persecution. Indeed, things would continue to progress as the emperor cult developed and persecution spread with Caligula, Domitian, and Trajan. But even then, says Torrey, "these attacks on the Christians were very slight... compared to those of a later day, especially under Decius and Diocletian, when... the persecution was more fully organized."¹⁰¹ It is noteworthy, in this context, that early Christian writers understood something of this developmental principle, for writers like Tertullian spoke of emperors who took repressive measures against the church as following the *institutum Neronianum*, "the Neronian precedent."¹⁰² John could have written Revelation under Nero's reign, when the seed of persecution was planted, even though he spoke of the harvest of suffering which would eventuate from it later as implicitly present to the Christians of his day. The fact that what John describes may have been a reality in his own day, but a reality in seed form, is sometimes overlooked in the polemical heat of debate over the date for Revelation. Having considered the telling evidence presented by Hort for correlating the writing of Revelation with the terrible, persecuting days of Nero in Rome, Swete confessed that the only thing which kept him from capitulating to that position was the fact that Revelation was not written from the perspective of a Christian in Rome (where the persecution was so real) but of one in Asia.¹⁰³ The inadequacy of this particular reply – regardless of what one thinks of the date for Revelation – was precisely its suppression of the principle often enlisted by *late* daters themselves, that John speaks of events or movements which are in the *process of developing* into their tragic outcome. Revelation was indeed written from the perspective of an *Asian* Christian in the time of Nero, one might readily contend, for the Neronian persecution would come to spell trouble (as John saw) for believers throughout the empire. As F. F. Bruce puts it in his masterful work on New Testament history:

The Apocalypse of John, addressed in the first instance to seven churches in the province of Asia, portrays the city of Rome as the scarlet woman 'Babylon the great', in whom 'was found the blood of prophets and of saints' (Rev. 17:5; 18:24) – a reflection of the events of A.D. 64 – and sees tribulation such as the Roman Christians had endured lying in store for their Asian brethren. Indeed, in some parts of Asia it has already begun....¹⁰⁴

So then, in attempting to date the composition of Revelation from internal evidences, the student will need to be careful in analyzing just what his evidence tells him. It must be borne in mind that the literature of Revelation has a prophetic intent and that the events spoken of may be prolonged developments which had only just begun in John's own day. Consequently one cannot simplistically hope to date Revelation by searching for the time in history when events portrayed within the book fully took place. The date when Revelation was written must, in the nature of the case, have preceded the time of such a fulfillment or full manifestation of the realities prophetically depicted.

We can now recapitulate our discussion to this point. In the first section of this chapter the importance of determining the date when Revelation was written was noted. Caird says:

The first readers of the Revelation knew the date at which it was written. This is a far more serious gap in our knowledge than our ignorance of the identity of the

¹⁰¹ Torrey, pp. 59-60.

¹⁰² F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 410; cf. Eusebius (*Eccles. History IV:26*) who quotes Melito as grouping together Nero and Domitian as persecutors.

¹⁰³ Swete, pp. cv-cvi.

¹⁰⁴ Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 421.

author. We cannot expect to decipher the book unless we know what happened to account for John's visionary experience and what he expected to happen in the imminent future; and certainty about its precise historical setting would carry us a long way.¹⁰⁵

In striving to find the date for Revelation, we find that there are two basic options held among scholars. Morris says: "There appear to be two dates only for which any considerable arguments are available, in the time of the Emperor Domitian, or in or just after that of Nero."¹⁰⁶ We have labeled these the late and early dates respectively. As we approach the arguments for these two alternatives, certain kinds of argumentation have been ruled out of serious consideration: for instance, appeals to an alleged consensus of opinion, appeals against an author's motivation, and reversible considerations such as Revelation's relation to other New Testament books, its literary style, or its interaction with the *Nero redivivus* myth. Three general principles or observations have also been set forth to guide our reasoning about the date of Revelation, principles which should be found equally acceptable to adherents of either the late or early hypothesis. First, reasonably clear internal evidence outweighs external evidence. Second, external evidence cannot be conclusive, and third, internal evidence must be analyzed with an understanding of the book's prophetic character and of the developmental character of the events mentioned by John as present in his experience.

As we finally come to a consideration of the arguments for the two proposed dates for the writing of Revelation, we can summarize in advance what can be expected. Boiling down the mass of different lines of argumentation, Moffatt has insightfully said:

The really cogent date for determining the period of this book's composition are (a) the interpretation of special allusions like the "seven heads" (17:10), as a historical series of Roman Emperors, the "beast", the number 666, and so forth; (b) the evidence of severe and recent persecution, of wars, physical disturbances, occupation of Jerusalem by foreigners, famine, pestilence, etc.; (c) the implied condition of the Christian communities addressed.¹⁰⁷

And ably summarizing the main thrusts of the two different schools of thought on the date of Revelation, Terry portrayed their respective argumentation in this fashion:

Two different opinions have long prevailed respecting the date of the Apocalypse. One rests mainly on a statement of Irenaeus, who seems to place the composition in the latter part of the reign of Domitian (A.D. 96); the other is based upon internal evidence, and maintains that the book was written before the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁰⁸

In short, the evidence for the late date comes down primarily to the external evidence found in the testimony of Irenaeus, while the argument for the early date rests primarily upon certain internal indicators. This is an oversimplification, yet helpful in setting before us the key lines of debate when all is said and done. Remembering our ground-rules and principles, we can turn to the debate itself.

¹⁰⁵ G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harpers New Testament Commentaries, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 5-6.

¹⁰⁶ Morris, p. 34.

¹⁰⁷ Moffatt, *The Historical New Testament*, p. 459.

¹⁰⁸ Terry, *Biblical apocalypics*, p. 256; cf. Schaff, I. 427.

Internal Evidence Proposed For The Late Date

We will begin our analysis by examining the alleged indications from within the book of Revelation itself that it was written during the reign of Domitian, at the end of the first century. This internal evidence for a period of writing late in the first century is usually found in what Revelation indicates about (1) emperor worship, (2) persecution of the church, and (3) advanced developments in the condition, practices, or theology of the Asian churches. Torrey asserted that “no internal evidence of any sort points clearly to this /Dominianic/ date.”¹⁰⁹ and even Tenney, an advocate of that late date, confessed that “internal evidence of the late date is confused and not very clear.”¹¹⁰ The reader can decide for himself or herself. I cannot find any substantiated claims among the numerous late-date scholars which I have researched that decisively *preclude* an earlier date, much less any that persuasively rivet the date within the reign of Domitian *specifically*.

