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Revelation Intro 2: Basic Questions

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This is one of five units introducing the book of Revelation. A closer look at the text, section by section, is to follow. If you like this material:

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Create a Learning Site (<https://www.wilrens.org>) is a monthly training letter and blog in the field of biblical studies and teaching.

Basic Questions

Where

When

Who

To Whom

Why

(Type of Literature)

It is time to ask some basic questions of the book of Revelation. This is especially important for a difficult book like Revelation. Let's face it: people tend to jump right at the intriguing but difficult bits such as the number 666, the battle of Armageddon, and the Antichrist. Complete books have been written on each of these subjects, but let's face it: these topics aren't exactly central to the book of Revelation. The number 666 appears in only one short passage. The name Armageddon appears in the whole Bible only once. And the term *Antichrist* isn't even used in the book of Revelation. Rather than start with the hard parts, it makes more sense to start with questions that are foundational for our understanding of the book and that are also easier to resolve.

Slide 2

Therefore, basic questions: where was this book written, when, who wrote it, to whom, and why? Obviously, we will also have to talk about the type of literature: what kind of a book is this? But that will be a separate unit. Here, we will look at these first five basic questions about the book of Revelation.

WHERE & TO WHOM

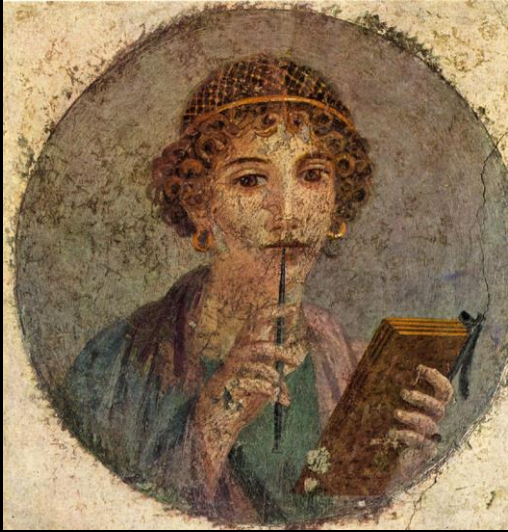


I start with where and to whom because these questions are particularly easy to answer. The book tells us exactly where and to whom it was written. In 1:9, we are told that the author was on the island called Patmos, on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Patmos is a tiny island. You see it circled here on the map. It belongs to Greece today, but it is not far from the western coast of Turkey, and the author tells us he was there on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. That does not suggest he was there on an evangelistic outreach to Patmos. Most likely he had been banished there by the Roman authorities because of his ministry.

The book is addressed to the seven churches that are in Asia, according to 1:4, and verse 11 will list the seven churches. Asia here is not the continent of Asia as we know it today. It is the Roman province of Asia, which gave its name to the continent but was much smaller. It is the western part of Turkey. Again, you see it on the map here.

These seven churches were not the only churches in the area. Presumably, their number is limited to seven because this number suggests completion and perfection.

No doubt these churches represent all the churches in the area and perhaps beyond. It is unclear why of all the churches that were there these seven are chosen. It makes sense that Ephesus and Pergamum are included as major population centres and influential cities. For some of the others it is not so clear, why others are left out is also unclear. Some people have suggested that these seven were connected by a Roman postal route, but there is no real evidence for this. What is clear, however, is that the book is a message addressed to these seven churches. In all our interpretation, we need to keep this group of people in mind. How would they have understood the visions described in this book?



WHO

Next is the question of authorship. Who wrote this book? At first sight, this one is easy as well, because the book tells us: it's John. However, once we ask which John, it turns out that it is not quite that simple. Traditionally, the book has been ascribed to John the Apostle, one of the sons of Zebedee. However, there is an early church father who lived in the area of Ephesus, Papias, born around 70 and writing around the year 120, so very close to the writing of Revelation. He appears to imply that there was another well-known John in that area whom we will call John the Elder, who also is a candidate to have written the book of Revelation.



