

THE BOOK OF REVELATION



2: THE AUTHOR & SCRIPT

WHO?

Four times in the Book of Revelation, we are told the author's name: 'John'. (1v1,4,9;22v8).

He variously describes himself to the 7 Churches as:

- A 'servant' of Jesus (1v1).
- Their 'brother and companion' in 'suffering'; in the 'kingdom'; in 'patient endurance.' (1v9).
- As a prophet, who 'saw and heard these things'. (22v9; 1v3;19v10).

So we know his name but what else do we know about him?

- He writes with a presumption and an assumption of authority over these 7 Churches. The revelation comes from Jesus and so carries its own authority but at the same time the author feels no need to tell them who he is or what authority he has for writing this message to them. His name alone tells them all that they need to know about who he is and the authority that he possesses.
- He is therefore clearly known to these Churches in Asia Minor.
- He also knows the state and condition of the Churches. Even accepting that the information that he shares with them comes from Christ and from the knowledge and perspective of Heaven, it would be unsurprising to suppose that knowing the Churches and being known by them, John was not already aware of what these congregations were like and what was happening.
- He calls himself simply a 'prophet' (and not, for example, an 'apostle') but then this is prophetic writing and he is acting as a prophet. To describe himself as one thing does not preclude him from being something else as well. (Jesus is twice described in Acts 3v22;7v37 as 'a prophet' foretold by Moses, but to call Jesus a prophet does not therefore mean that He is not also Messiah and Son of God).
- John exercises an (apostolic) authority over these Churches which is wider and more extensive than that usually exercised by an N.T. prophet.

So who is he?

- 'John the Elder'. However this theory is based upon a single reference where it is actually not clear if the author is referring to two different 'Johns', one called John the Elder and one John the Apostle, or to one and the same person. And even if there are two 'Johns', that does not mean that 'John the Elder' wrote Revelation (see 2 and 3 John).
- Writings from the 'school of John the Baptist' and thus with an inadequately formed understanding of Jesus. But why then would this Jewish writing find its way into the Christian canon, when other apocalyptic writing from Christian sources were rejected?
- John the apostle; the brother of James and the companion of Jesus. All the earliest Christian authorities agree that it was the apostle John who wrote the Book of Revelation. (Justin Martyr – c.100-165 AD: Eusebius – AD 260-339: Ireneaus - AD c.125-202, who as a boy had known Polycarp, who himself had known John: Clement of Alexandria - AD c.150-215: Tertullian – AD c.115-240: and even a Gnostic text credits John the apostle as being the author.

BUT...

The author of the Book of Revelation writes in a very different style to the author of John's Gospel or of the 1st letter. Whereas the latter are in good, grammatical Greek, Revelation is not written in good quality Greek. More red crayon than fountain pen! However it appears that it was not that the author was unaware of the correct usage of language and of grammar or incapable of putting them into effect but rather that at times he chose not to adhere to those rules. This may be quite deliberate, given the material that he is compiling – the difference between the original Shakespearean Hamlet and Hamlet as a graphic novel for teens, or it may be due to the excitement and the urgency to write down what he was seeing and hearing and having written it down, a reluctance to change it in any way.

It is claimed that the content of the Gospel and of Revelation are so very different. The one concentrates on love and on the present whilst the other speaks of judgement and on the future. But of course it does – it is a different book and is John only capable of writing about one thing!? And yet although the subject matter is different and although the Greek may differ, there are a significant number of themes found in both Gospel and Revelation.

The Word (Jn.1v1; Rev.19v13).

The Lamb (Jn.1v29,31; Rev.5v6 (and another 31 occasions after that!).

The Water of Life (Jn.4v14; rev.21v6;22v1,17).

'Thirsty' (Jn.7v37; Rev.22v17)

Overcomers (Jn.16v33; Rev.2v7,11,17,26; 3v5,12,21; 12v11; 17v14; 21v7).

Keeping the commandments (Jn.10v18; 12v50; 13v34; 14v15,21; 15v10-12,14,17; Rev.3v10; 12v17; 14v12).

'True' is found 9 times in John's Gospel; 4 times in his first letter; 10 times in Revelation.

The world is in the grip of Satan (Jn.12v31; 14v30; 16v11; rev.13v1-4,7-8).

Both John's Gospel (19v37) and John's Revelation (1v7) make use of Zech.12v10

It would seem wise to be humble and to accept the unbroken testimony of previous generations of believers, that the 'John' who wrote Revelation is the same 'John' who wrote the 4th Gospel.

WHEN?

There are two favoured dates for the composition of Revelation.

During or just after the reign of the Emperor Nero (AD 54-68) or just after.

During the reign of the Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96)

NERO

It is conjectured that John had experienced the terrible persecution of the Church under the Emperor Nero, during which both Peter and Paul were martyred.

If the instruction to measure the Temple that is given to John in Ch. 11 is taken at face value, then it would suggest that the Temple was still in existence and thus Revelation must have been written some time prior to AD 70. If the picture is taken even more literally, it would suggest that Jerusalem is under siege and that much of the city and Temple have already been captured and only the actual Sanctuary remains, protected for a time by the Lord.

Rome is called 'Babylon the Great' in 14v8; 16v19; 17v5; 18v2,10,21, and the 'Harlot' is drunk on the blood of the saints. Is Rome so called, because in 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem, just as Rome is about to do / has done? Two Jewish apocalyptic writings composed towards the end of the 1st century AD, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, both also describe Rome as 'Babylon' - although 1 Ptr.5v13 is pre the sack of the city...

The myth of *Nero Redivivus* (Nero alive again) appears to be known. In 13v3, the Anti-Christ receives a death wound but lives again and in 17v8 is seen as rising to life to lead a great army against Rome. Not long after Nero's assassination, stories began to circulate that he was either not dead but had survived the attack, or perhaps had died but would return.