(1) Emperor Worship

Many advocates of the late date present as the most telling internal evidence of the Domitian setting the portrayal of emperor worship from Revelation (see 13:4, 15-17; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). After considering such evidence in a favorable light, though, Guthrie has to admit that “the evidence based on emperor worship would not of itself be enough to close the discussion of the date.”¹¹¹ His evaluation is fair, for such evidence is simply not decisive one way or the other.

Emperor worship had been around in the ancient world for quite a long time, even *before* Christianity came on the scene. Indeed, the messianic and divine character of the state or its ruler had been maintained repeatedly in the pagan cultures of the ancient world, especially among the Egyptians, the Mesopotamian peoples (e.g., Akkadians, Hittites), the Babylonians, and the Persians. R. J. Rushdoony has insightfully demonstrated this error of divinizing the state over and over again.¹¹² The error was not simply conceptual or philosophical in character; it was quite explicitly played out in the titles assumed by rulers in their lifetimes, liturgical hymns sung to them, and worship offered by their subjects (sometimes compelled). A combination of polytheism, the notion of a “chain of being” between deity and humanity, ancestor worship, and the need to exalt heroes and kings to superhuman proportions all provided a conditioning soil in which emperor worship could readily grow. This idolatrous error was by no means put aside as an old superstition in the Greek and Roman eras. It was rather nurtured and harvested. By the time of the New Testament it was so influential in creating a *mind set* among people that, when Herod Agrippa made an oration in Caesarea at the festival games celebrated to offer vows to the Emperor Claudius, the ready and natural response of the people to the splendor of his dress and speech was: “The voice of a god and not of a man” (Acts 12:22; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* XIX:8). The deification of the emperor was *not* some bold *new* program initiated in Rome during the first century, for it had been a prevailing reigio-political attitude for centuries already.

The Greeks viewed their legendary heroes, like Achilles and Heracles, to be mortals who were deified after death. They erected temples and altars to famous legislators and generals, such as

¹⁰⁹ Torrey, p. 77.

¹¹⁰ Tenney, p. 19.

¹¹¹ Guthrie, p. 951. Moffatt says that the imperial??? cult is “mainly though not decisively” the evidence for the Domitianic date (*Historical New Testament*, p. 460).

¹¹² e.g., Rousas J. Rushdooney, *World History Notes* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, 1974); *The One and the Many* (New Jersey: Craig Press, 1971); cf. *The Foundations of Social Order* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1968).

Lycurgus and Lysander.¹¹³ Divine honors were readily afforded to mere men. Alexander the Great defeated Darius III in 333 B.C., moving on to capture Egypt without incident.

In Egypt, he founded the city of Alexandria and visited the oracle of Ammon to be proclaimed the son of Zeus Ammon and divine, hence a valid pharaoh. In the Hellenic world, the city-state or *polis* was itself divine; in Egypt, the office holder, the ruler... assumed a divine office or function rather than a divine nature. Alexander was to assume all three kinds of political divinity into his person and empire, and all three were subsequently to enter Rome and the history of Europe.¹¹⁴

After the death of Alexander his empire was divided into four parts, the Ptolemaic (Egyptian) and Seleucid (Syrian) empires being prominent in Biblical history. The last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra (died 30 B.C.), assumed the title of “youngest goddess.” The most infamous Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV (died 163 B.C.), minted his name on coins as “King Antiochus, god manifest,” and imposed the characteristics of Zeus upon his own picture appearing on coins.

Roman culture was readily infused with a religion of the state. Noting that Roman religion was originally a form of ancestor worship, Rushdoony comments:

As family declined in importance in Rome, the state assumed the more central religious role and the dead emperors became gods, and the living emperor, as their presence, was the object of worship. The religious forms in Rome varied, and various new cults and mystery religions arose, but all had as a basic aspect the recognition of the inherent deity of the state and its emperor.¹¹⁵

The deity of the Roman state came to be honored very early in Asia. Even before Asia was a province of Rome, the cult of Rome was established there. Swete observed: “As early as the second century before Christ a complimentary cult of the genius of Rome or the *dea Roma* had begun in the provinces.”¹¹⁶ A belief current at this time was that there existed the “genius” of a person, place, or group – that is, a deity symbolizing the religious principle inherent in the person, place, or group. Rushdoony notes:

Basic to this belief was the concept of continuity, and the immanent divinity in all being. “The worship of the Emperor’s Genius was one of the many elements which led up to Caesar-worship.” From 195 B.C. on, the *Dea Roma* cult, begun in Smyrna, grew into “a new and potent abstraction, the idea of the Roman people and their city as a divine personality.” This idea was not foreign to Rome, in its developed concept of the god-king, “as may be seen in the old legend of the apotheosis of Romulus into the divine figure of Quirinius.” ... Power, wherever and however manifested, whether for good or for evil, was an indication of the presence of immanent divinity.... The growth of the cult of Rome, and the rise of a cult of the god-king whenever a strong ruler appeared, were thus inevitable and logical outgrowths of the Roman faith.¹¹⁷

Remembering that the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3 are addressed to churches in the province of Asia, it is significant that a temple to the city of Rome existed as early as 195 B.C. in Smyrna, an altar to Rome was present in 105 B.C., and a priest of the Roman cult is

¹¹³ Beckwith, p. 198.

¹¹⁴ Rushdoony, *World History Notes*, p. 43,44.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹¹⁶ Swete, p. lxxxvi; cf. lxxxix.

¹¹⁷ Rushdoony, *The One and the Many*, pp. 93-94. Rushdoony is quoting from Cyrus Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (1932).

mentioned by name in a 98 B.C. compact between the cities of Sardis and Ephesus.¹¹⁸ The statement of Revelation 13:4, “They worshipped the beast” (i.e., the Roman empire), could virtually have been made two centuries *before* it was asserted by John, and it would have been applicable to the *very area* where the seven churches of Revelation resided – where the “second beast” or false prophet arising “out of the land” (rather than from across the sea; cf. 13:1) is said to minister (13:11).

The cult of Rome evolved a full step with the rise of the Empire, for the majesty of Rome took a more concrete expression in the person and work of the *princeps* of Rome. Mounce says:

In Roman Empire an earlier deification of the state among the provinces provided the rationale for emperors to strengthen their authority by making certain claims to divine status. Julius Caesar accepted worship as a god during his lifetime.¹¹⁹

Cicero had written to Julius Caesar in Gaul that those who have saved or enhanced the power of their native land “are assigned an especial place in heaven where they may enjoy a life of eternal bliss.” Julius audaciously claimed such divine honor and placed his statue among those of the gods in the temples, presenting himself thus as a god.