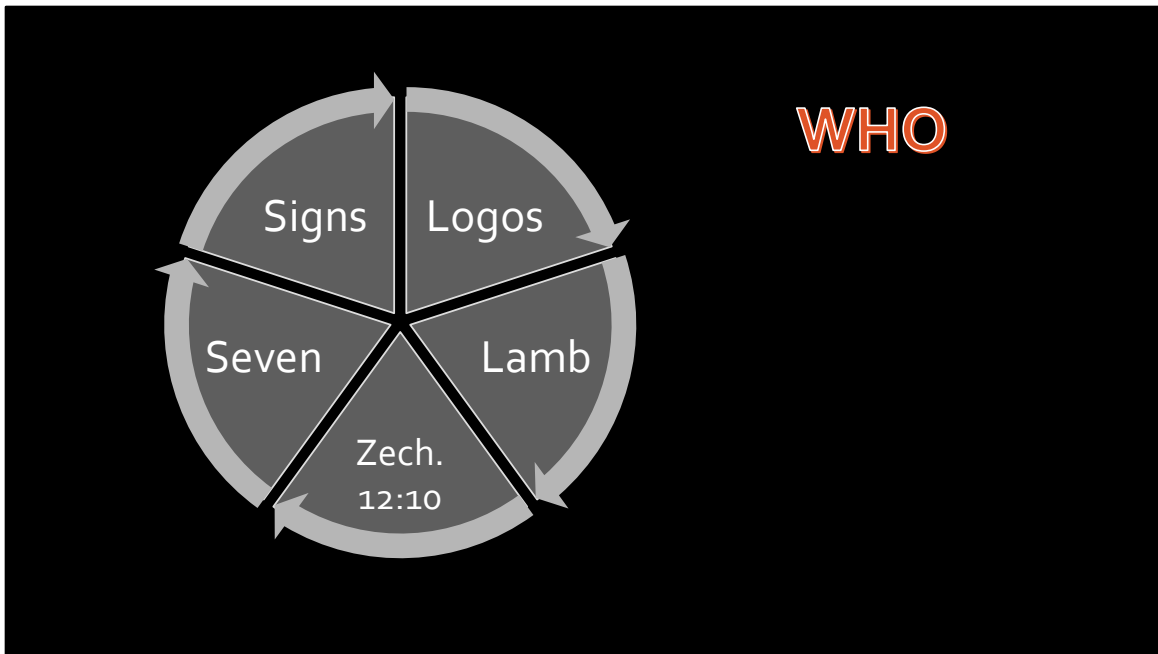
GOSPEL OF JOHN LETTERS REVELATION

Of course, in the New Testament, we have several other books that carry the name of John: the Gospel of John and three letters. Interestingly, none of these four claims that it was written by John. John's authorship is mostly based on church tradition. What is clear is that these four books are very similar to each other in style and vocabulary, so almost everyone assumes that they were written by the same person.

But it is also clear that the book of Revelation is very different in content and style. The Greek that is used is different from that of the gospel and the three letters. So many argue that there were two authors at work here. If this is true (a real if), it still leaves us with the question of which one wrote the Revelation: was it the apostle or was it this other John, the Elder, that Papias seems to refer to? It is hard to know.

There are some indications in the Gospel of John that perhaps it was not written by the apostle John. Its author identifies himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved, but he cannot be identified by name. It seems that, unlike John the son of Zebedee, he may have had his residence in Jerusalem, not at the Sea of Galilee. Others argue that the close association between the author of the Gospel and Peter, not to mention church tradition, shows it must be John the son of Zebedee. Either way, this is a little

