My presentation will deal with the Book of Revelation. I will particularly address the issues of its date of composition and theme. In that establishing Revelation's time of origin is a crucial issue for the proper interpretation of the book, I will begin with a brief presentation of the case for the early dating of Revelation. In that understanding the flow and purpose of Revelation should be among the interpreter's leading goals, I will deal a little more at length with the question of the book's theme. Once the question of when Revelation was written is resolved, I believe the question of what it is about becomes more evident.

The Date of Composition

There are two basic positions on the dating of Revelation, although each has several slight variations. The current majority position is the late-date view. This view holds that John wrote Revelation toward the close of the reign of Domitian Caesar about A.D. 95 or 96. The minority view-point today is the early-date position. Early-date advocates hold that Revelation was written by John prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. I hold that Revelation was produced prior to the death of Nero in June, A.D. 68, and even before the formal engagement of the Jewish War by Vespasian's forces in Spring of 67.

Though the late-date view is the majority position today, this has not always been the case. In fact, it is the opposite of what prevailed among leading biblical scholars a little over seventy-five years ago. Late-date advocate William Milligan conceded in 1893 that "recent scholarship has, with little exception, decided in favour of the earlier and not the later date."1

Two decades later in 1910 early-date advocate Philip Schaff could still concur Milligan's report: "The early date is now accepted by perhaps the majority of scholars."2

In the 1800s and early 1900s the early-date position was held by such worthies as Moses Stuart, Friedrich D Gsterdieck, B. F. Westcott, F. J. A. Hort, Joseph B. Lightfoot, F. W. Farrar, Alfred Edersheim, Philip Schaff, Milton Terry, Augustus Strong, and others. Though in eclipse presently, the early-date view has not totally faded away, however. More recent advocates of the early-date include Albert A. Bell, F. F. Bruce, Rudolf Bultmann, C. C. Torrey, J. A. T. Robinson, J. A. Fitzmeyer, J. M. Ford, C. F. D. Moule, Cornelius Vanderwaal, and others.

But rather than committing an ad verecundiam fallacy, let us move beyond any appeal to authority to consider very briefly the argument for the early date of Revelation. Due to time constraints, I will succinctly engage only three of the internal indicators of composition date. The internal evidence should hold priority for the evangelical Christian in that it is evidence from Revelation's self-witness. I will only summarily allude to the arguments from tradition before concluding this matter. Generally it is the practice of late-date advocates to begin with the evidence from tradition, while early-date advocates start with the evidence from self-witness.

The Temple in Revelation 11

In Revelation 11:1, 2 we read:

And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein. But the court which is without the temple leave out, and measure it not; for it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months.

Here we find a Temple standing in a city called the "holy city." Surely John, a Christian Jew, has in mind historical Jerusalem when he speaks
of "the holy city." This seems necessary in that John is writing scripture and Jerusalem is frequently called the "holy city" in the Bible. For example: Isaiah 48:2; 52:1; Daniel 9:24; Nehemiah 11:1-18; Matthew 4:5; 27:53. In addition, verse 8 informs us that this is the city where "also our Lord was crucified." This was historical Jerusalem, according to the clear testimony of Scripture (Luke 9:22; 13:32; 17:11; 19:28).

Interestingly, historical Jerusalem is never mentioned by name in Revelation. This may be due to the name "Jerusalem" meaning "city of peace." In Revelation the meanings of specific names are important to the dramatic imagery. And, so it would be inappropriate to apply the name "Jerusalem" to the city upon which woe and destruction are wreaked.

Now what Temple stood in Jerusalem? Obviously the Jewish Temple ordained of God, wherein the Jewish sacrifices were offered. In the first century it was known as Herod's Temple. This reference to the Temple must be that historical structure for four reasons:

(1) It was located in Jerusalem, as the text clearly states in verse 8. This can only refer to the Herodian Temple.


Luke 21:24b: "Jerusalem shall be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."

Revelation 11:2b: "it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot for forty and two months."

(3) According to Revelation 11:2 Jerusalem and the Temple were to be under assault for a period of forty-two months. We know from history that the Jewish War with Rome was formally engaged in Spring, A.D. 67, and was won with the collapse of the Temple in August, A.D. 70. This is a period of forty-two months, which fits the precise measurement of John's prophecy. John's prophecy antedates the outbreak of the Jewish War.

(4) After the reference to the destruction of the "temple of God" in the "holy city," John later speaks of a "new Jerusalem" coming down out of heaven, which is called the "holy city" (Rev. 21:2) and which does not need a temple (Rev. 21:22). This new Jerusalem is apparently meant to supplant the old Jerusalem with its temple system. The old order Temple was destroyed in August, A.D. 70.