Statues declared him to be a “demi-god,” and “god invincible,” and he was given his own *flamen* or priest for his worship. Caesar was thus a deified man, to whom divine honors were paid. His face appeared on coins where previously the effigies of gods had been figured. Caesar avowed himself to be “the unconquered god,” and coins proclaimed him the “Pater Patriae,” whose divine *Clementia* was itself the object of worship.¹²⁰

Julius Caesar dreamed of a great universal Roman power based on a religious policy of clementia, clemency, mercy, appeasement.... The Senate decreed that a temple should be built for the *clementia Caesaris*, wherein Caesar and his *clementia* were to be worshipped, and Caesar was appointed father of his country, *Pater Patriae*.¹²¹

After Caesar’s death the Senate consecrated him as a god (42 B.C.), and the appearance of a comet was taken as a heavenly sign that he had been received into the ranks of the superior deities. A temple was built in his honor in Ephesus, bearing the inscription “To the goddess Roma and the divine Julius,” and an altar was erected for him in the Roman forum.¹²² Therefore, even before the historical appearance of Christianity, the ancient world knew the worship of the Roman emperor – the “head” of “the beast” – both in life and in death.

The competition and conflict with the true religion of God’s people which was embodied in the development of emperor worship became pointed at the very beginning of the Christian era. Speaking of the belief in the incarnate divinity of the state as the highest power in history, Rushdoony observes:

between Christ and Caesar. At the beginning of the Christian era, the world was confronted with two epiphanies, in Bethlehem and in Rome. As Ethelbert Stauffer, in *Christ and the Caesars*, points out, Augustus saw himself as “the world’s saviour who was to come.” When, in the year 17 B.C., “a strange star

¹¹⁸ Swete, p. lxxxvi.

¹¹⁹ Mounce, p. 32.

¹²⁰ Rushdoony, *The One and the Many*, p. 110; cf. p. 97.

¹²¹ Rushdoony, *World History Notes*, p. 67.

¹²² Beckwith, pp. 198-199; Swete, p. lxxxvii; Hailey, p. 61; Mounce, p. 32.

shone in the heavens, he saw that the cosmic hour had come, and inaugurated a twelve-day advent celebration, which was a plain proclamation of Virgil's message of joy: "The turning-point of the ages has come." The political order embodied and manifested the divinity inherent in being and salvation was therefore in and through this high point of power, Caesar. "Salvation is to be found in none other save Augustus, and there is no other name given to men in which they can be saved." Conflict between Christ and Caesar was thus inescapable.¹²³

Octavian clearly viewed himself as the promised savior of the world. He accepted from the Roman Senate the special title "Augustus" in 27 B.C.; the term connoted that he possessed superhuman "Increase" as a Savior and benefactor of the Roman empire. Previously it had been an epithet for gods, temples, and sacred objects. Although he discreetly declined divine honors which were offered him in Rome itself, Augustus gladly sanctioned temples built for him in conjunction with the goddess Roma in the Asian provinces. When this was accomplished, says Hailey,

... the concept of divinity, the worship of Rome and Augustus, which began in the provinces, spread rapidly. Temples were erected, high priests appointed, sacrifices offered, and public games celebrated in a most organizations acted as a sacred bond between province and empire and encouraged the religion of the state. Even while he lived, the statue of Augustus was placed in the vestibule of the Pantheon of Agrippa, where it "was associated with the images of the supreme gods of the temple itself." After his death he is referred to repeatedly by Tacitus as "the Divine Augustus." ...

Under the republic, Asia had suffered much at the hands of the Roman magistrates who sought to fill their own personal coffers at the expense of the provinces. The people therefore welcomed Augustus as a savior, for emperor worship had long been in vogue in the East. It was therefore easy for Augustus to see the value of the altars and temples to "Rome and Augustus," and use it to his advantage. This imperial cult would provide a basis for unity between Rome and the provinces and for an expression of loyalty to the emperor. The cult was overseen and directed by the "Commune" or "Common Council" in the province.... Members of this group are mentioned one time in the New Testament as being friends of Paul (Acts 19:31).¹²⁴

We see, then, that by the earliest years of the church the Roman empire *already* possessed the machinery and motivation for emperor worship (and its enforcement) in the Asian provinces. From the outset the "second beast" from the land was poised to do service for the "first beast" from across the sea, promoting the worship of the emperor at his permission and approval (cf. Rev. 13:12, 15b). Upon the death of Augustus Caesar the Roman Senate consecrated him as a god, and a temple was erected to him on the Palatine. The worship of him spread so rapidly in the Asian provinces that Philo, an Alexandrian Jew who died in 40 A.D., testified that honor equal to that given the Olympian gods was everywhere decreed for him.¹²⁵

So, if Revelation is to be dated according to the emperor cult (as late daters argue), it could easily be dated *as early* as Augustus or the years immediately following his death! This is pointedly true when we note that the cult was especially active in the region of the seven churches to which Revelation was written. F.F. Bruce writes:

¹²³ Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order*, p. 64; cf. *World History Notes*, p. 70.

¹²⁴ Hailey, pp. 62, 71-72.

¹²⁵ Beckwith, p. 199.

The province of Asia was outstanding for its devotion to the emperor and the Empire; here, in Pergamum, one of the great cities of the province, had been established since 29 B.C. a temple consecrated to the worship of “Rome and Augustus.” This is possibly what is referred to when the letter in Revelation addressed to the Pergamene church describes it as dwelling “where Satan’s throne is.” And later in the same book, when John describes the fierce monster of the persecuting power as followed by another beast of lamb-like appearance but dragon-like voice, which commands men to pay divine worship to the former beast, it is not difficult to conclude that the imperial cult of Asia sat for the portrait of the second beast.¹²⁶

Rome had been encouraging such a relationship of idolatrous “fornication” with the Asian provinces for some time (cf. Rev. 14:8-11). Swete said:

The province of Asia accepted with acclamation the new cult of Rome and the Emperor. For more than 200 years Rome had been mistress in Asia, and on the whole she had contributed to the prosperity of her great province; but the provincials had suffered from the extortions of greedy officials, and from the days of Augustus the *principatus* had been hailed by the Asian towns as their salvation. Inscription after inscription testifies to the loyalty of the cities towards the Empire. At Ephesus, at Smyrna, at Pergamum, and indeed throughout the province the Church was confronted by an imperialism which was popular and patriotic, and bore the character of a religion. Nowhere was the Caesar-cult more popular than in Asia. The Augusteum... or temple of Rome and the Augusti, had long taken its place among the public buildings of the greater cities. Augustus... permitted a temple to be dedicated to *dea Roma* and himself at Pergamum. The other Asian cities followed the precedent set by the old capital. In A.D. 26 they vied with each other for the honour of building a temple to Tiberius, when Smyrna gained the coveted distinction over the head of Ephesus.... Ephesus, not to be outdone by her neighbor, erected an Augusteum, probably to Claudius, and thus acquired the title of *neokoros* of the Imperial worship. These local temples were not of merely local interest; their affairs were managed by the provincial league known as the *commune Asiae*.... It belonged to the Asiarch to direct the worship of the Augusti throughout the province, and to preside at games which were held quinquennially in the cities where Augustea had been erected. Such festivals are known to have been celebrated from time to time at five of the seven cities addressed in the apocalypse, namely, at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, and Philadelphia.