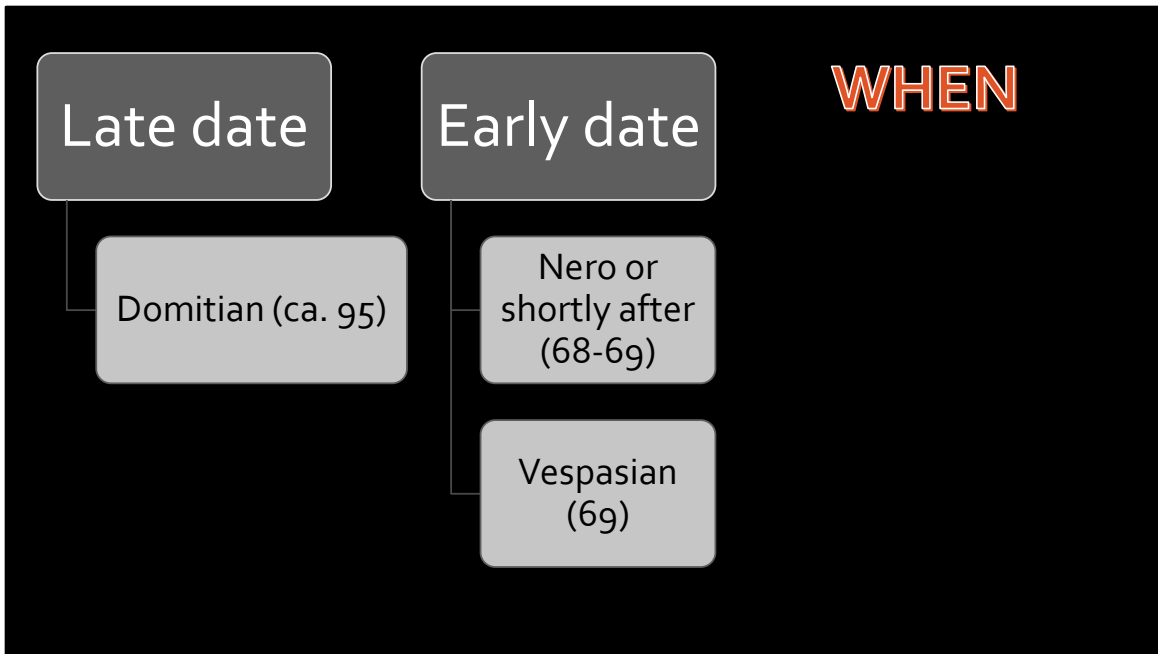
inconclusive. We cannot be 100% sure which John wrote the book of Revelation (or the Gospel). I should add that a reasonable case can still be made that the same author wrote all five books.



This is because there are not only differences between the two books, the Gospel of John and Revelation. There are also many things they have in common. For instance, both books speak of Jesus as the *logos*, the word of God. Both books emphasise Jesus as the lamb of God. These are the only two books in the New Testament that contain a reference to Zechariah 12:10: they will look upon him whom they have pierced. It appears in Revelation chapter 1 and in the Gospel of John when a Roman soldier pierces the side of Jesus hanging on the cross. And in both books, the number seven plays an important role, also in the structure, as will see. The first half of the Gospel of John is structured according to 7 signs that Jesus did and there are 7 I am statements by Jesus. In addition, signs are important in both books. Whereas Paul seems to have been more of a conceptual thinker, thinking in abstract ideas and concepts (such as justification), John is more visual, both in the Gospel and in the book of Revelation. It is therefore quite possible that the Gospel and Revelation were the work of the same author after all.

But that still leaves us with the question, which John was this? I am afraid the information we have does not enable us to prove beyond doubt the authorship one way or another. The church fathers say John the Apostle, but did they really know?

This is a little frustrating. On the other hand, for our interpretation, it makes little difference whether it is John the Apostle or John the Elder, another eyewitness to Jesus, who wrote this book.



Next, when was the book written? Here too we have two options, although for this I have a clear preference. We have an early date and a late date. The late date, which is the one I prefer, places the book during the reign of Domitian in the mid-90s of the first century. This is the date that is supported by church tradition and the early church fathers. It also fits well with the condition of the church as we see it in the book and with the purpose of the book, as will see.

There is a minority of scholars who argue for an early date of the book, that is, either towards the end of Nero's reign or during the reign of Vespasian, and then the book would have been written in 68 or 69. Quite a few of those who argue for an early date hold a very different interpretation of the book than the one that I will present. They believe that the book predicts the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year A.D. 70. Of course, in that case, it must have been written before the event. I don't think that is the case and I don't find the arguments for the early date convincing. It includes considerations like: in chapter 11 John is told to measure the temple as if there still is a temple in Jerusalem; if John were writing in the 90s there would not be a temple in Jerusalem. And the number of the beast, so it is argued, refers to Nero. As will see when we get to this number 666, there is indeed a

way to make Nero's name add up to 666, but it looks a bit forced to me. And then there is the argument based on Revelation 17:10.