The Number of the Beast 666 in 13v18 is sometimes held to refer to Nero. In Greek, letters were used to represent numbers, and so the first 9 letters stood for 1-9, and the 10th letter for 10 and so on. We are perhaps more familiar with the same principle in Latin, whereby M = 1000; D = 500; C = 100; L = 50; X = 10. However for 666 to represent 'Nero Caesar' requires taking the Greek form of the Latin name and then transliterating that into Hebrew, with a variant spelling. Not too convincing! Given that the numerical equivalent of the Greek '*Jesous*', or 'Jesus', comes to 888, a number beyond the perfection of the perfect number 7, it seems more likely that 666 is meant to direct us to the fact that this is the number of imperfection and of sin - 'for it is man's number' (13v18).

DOMITIAN

Certain indications within Revelation suggest a later date for its composition in the reign of Domitian.

Whereas there was undoubted persecution of Christians under Nero, this persecution was limited to Rome, and rather than being political or religious in content it was Nero's attempt to find a scapegoat for the great fire that destroyed much of Rome in AD 64. And although there was a history of Roman Emperors claiming or receiving worship, it appears that the policy of regarding the Emperor as being divine was energetically pursued by Domitian and that it became a punishable offence not to regard him as such. Even if Domitian himself did not so describe himself, he was lauded as '*Dominus et Deus*' (Lord and God) and one carved frieze in Rome for example, depicts him going out to war, not accompanied by mere mortals but by gods and goddesses. His sumptuous palace in Rome was so magnificent as to 'stupefy the neighbouring abode [temple] of Jupiter the Thunderer'. And of all the places in the Empire, Emperor worship was probably most enthusiastically taken up in the East.

Persecution has become a fact of life or is about to be unleashed upon the Church (1v9;2v10,13;3v10;6v9;16v6;20v4) and the Harlot is drunk on the blood of the saints (17v6;18v24;19v2). It will be more widespread than Nero's persecutions which had begun and ended in Rome (3v10).

In the letters to the Churches of Asia Minor there is no mention of Paul's pioneering work in that area, which would be surprising if the work is to be dated to the reign of Nero and the fact that there has come about a decline in the spiritual life of Ephesus (2v4), Sardis (3v2-4) and Laodicea (3v15-20), suggests a period of time has elapsed. Moreover it is thought that Smyrna wasn't founded until AD 60-64 and Laodicea is described as being 'rich' and yet it was almost totally destroyed in an earthquake AD 60-61, so would have needed time to recover.

A distinct heretical sect has developed, with their very own name - the *Nicolaitans* (Victory people) (2v6,15).

The *Nero Redivivus* myth (if it is contained in Revelation) would also have needed time to develop and to spread and to be believed for it to have any relevance or resonance to the Asia Minor Churches.

WHAT?

Revelation belongs to a distinct genre of Jewish and Christian religious writings from about 200 BC – AD 100 and which is called 'Apocalyptic Literature' – something hidden and now revealed. Revelation alone is the only such piece of literature in the N.T. canon and most obviously Daniel in the O.T. although there are also elements in e.g. 'In that Day...' Isa. Ch.25-27;40-55; Zech.ch.9-14.

Such writings are to keep faith and hope alive in hard times and to encourage the faithful to look forward to the coming of God's Kingdom, when God will intervene in human history for the salvation of His people.

Apocalyptic literature has basic characteristics, some of which Revelation shares. And this should not surprise us at all, for if God is communicating divine truth via this sort of literature than we would expect the Holy Spirit to use imagery and language that would resonate and be familiar with the original audience – those 1st century believers in Asia Minor.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

- It is claimed to be a divine revelation, often communicated by a dream or a vision.
- The revelation is usually mediated by some divine intermediary such as an angel.
- The 'writer' is a notable religious figure of the past and thus in a literary conceit, history is presented as prophecy. In other words past events are described as if they have not already taken place but are still in the future and are being foretold.
- God promises to intervene in human history to judge the wicked and to vindicate the righteous (usually just Israel!) and to usher in the 'day of the Lord', the Kingdom of God.
- Often there is woven into it a Messianic promise and expectation.
- The language is often very vivid and full of imagery.
- As well as describing earthly events, Heaven is also described as are angels and demons.
- It always talks about future events (*eschatology* – the last days) and focuses almost exclusively on the battle between Good and Evil, between Satan and the Lord.
- The present is terrible and beyond saving and only the future shines brightly.
- Everything unfolds according to God's predetermined plans and purposes.

BUT...

Although there are clear similarities between Revelation and other apocalyptic writings, there are also very clear differences.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- It categorically and unambiguously claims to be divinely inspired prophecy (1v3 cf 22v7,10,18,19).
- It claims to be an authoritative, complete and full revelation, something that other apocalyptic writings only dimly grasped or grasped not at all. It is, after all, *'The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.'* (1v1-2).
- It identifies the author not as some person from the past but as an identifiable believer in the present.
- It is not pessimistic but brightly full of faith.
- Although the world is caught in sin, it is not irretrievably lost, for this Revelation is firmly grounded in the redemptive acts of God in and for the world (e.g. 1v18; 5v6).
- This revelation and God's Kingdom embraces the whole world (7v9f).
- There is call to change and to repent in the here and now and not just to wait for the coming of God in the future (2v5,16,22;3v3,19).
- Apart from a few exceptions, the interpretation and understanding of this revelation is left to the hearer and is not provided for them.
- Although there are on occasion angelic intermediaries, this revelation is given directly to John by the Lord Himself.
- Revelation includes 7 very specific and personal letters to the believers in Asia Minor.