A system such as this, it is obvious, supplied the machinery which could at any time be used against the Church with fatal facility. To refuse worship to Artemis or Asklepios was to decline a local cult; to refuse it to the statue of the Emperor at a time when the whole city was taking part in festivities organized by the *Commune*, was to expose oneself to the charge of disloyalty both to the provincial authorities and to the Emperor.¹²⁷

To make emperor worship our bench-mark in history for locating the date when Revelation was written will be less than helpful, then, since the conditions for the imperial cult mentioned in that book obtained long *before* it was actually composed (on anybody’s proposal for the date).

¹²⁶ Bruce, *Spreading Flame*, p. 167.

¹²⁷ Swete, pp. lxxxviii-xc.

We certainly do not need to wait until the reign of Domitian to find Roman emperors deified. Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar, as we have seen, both enjoyed acclamations of deity during their own lifetimes, either in Rome or in the Asian provinces. The cult of the emperor was organized and willing to promote his honor in Asia even before the birth of Christ. And the Roman emperors were glad to authorize the political service of the imperial cult, being happy to receive religious apotheosis along with political loyalty. Tiberius was called “the common Benefactor of the world” and “God visible.” The Alexandrians referred to him as “our God Caesar.” Tacitus tells us that “all prayers were addressed to Tiberius.... They [the Senators] raised their hands to the gods, to the statue of Augustus, and to the knees of Tiberius, when he ordered a document to be produced and read.”¹²⁸ The Pergamenes, citing the precedent left by divine honors being given to Augustus, wanted to build a temple for Tiberius, who allowed one such temple in Asia.¹²⁹

The emperor cult took a decisive step forward with the coming of Caligula (Gaius) to the Roman throne. An ancient inscription declared of him: “The world knows no limit to its joy, and every State and people has turned eagerly to gaze on the face of the God as if now the happiest age had dawned on mankind.”¹³⁰ Caligula aggressively and madly sought empire-wide reverence as a god. This historical observation of Josephus is precise: “with the passage of time he no longer thought of himself as an ordinary man, but was driven by the greatness of his power to deify himself: (*Anti-quitities* XVIII:7). According Seutonius, he ... insisted on being treated as a god – sending for the most revered or artistically famous statues of the Greek deities (including that of Jupiter of Olympia), and having their heads replaced by his own He established a shrine of himself as God, with a priest, the costliest possible victims, and a life-sized golden image, which was dressed every day in clothes identical with those he happened to be wearing (*Gaius Caligula* 22).

Caligula “asserted his own divinity ... and had boldness enough to call himself the brother of Jupiter” (Josephus, *Antiquities* XIX:1), which Josephus took as an illustration of the fact that Caligula made his madness for religious honor “to extend itself through all the earth and sea, so far as was in subjection to the Romans.” As Mounce puts it, “Caligula was not content with voluntary worship. He demanded that his subjects everywhere show homage to his statue.”¹³¹

Although they historically precede the writing of Revelation, the facts connected with this aspect of Caligula’s reign are strikingly akin to John’s description of the worship of the “beast” in Revelation. With horrified language John indicates that the false prophet *commands* that people worship the *image* of the beast, with *deadly* sanctions if they refuse to do so (Rev. 13:15; cf. 14:9; 15:2; 16:2). Caligula’s notorious relation with the Jews in the empire could readily have formed the background to such a portrayal. In 38 A.D. the synagogues of the Jews in Alexandria were desecrated by the erecting of images of Caligula in them; by attempting to remove them, the Jews showed themselves, it was argued, disloyal to the divine emperor. Many Jews suffered violence, and during the emperor’s birthday celebrations thirty-eight Jewish leaders suffered public scourging.¹³² Ambassadors went to Caligula in Rome with the following accusation against the Jews, recounted by Josephus:

Now one of these ambassadors from the people of Alexandria was Apion, who uttered many blasphemies against the Jews; and, among other things that he

¹²⁸ Citations from Hailey, pp. 63, 74.

¹²⁹ Swete, p. lxxxvii.

¹³⁰ Cited by Hailey, p. 74.

¹³¹ Mounce, p. 35; cf. Beckwith, p. 199.

¹³² F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 252.

said, he charged them with neglecting the honors that belonged to Caesar; for that while all who were subject to the Roman empire built altars and temples to Gaius, and in other regards universally received him as they received the gods, these Jews alone thought it a dishonorable thing for them to erect statues in honor of him, as well as swear by his name (*Antiquities* XVIII:8).

The Jewish defense team, headed by Philo the philosopher, was not cordially received, and because of Caligula's German campaign, the hearings were delayed until 40 A.D., by which time an insult from the Jews of Jamnia (western Palestine) left Caligula ill disposed to hear the Alexandrian Jews sympathetically. When Gentiles in Jamnia erected an altar to Caligula in honor of his German tour, some Jews indignantly pulled down the idolatrous token.

In due course news of their action reached Gaius, whose northern expedition had made him surer than ever of his divinity. He retaliated by sending instructions to Publius Petronius, Vitellius's successor as legate of Syria (A.D. 39-42), to march with an adequate statue of Gaius in the Jerusalem Temple.¹³³

Philo tells us that Caligula planned to convert the Jerusalem temple into a sanctuary bearing his own name, under the designation "the young Zeus made manifest." His intentions there were surely foreshadowed by the way in which he dismissed the Alexandrian Jews as "pitiable fools, or else they would have recognized my divine nature"; the fault he found with them was, "You offered sacrifices *for* me, it is true, but you offered not *to* me."¹³⁴ Caligula had thus ordered his own image to be erected in the Jewish temple, which he planned to convert into his own idolatrous shrine and (likely) have sacrifices made to his self-proclaimed deity. The interposition of Agrippa only temporarily stalled the execution of the order to have Caligula's image erected in the Jerusalem temple – an order which was to be enforced by deadly warfare, if necessary (Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII:8). Only the emperor's timely death in 41 A.D. prevented the order from finally being fulfilled (at which time, by the way, the collected words of Jesus, including those about the "abomination of desolation," were first circulating among Christians).¹³⁵

Following Caligula, the emperors Claudius and Nero were more moderate (if idolatry and apotheosis can ever be "moderate"), but did not refuse or prevent their deification. A temple in honor of Claudius was erected at Camulodunum in Britain, and deity was conferred upon him by the senate at his death.¹³⁶ Early in Nero's life an Egyptian inscription declared that he personally was "the good genius [spirit, *daimon*] of the inhabited world." An altar dedicated in 67 A.D. to Nero reads, "to Nero God, the deliverer forever." Nero enjoyed having the populace sacrifice to his image and gladly had the people deem him a god. In the entry of his "Golden House" there stood a gilded-bronze colossus of Nero as the sun god, standing taller than the Statue of Liberty! Seneca hailed Nero as the savior of the world: "He restores to the world the Golden Age." Upon returning to Rome in 68 A.D., Nero was greeted by the multitudes crying: "Hail, Olympian Victor! Hail, Pythian Victor! Augustus, Augustus!) divine voice! Blessed are they that hear it!"¹³⁷ Mounce must admit, even as a supporter of the late date for Revelation, that "by the time of Nero the imperial cult was firmly established as a religious institution."¹³⁸

¹³³ Ibid., p. 253.