They are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. (Rev. 17:10-11, ESV)

This is the relevant passage: “The seven heads are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come, and when he does come, he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.” I probably should warn you ahead of time. If interpreters agree on anything related to this passage, it is that this is one of the most difficult and obscure statements in Revelation and that we probably cannot reconstruct anymore what it is supposed to mean. Which makes this a weak foundation stone for any date that we seek to defend. The early date proponents take it as a reference to Roman emperors.

EMPERORS

	49-44 BC	Julius Caesar
	27 BC-AD 14	Augustus
	14-37	Tiberius
five have fallen	37-41	Gaius/Caligula
one is	41-54	Claudius
the other has not yet	54-68	Nero
come		
the beast is an eighth but	68-69	Galba (June 68-January 69)
it belongs to the seven	69	Otho (January-April)
(Rev. 17:10-11, ESV)	69	Vitellius (April-Dec.)
	69-79	Vespasian
	79-81	Titus
	81-96	Domitian

This is a list of Roman emperors beginning with Julius Caesar, which is already a question: should he be included, was he truly an emperor? Assuming that the seven kings are to be identified as seven emperors we can start counting. If we include Julius Caesar, then number six is Nero as the one reigning. That is where the early date comes from. His reign was followed by the year of the three emperors, 68-69: Galba, Otto, and Vitellius. Each of them reigned only for a few months and did not manage to gain full control of the empire. So it is a little unclear what numbers seven and eight mean.

If we leave Julius Caesar out, then number six takes us to the year of the three emperors. They are usually skipped, and number six becomes Vespasian and number eight is Domitian. The problem with this is that although Domitian did persecute some Christians, he did not initiate the kind of large-scale persecution that the book of Revelation predicts. So it is a little confusing or unsatisfying to identify him as the beast.

In fact, it does not really work for any of the emperors to specifically consider that individual the beast. So it seems to me that the seven kings, the seven heads of the

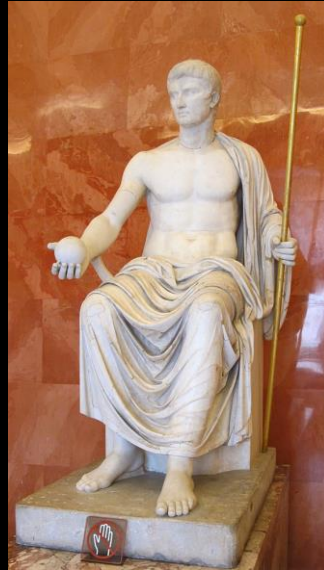
beast, do not represent seven Roman emperors. I don't think it helps us to place a date on the book. It is quite a puzzle, and perhaps not solvable. How can the beast be both the whole and one of its heads? There is something circular or cyclical about it: the beast has seven heads, an eighth, belonging to the seven, is the beast – which therefore also has seven heads, plus an eighth? So perhaps this is the idea: within this age, the beast will re-emerge – a cyclical pattern in history. But it is hardly an argument for a date.



WHY

I am therefore going to assume the late date of the book, in the 90s of the first century. In that case, the purpose of Revelation is to warn its readers that a time of intense persecution is ahead and to encourage and empower them to persevere during this time. The historical background of this persecution has everything to do with the statue we are looking at here. This is emperor Augustus. He was the emperor reigning when Jesus was born. And already this statue hints in subtle ways that the emperor is more than a human being. That little fellow on the left at his leg is Cupid. Cupid was the son of the goddess Venus, and the family of Augustus claimed to have descended from this goddess. In other words, it suggests this man is especially close to the divine. He is more than a mere human being. Increasingly, during the first century, there were these kinds of claims made about the emperor. Especially in the east of the empire, the emperor was also worshipped. There was a cult with temples and sacrifices that developed there. The very first temple to be built dedicated to a living emperor stood in Pergamum and was built even before Christ was born. Pergamum – this is right in the Roman province of Asia, where the book of Revelation was written.