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 256,253.

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 255-257.

¹³⁶ Swete, p. lxxxviii.

¹³⁷ The information on Nero comes from Swete, p. lxxxviii; Hailey, pp. 31, 65, 75; and Rushdoony, *World History Notes*, p. 72.

¹³⁸ Mounce, p. 33.

When one becomes familiar with the history of the cult of Rome and the deification of her emperors – *especially* with the Commune of Asia and the infamous career of Caligula – one will find that by the time of Nero all of the elements were present from which John could make a reasonable projection about the future course of the Roma “beast” and its worship. Therefore, the argument for the late date of Revelation which is derived from the book’s portrayal of emperor worship is simply groundless. One does *not* need to wait until the reign of Domitian to find a *historical basis* for John’s composite picture of the second beast enforcing worship of the first beast and his image! Some authors have argued that the circumstances of emperor worship in Revelation correspond best with the (alleged) persecution under Domitian.¹³⁹ Beasley-Murray says: “The Revelation reflects a situation force and was bidding to become world-wide.... It was under Domitian, who claimed and frequently used the title *Dominus et Deus noster* (‘our Lord and God’), that Church’s existence.”¹⁴⁰ Such a claim – if meant to preclude an earlier date – is just historically mistaken, as the previous survey has revealed. Harrison alleges that “It is only in the reign of Domitian that the worship of the living emperor began to be promoted in Asia,”¹⁴¹ and Caird asserts that demand for emperor worship was “openly made” only for the time under Domitian.¹⁴² But such allegations are not supported by the known facts of Roman history. The living emperor was worshipped from the time of Julius Caesar on down, the Asian commune from at least the time of Augustus promoted emperor worship as a threat to the church in as many as five of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3, and Caligula openly demanded (and tried to enforce with violence) the worship of his image.

The problem with late-date arguments such as those mentioned above is really *two*-fold. Not only are many of them premised on historical error or shortsightedness, but the very point or thrust of such arguments is off target. These arguments assume that, if John described some situation concerning emperor worship, S, then by locating the eventuation of S in history we will simultaneously locate the time when Revelation was written. However such reasoning is fallacious in a genuinely prophetic book. If S did not come about until the reign (say) of Domitian, then this fact would indicate that the relevant portion of Revelation was *fulfilled* in the reign of Domitian – *not* that it was *prophesied* during the reign of Domitian! It is just John’s prophetic perspective as a writer which is so often forgotten by prophetic perspective as a writer which is so often forgotten by supporters of the late date. For instance, Summers claims: “Revelation clearly indicates that Christians *were being persecuted* because they refused to worship the emperor”¹⁴³ – assuming without warrant that this event was contemporaneous with the writing (note the word “being”). John wrote of the beast and of its worship he generally wrote in the present or past tenses (see Rev. 13 *passim*) – not because the events being described were actually present or past to him, but simply to describe his visionary *prophecy* with vividness and certainty. And yet, even in the literary context, he spoke of the worship of the beast in the *future* tense: “all that dwell on the earth *will*worship him” (Rev. 13:8) – this quite explicitly being a *prophecy* concerning all peoples (10:11; cf. 13:7-8). From John’s vantage point, taking place at least subsequent to the protection of the woman (12:13-17), the healing of the beast’s death-stroke (13:12, 14; cf. 13:3-4), and the 42-month war with the saints (13:5-7). So the argument from emperor worship being present in the time of Domitian is really without cogency. John’s words were penned sometime *prior* to the *predicted* events.

¹³⁹ e.g., Swete, p. cii; John J. Pilch, *What are they Saying About the Book of Revelation?* (New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 34.

¹⁴⁰ Beasley-Murray, p. 38.

¹⁴¹ Harrison, p. 446.

¹⁴² Caird, p. 6.

¹⁴³ Summers, p. 80 (emphasis added).

To recapitulate: since emperor worship occurred *both before and after* the writing of Revelation, John's mention of that phenomenon does not establish one way or the other his date of writing the book. But even if the emperor worship which is described by John in Revelation did not come about until the time of Domitian, John's *prophecy* of that occurrence would need to be dated prior to the age of Domitian, rather than during Domitian's reign.

The argument takes a strangely self-destructive turn in some authors who want to allege that certain precise conditions of the emperor worship mentioned in the book did not fully obtain until Domitian. We will see that such argumentation usually turns out to prove *too much* for the supporters of the Domitian date, in addition to overlooking the prophetic character of the literature (in the way just described above). The argument formally runs like this: condition C did not completely come about until the reign of Domitian, and since C is portrayed in Revelation, this book should not be dated prior to this time of Domitian. Overlooking the fallacious reasoning this represents in a prophetic book, we would still need to *verify two things* before being persuaded by such an argument. Does Revelation itself precisely demand what is described as C (i.e., has the book been properly interpreted as teaching what is meant by C)? And then, is it historically accurate to claim that C actually did come about in the time of Domitian (and not until that time)? When we follow out these two obvious and necessary lines of verification for the emperor-worship argument in favor of the late date for Revelation, it turns out either that Revelation does *not* precisely *teach* C, or (worse) that C did *not* actually obtain until *after* the reign of Domitian as well! That is, the argument proves *too late* a date for the book, if it proves anything at all.

For instance, it is contended by some authors that it was *not until* the reign of Domitian that (a) the emperor cult enjoyed a well organized expansion,¹⁴⁴ (b) the vehement insistence on emperor worship – a concerted effort to force it – became to intense as to reach a pitch of irreconcilable antagonism,¹⁴⁵ (c) Christians (at least in Asia) were persecuted specifically for the religious offense of refusing to worship the emperor as god,¹⁴⁶ or (d) emperor worship was enforced by law so that refusal became a punishable political offense.¹⁴⁷ The difficulty, in the first place, with some aspects of these varied premises is that Revelation does not assert what they describe. No text in Revelation says anything about the *organizational expansion* of the emperor cult itself, nor does any text explicitly teach the promulgation of a *legal decree* from the emperor for his worship (beyond personal authorization). These are at the best a reader's personal inferences from the book itself.

In the second place, we should note a certain tension between these different suggestions of a special condition which was not realized until the time of Domitian's reign. One suggests that refusal to worship the emperor was *religious* offense, while another suggests that it was a *political* crime. In one sense, of course, there was an ambiguous situation: what was a religious issue to the Christians could have been a political (or basically political) matter of loyalty in the eyes of the Roman officials. In fact, that is the way the Romans viewed the matter. The Christians were welcome to their local god(s) and religious rites, provided they would swear allegiance to the emperor as well – an allegiance testified by offering incense to his image.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Beckwith, p. 201.

¹⁴⁵ Charles, II:xciv; Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, p. 504; Beckwith, p. 200; Summers, p. 84; Hailey, p. 33; Gundry, p. 35; E.M. Blaiklock, *The Century of the New Testament* (Chicago, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), p. 124.

¹⁴⁶ Moffatt, *Historical New Testament*, pp. 460,461; Swete, p. civ; P. Feine, J. Beher, and W.G. Kuemel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 14th rev. ed., trans. A.J. Matill, Jr. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 42; Summers, p. 80.

¹⁴⁷ Alexander Ransey, p. 5; Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, p. 503; Mounce, p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, the account of "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," which makes clear that even the officials tried to save the saint by persuading him simply to offer incense and say "Caesar is Lord," swearing by his divine genius.

Another, related, point of confusion in the varied premises offered here is the question of just who is envisioned as “enforcing” the cult of the emperor. Is the claim being made that emperor worship was not enforced by *anyone* (e.g., the Commune in Asia) prior to Domitian, or not enforced by the central authority of the *emperor himself* before Domitian? It makes quite a difference, and on this point the text of Revelation (13:12, 15b-17; 14:8-11) really allows for a broad range of possibilities: from the emperor *permitting* the false prophet to please and serve him by the prophet forcing people to worship the emperor’s image, to the emperor *himself* forcing the nations to submit to the idolatry he personally commissions from the false prophet (yet short of a written law).

What we find, then, is that the text of Revelation does not clearly support what many writers have claimed in the various forms of the late-date argument before us. Nevertheless, the inevitable critical difficulty with this late-date argument (viz., that until Domitian Christians were not officially persecuted for the specific crime of refusing the worship the emperor as a god) is the *historical* problem that this envisioned situation did *not* by any known means come about under the reign of *Domitian either!* there is evidence that Domitian began his letters “Our Lord and God commands....,” and he demanded that his subjects address him personally in that way (Seutonius, *Domitian* 13); Schaff says that he ordered statues of himself placed in the temples,¹⁴⁹ while the encyclopedia informs us that he claimed to be a son of Minerva,¹⁵⁰ and Blaiklock tells us that he delighted to be identified with Jupiter.¹⁵¹ In none of this, however, do we find anything particularly outstanding in significance relative to his predecessors (especially Caligula). The evidence for Domitian’s pressing claims to deity is simply not extensively attested or comparatively impressive in content. He certainly was a blasphemer, but no more so (it seems) than some of the earlier rulers in Rome.

Moreover, as to Domitian’s punishing people – Christians in particular – for the specific crime of refusing to worship him as god, I can find no hard evidence whatsoever. Either could F. F. Bruce:

Domitian’s predilection for being styled *dominus et deus noster*, our Lord and God’, stimulated a satirical response in many of his subjects, but would have been regarded as plain blasphemy by Christians but there is no record that this precipitated a clash between him and the Christians.¹⁵²

Many writers unreservedly allege that emperor worship came to an irreconcilable, enforced, pitch of an antagonism in the days of Domitian,¹⁵³ but *known facts do not corroborate* that imagined situation. Blaiklock (himself a late-dater for Revelation) explains that the story of the Flavian rulers is generally one where conjecture has an open field, aided only by tenuous threads of evidence.¹⁵⁴ Previous supporters of the late date for Revelation acknowledged this paucity of evidence. Swete conceded that the title “our Lord and God” was *not* “official”¹⁵⁵-- by which he means (I take it) that it was not legally recognized or enforced by officers of the empire. And Beckwith, having premised the Domitian date on the claim that he enforced with persecution an

¹⁴⁹ Schaff, I: 427.

¹⁵⁰ “Domitian,” *The Encyclopedia Americana*, 30 vol. (New York: Americana Corporation, 1957), IX:249.

¹⁵¹ Blaiklock, p. 120.

¹⁵² Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 412.

¹⁵³ e.g., see entries in footnotes 143-145 above; also Merrill C. Tenney, *The New Testament: A Historical and Analytical Survey*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1953), pp. 99, 403.; Hailey is typical in *repeatedly* asserting the situation matter-of-factly (pp. 31, 35-36, 70-71, 293, 295).

¹⁵⁴ Blaiklock, pp. 119, 121.

¹⁵⁵ Swete, p. lxxxvi.

edict demanding emperor worship, went on to admit, “though it is not clear just how far actual enforcement of his worship was carried.”¹⁵⁶ It is not clear just because conjecture alone fuels such claims.

Eusebius mentions a persecution under Domitian, but he says nothing at all to connect such turmoil with a demand for emperor worship. It is known that Domitian punished his cousin Flavius Clemens, together with his wife favia Domitilla (Domitian’s niece), and it *may* be the case that they were Christians. However a strong dose of romanticism colors the interpretive story as told by modern Christians, and it must be admitted that other interpretations are credible as well. They were charged (according to Xiphilin, the epitomizer Dio Cassius who flourished c. 200 A.D.) with atheism and “drifting into the customs of the Jews”¹⁵⁷ – which could simply mean that they stopped worshiping gods recognized by the state (*not* including the emperor since the Senate never apotheosized Domitian) in Jewish fashion *or* by becoming Jewish proselytes. But at any rate, even if the speculation that they converted to Christianity were to turn out true, it would still need to be recognized that Domitian’s actions against them were “really part of his general proceedings against people of senatorial rank whom he suspected of conspiring against him.”¹⁵⁸ Historians remember Domitian for just such pathological suspicion, reviving the use of the “delator” (common informer) to punish people for alleged treason.¹⁵⁹ Domitilla was exiled to islands off the coast of Campania which were used for the detention of political prisoners.¹⁶⁰ It was Domitilla’s steward who assassinated the emperor in turn – which we would not at least *expect* of a Christian’s servant (cf. Rev. 13:10). The situation fully suggests a *political* struggle, rather than a truly religious persecution of clearly identifiable Christians. There appears to be no concrete proof that Domitian persecuted Christians for refusing to worship him as a god. “In fact, as late as the principate of Trajan, In A.D. 112, it is plain that there was not statutory precedent which even the emperor himself could quote with regard to Christians.”¹⁶¹ When Pliny the Younger, the new governor of Bithynia, requested instructions from the emperor on how to handle Christians who refused to offer incense to the emperor’s statue, Trajan’s rescript mentioned no universal law enforcing the emperor cult – nor did Hadrian’s rescript to Minucius Fundanus in 124 A.D.¹⁶² Such a legal situation did not come about until later. As Guthrie notes:

What is not certain is the method /Domitian/ adopted to deal with any who were disinclined to offer him homage. No knowledge of any rescript or edict has survived from the first century which enforced emperor worship.¹⁶³

Therefore, those forms of this emperor-worship argument for the late date of Revelation which argue that the book could not have been written until Christians were being officially persecuted for the specific crime of refusing to worship the emperor as god but rather much later. But of course, as pointed out already, such arguments do not prove *anything* in the first place since they assume a mistaken reading of the textual teaching of the book and utilize a logic which suppresses the prophetic character of the literature involved. Indeed, as we first pointed out in our discussion of this argument, John’s mention of emperor worship in Revelation does not

¹⁵⁶ Beckwith, p. 200.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce, *Spreading Flame*, pp. 162-164; *New Testament History*, pp. 413-414; Blaiklock, pp. 122-123.

¹⁵⁸ Bruce, *Spreading Flame*, p. 168; cf. p. 163.

¹⁵⁹ Blaiklock, p. 118.

¹⁶⁰ Swete, p. lxxxv.

¹⁶¹ Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 412.

¹⁶² Bruce, *Spreading Flame*, pp. 168-171, 172; this fact is acknowledged even by Beckwith, p. 200.

¹⁶³ Guthrie, p. 950.

establish anything regarding the date of the book since the phenomenon began long before and continued long after both of the proposed dates for Revelation. Guthrie puts it this way: “although the emperor worship presupposed in the Apocalypse would well suit the later period of Domitian’s reign, there is no conclusive evidence that it could not have occurred earlier.”¹⁶⁴ Consequently, the emperor – worship argument for the late date of Revelation – the internal evidence considered by many writers to be the strongest available to late-daters – turns out to offer no discernible support for that thesis whatsoever. It does not preclude an earlier date for Revelation, and it does not specifically pinpoint the reign of Domitian as the time the book must have been written. Upon cross-examination the argument has no strength.

(2) *Persecution of the Church*

The next proposal of internal evidence for the late date of Revelation which claims our attention is the indication within the book of persecution falling upon the church. Defenders of the late date advance the argument that the persecution described within Revelation correlates better with what historians know about the days of Domitian than it does with available knowledge about the days of Domitian than it does with available information about the time of Nero. However, upon investigation and careful examination, it turns out that this kind of claim reflects a very unbalanced assessment of the evidence bearing on this question, stemming either from lack of familiarity with the primary sources themselves or from injudicious reasoning.

The first thing which should be noted about any argument from persecution to a date for the book of Revelation is that generalizations will prove unpersuasive. What will be required is detailed or specific argumentation which shows that some feature(s) of the persecution described in Revelation can be correlated only with the precise historical evidence we have to Domitian’s reign (rather than Nero’s). General references to persecution or to conflict with civil officials will not support a Domitian date in particular, for from the very beginning of the church’s history it experienced social oppression and governmental opposition.

Indeed, the foundational event from which the church arose was the government-sanctioned execution of the Lord of glory (cf. I Corinthians 2:8). Within days the disciples were being slandered to the governor that his orders had been defied (Matthew 27:62-66; 28:12-14), and a week later the disciples already perceived the threat of the Jews (John 20:19). Shortly thereafter two of the leading apostles were arrested and threatened by the Jewish officials (Acts 4:1-3, 17-21, 29). Persecution was the lot of the Christian church *from the outset*. Its members were pervasively drawn from the lower ranks of society and were seen as worshiping an executed criminal (I Corinthians 1:23, 26-28). They were known to disapprove of the general life-style of society (I Peter 4:3), to interfere with lucrative trades (Acts 16:19; 19:24-41), and to be suspected of evil doing (I Peter 2:12). By the mid-30’s of the first century the Jewish Sanhedrin and/or mob violence had taken the life of the deacon Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60). This in turn triggered “a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1), spreading outward (e.g., to Damascus; Acts 9:1-2,21). By the mid-40’s of the first century James – the brother of John, who wrote Revelation – was executed by Herod Agrippa I, the intimate friend of the emperor Gaius (Caligula).¹⁶⁵ This was part of his program to afflict the church and thereby please the Jews (Acts 12:1-3). The Jews stirred up hostility everywhere; at Lystra they provoked a mob to stone Paul (Acts 14:19). Civil officials oppressed the church as well. In Philippi the magistrates beat and imprisoned Paul for violating Roman law (Acts 16:19-23). By the early 50’s of the first century

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 950-951.

¹⁶⁵ F.F. Bruce, *Common the Book of the Acts*, NICNT, ed. F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 241-247.

the magistrates of Thessalonica were entertaining charges against Christians that “they act contrary to the decrees of Caesar” (Acts 17:7). Before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, Paul was again charged with violating Roman law, again by the Jews (Acts 18:12-13). In Ephesus the craftsmen fomented a riot against Paul (Acts 19:23-41). In Jerusalem he was arrested and eventually sent to Rome for trial (Acts 21:27-25:12). Anyone who thinks that a simple reference to persecution in the book of Revelation can establish a date for its writing must engage in a fresh rereading of the New Testament. Persecution – whether by mobs or under the pretext of civil law, whether by Jews or by Gentiles, whether stimulated by social or religious motives – was the persistent experience of the Christian church in its earliest days. Long *before either* Nero or Domitian had come to the Roman throne, Christians were suffering for their faith, and often enough this suffering was occasioned by civil officials or by charges of violating Roman law. Consequently, if *general* references to civil persecution of the church in the book of Revelation were the only factor taken into consideration in attempting to date its composition, one could hold that it was written in advance of many of the credible suggestions as to the time which are set forth today! Any date-setting argument from indications of persecution within Revelation will need to show some *special* reason for pinpointing a certain period in the first century and excluding others. We must look for specific features in the teaching of Revelation and in the historical evidence corresponding to it.