WHY



Here we see another statue of emperor Augustus on the right, and on the left a statue of Jupiter, the main god of the Romans. Both hold an orb or a globe in their hand and a sceptre. Augustus is portrayed here in a pose that suggests Jupiter.

With this elevation of the person of the emperor, there was also an ideology or a myth created around the emperor and the empire. Rome, so it was claimed, had been destined by the gods to bring peace to the world, to bring salvation, to establish justice and a golden age on the earth. This is beginning to sound like an alternative gospel. The birth of Augustus had even been described using this term: it was a day of good news, literally, the day of the gospel of the birth of Augustus. The emperor was Lord, son of the divine, he was a saviour. Later, Domitian would identify himself as *Dominus et Deus*, Lord and God. And increasingly the emperor became a godlike figure. Eventually, there would be the expectation that one would prove one's loyalty to the empire by sacrificing a bit of incense to the emperor. If one refused to do this, the consequences could be severe. Clearly, we now have two competing gospels and we have two lords, and they could not coexist. Of course, the church was willing and ready to honour and respect the emperor, but not in this way. The conflict was

inevitable.

Sailko, 2011, "Giove, I sec dc, con parti simulanti il bronzo moderne,"

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giove,_I_sec_dc,_con_parti_simulanti_il_bronzo_moderne_02.JPG, CC BY-SA 3.0

Id., "Ancient Roman statue of Emperor Augustus as Jove (i.e. Jupiter), first half of the 1st century AD," https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Augusto_come_giove,_00-50_dc_circa.JPG, CC BY-SA 3.0



So I am going to assume a late date for the book, in the 90s of the first century. In that case, the purpose of Revelation is to warn its readers that a time of intense persecution is ahead and to empower them. One way the book does this is by giving us a peek behind the screen, by lifting the curtain and showing what is really going on. On the surface, we have a small minority and a powerful and hostile empire. An empire that has become aware of the existence of the church and is now beginning to turn its resources against it.

So what chance does this small marginal minority have in this confrontation? Well, by allowing us to look behind the curtain, we get to see not only what's really going on, but also that the real power is in God's hand, that the church is not marginal at all, but that it stands at the centre of world history. It will be victorious in its battle against the powers of darkness including the Roman Empire. Even more: it is in part through the church that God will establish his rule and overcome conflicting and competing empires and claims. So the church is central to what God is doing in the world; this is what the book also shows us.



Committed Communities

And in this way, the book can become relevant to us, even if we are not facing persecution. We are still part of committed communities. In all likelihood, those committed communities are a minority in our country, and they may look marginal to what is going on. Revelation shows us that it is through such committed communities that God shapes human history, that he brings his purposes and his kingdom forward.

The photo you are looking at here is part of the ruins of a monastery close to where I live.



This monastery was founded in the 11th century. By 1100, it had become the German centre for a monastic renewal movement that was impacting all of Europe. At its peak, there were about 150 monks living here. This is not a large number. And there were about 100 or 150 other monasteries spread out through Germany that were connected to this centre. That is not a large movement. Nevertheless, it is communities like these that have shaped Europe repeatedly in its history and continue to do so today. That is part of the message of the book of Revelation today: committed communities are God's channel to impact the world for the gospel, and they are influential and significant well beyond their marginal numbers.

Credits

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

Map: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seven_churches_of_asia.svg, CCo

Donna con tavolette cerate e stilo (cosiddetta "Saffo"),
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sappho_fresco.jpg CCo

Brown (1852-6), Jesus Washing Peter's Feet,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesus_washing_Peter%27s_feet.jpg, CCo

Augustus 1: Till Niermann, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Statue-Augustus.jpg>, CC BY-SA 3.0

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Augustus 2: Id., "Ancient Roman statue of Emperor Augustus as Jove (i.e. Jupiter), first half of the 1st century AD," https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Augusto_come_giove,_00-50_dc_circa.JPG, CC BY-SA 3.0

Curtain: <https://pixabay.com/de/theater-kino-vorhang-streifen-blau-2757802/>, CCo

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