The first difficulty in using an argument concerning references to persecution of the church in the book of Revelation, then, is the *common* experience of persecution of the church in the first century, making a particular correlation between Revelation and historical events a matter of more detailed argumentation. The second difficulty arises from the nature of the teaching within Revelation itself. Just what does Revelation say about persecution of the church which will help us date the writing of the book? As before, we must keep the prophetic character of Revelation in mind. Even if we uncover historical evidence of persecution in a particular period which corresponds to the description found in the book of Revelation, we would need to be cautious so that we do not confuse this period *as a date of fulfillment* with this period *as a date of writing* (prediction). As we look at what Revelation says, then, we can ask whether the persecution has already begun or is being anticipated, whether the persecution is located in Rome or the provinces, whether it is being propagated by the state or the Jews or society in general, etc.

Is the severe persecution spoken of in the book of Revelation the historical context out of which Jon wrote? That is, had the terrible time which he described already begun as he was composing? Some scholars, like Beckwith, would answer yes. According to Revelation 18:24, he maintains, martyrdoms in many places of the earth “have already taken place”; “the hour of trial, including banishment, imprisonment, and even death, has already fallen upon the churches of Asia Minor” according to Revelation 1:9; 2:3, 13; 3:8, 10, Beckwith observes.¹⁶⁶ Summers’ assertion is stronger: “All critics agree that Revelation was written during a period of severe persecution in the first century.”¹⁶⁷ This claim proves unhelpful, however, since each reader is left to define for himself the severity of this “severe persecution,” and anyway *not* all critics can be enlisted to support Summers’ claim: Tenney, for instance, states that Revelation “does not necessarily imply that a universal policy of persecuting Christians had been adopted.”¹⁶⁸ The earlier claim by Beckwith was likewise overstated. The picture of Rome drunk with the blood of the saints which John paints in the context of Revelation 18:24 (cf. 16:6; 17:6; 19:2; 20:4) is presented as a *vision of the future* (cf. Revelation 4:1; 15:1; 17:1). These martyrdoms arise from the upcoming persecuting policy of the beast (Revelation 13:5-7), and regarding them

¹⁶⁶ Beckwith, p. 206.

¹⁶⁷ Summers, p. 79.

¹⁶⁸ Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, p. 403.

the heavenly beatitude is pronounced: “Blessed are the dead who *from henceforth* die in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13).¹⁶⁹ Moreover, the earlier chapters of Revelation do not state that “the hour of trial” has already fallen, but rather that it is “about to come” (Revelation 3:10, *mellousas erchesthai*). The worst is yet future then.

It is true, of course, that Revelation indicates that persecution of a general nature has begun. John has already been exiled to Patmos (Revelation 1:9). Yet John does not specifically tell us who decreed his banishment, whether it was the emperor himself or rather a local proconsular official (behind whose action would presumably be an increasingly negative attitude emanating from Rome).¹⁷⁰ Antipas has already suffered martyrdom in Pergamum (Revelation 2:13), but the very fact that John offers this single mention suggests that this is, as yet, an isolated instance.¹⁷¹ Revelation 6:9, though, indicates that a number of saints had lost their lives and awaited vindication by the time John wrote; however, Guthrie correctly says that “the description here is notably general ... wide enough to include the Old Testament martyrs as well as Christian martyrs. All that can certainly be deduced from this is that at some previous time certain people had been martyred for the sake of their testimony. It tells us nothing about how many were involved, nor how widespread was the persecution, nor indeed whether these martyrs belonged to the same district as the readers.”¹⁷² The fact that in verse 11 the past martyrs are exhorted to rest a little longer while their fellow-believers complete the course of martyrdom suggests that even greater persecution still awaits the church. We should probably agree with Moffatt, then, that the persecution had *already* taken place as John wrote Revelation was “general and varying in severity.”¹⁷³

The worst was yet to come according to John. Severe persecution was impending. Imprisonment and death were imminent for many in Smyrna (Revelation 2:10), when Rome would become guilty of the death of many saints (Revelation 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). In the words of Mounce, “the storm of persecution is about to break.”¹⁷⁴ Even Beckwith acknowledges: “the present calamities of the Christians are everywhere in the book viewed as but the forerunner of a yet severer time of trial for the whole world in the near future.”¹⁷⁵ This being so, it will be difficult to try and date Revelation in terms of what we know from history about the persecution of the church. The most intense time of persecution (calling forth the most notice in our sources) would likely correspond, not to the time when severe persecution was predicted (i.e., the time when Revelation was written), but to the time Revelation’s prophecies were fulfilled – *later* than the time of writing. How long the interval was cannot be discerned from the book itself.

Consequently, any argument for a date when Revelation was written which comes from internal evidence of persecution is going to be, at best, inconclusive and somewhat speculative. We can agree with Hort that “the Apocalypse was certainly due to persecution.”¹⁷⁶ John wrote in the midst of continuing persecution of Christians and in anticipation of even worst persecution to come – so Revelation was *due to* persecution. But many questions remain. In some cases we do not know the precise source of the past or predicted persecution; for instance, who banished

¹⁶⁹ The phrase “from henceforth” more naturally belongs to this clause rather than the next one in the verse; cf. Mounce, p. 178; Beckwith, pp. 659, 661.

¹⁷⁰ Guthrie, p. 951.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*; Hort, p. xxi.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Moffatt, *Historical New Testament*, p. 460.

¹⁷⁴ Mounce, p. 33.

¹⁷⁵ Beckwith, p. 206.

¹⁷⁶ Hort, p. ix.

John (Revelation 1:9), and will the persecutors of the believers in Smyrna be the Jews or the state (Revelation 2:10; cf. v 9)? Furthermore, the interval between the time of John's prophecy of greater persecution ahead and the period when the prophecy would be fulfilled will remain a matter of interpretation and dispute. Schools of thought divide over the question of the referent of the prophesied persecution in Revelation 3:10 and in the latter chapters (Revelation 13-18). Some see this disagreement as to whether it encompasses a persecution by Nero and/or Domitian. Some see the persecution as taking place in a much *later* tribulation period toward the end of human history. So again, arguments from internal evidence of persecution will not turn out to carry a great deal of weight in dating the writing of the book. The history of persecution of the church in the first century is too general and continuous, and the nature of John's teaching is too anticipatory and disputable in interpretation, to allow for the selection of one period of time to the exclusion of others as the definite date of his writing.

If we are going to pursue the internal evidence from persecution for a dating of Revelation, the question (weak though it be in deciding the issue with any confidence) will become this: which age, Nero's or Domitian's, witnessed a state-instigated persecution of Christians which would *most likely* have led John to pen such *horrified* words of the coming turmoil and which would most likely have influenced (if not condoned) similar oppression *throughout* the empire? That is, does the Neronian or the Domitian hypothesis for dating Revelation offer a more probable historical context out of which John would say what he did about the impending persecution of the church.