Thus, while John wrote, the Temple was still standing, awaiting its approaching doom. If John wrote this twenty-five years after the Temple's fall it would be terribly anachronous. The reference to the Temple is hard architectural evidence that gets us back into an era pre-A.D. 70.

The Seven Kings in Revelation 17

In Revelation 17:1-6 a vision of a seven-headed beast is recorded. In this vision we discover strong evidence that Revelation was written before the death of Nero, which occurred on June 8, A.D. 68.

John wrote to be understood. The first of seven benedictions occurs in his introduction: "Blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein" (Rev. 1:3). And just after the vision itself is given in Revelation 17:1-6, an interpretive angel appears for the express purpose of explaining the vision: "And the angel said unto me, Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns" (Rev 17:7). Then in verses 9 and 10 this angel explains the vision: "Here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space."

Most evangelical scholars recognize that the seven mountains represent the famed seven hills of...
The recipients of Revelation lived under the rule of Rome, which was universally distinguished by its seven hills. How could the recipients, living in the seven historical churches of Asia Minor and under Roman imperial rule, understand anything else but this geographical feature? But there is an additional difficulty involved. The seven heads have a two-fold referent. We learn also that the seven heads represent a political situation in which five kings have fallen, the sixth is, and the seventh is yet to come and will remain but a short while. It is surely no accident that Nero was the sixth emperor of Rome, who reigned after the deaths of his five predecessors and before the brief rule of the seventh emperor.

Flavius Josephus, the Jewish contemporary of John, clearly points out that Julius Caesar was the first emperor of Rome and that he was followed in succession by Augustus, Tiberius, Caius, Claudius, and Nero (Antiquities 18: 19). We discover this enumeration also in other near contemporaries of John: 4 Ezra 11 and 12; Sibylline Oracles, books 5 and 8; Barnabas, Epistle 4; Suetonius, Lives of the Twelve Caesars; and Dio Cassius’ Roman History 5.

The text of Revelation says of the seven kings “five have fallen.” The first five emperors are dead, when John writes. But the verse goes on to say “one is.” That is, the sixth one is then reigning even as John wrote. That would be Nero Caesar, who assumed imperial power upon the death of Claudius in October, A.D. 54, and remained emperor until June, A.D. 68.

John continues: “The other is not yet come; and when he comes, he must continue a short space.” When the Roman Civil Wars broke out in rebellion against him, Nero committed suicide on June 8, A.D. 68. The seventh king was “not yet come.” That would be Galba, who assumed power in June, A.D. 68. But he was only to continue a “short space.” His reign lasted but six months, until January 15, A.D. 69.

Thus, we see that while John wrote, Nero was still alive and Galba was looming in the near future. Revelation could not have been written after June, A.D. 68, according to the internal political evidence.

In Revelation the Jews are represented as eminently calling themselves “Jews.” They are not true Jews in the fundamental, spiritual sense, which was Paul’s argument in Romans 2. This would suggest a date prior to the final separation of Judaism and Christianity. Christianity was a protected religion under Rome’s legitimation, as long as it was considered a sect of Judaism. The legal separation of Christianity from Judaism was in its earliest stages, beginning with the Neronian persecution in late A.D. 64. It was finalized both legally and culturally with the Temple’s destruction, as virtually all historical and New Testament scholars agree. Interestingly, in the A.D. 80s the Christian writer Barnabas makes a radical “us/them” division between Israel and the Church (Epistle 13:1).
Second, at the time John writes, things are in the initial stages of a fundamental change. Revelation 3:9 reads: “Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie--behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you.”

John points to the approaching humiliation of the Jews, noting that God will vindicate His Church against them. In effect, He would make the Jews to lie down at the Christian’s feet. This can have reference to nothing other than the destruction of Israel and the Temple, which was prophesied by Christ. After that horrible event Christians began making reference to the Temple’s destruction as an apologetic and vindication of Christianity. Ignatius (A.D. 107) is a classic example of this in his Magnesians 10. There are scores of such references in such writers as Melito, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius, and others.

There are other arguments regarding the Jewish character of Revelation, such as its grammar, its reference to the twelve tribes, allusions to the priestly system, temple worship, and so forth. The point seems clear enough: When John writes Revelation, Christianity is not divorced from Israel. After A.D. 70 such would not be the case. This is strong socio-cultural evidence for a pre-A.D. 70 composition.

Conclusion

I have surveyed the political evidence regarding the Seven Kings, the architectural evidence of the standing Temple, and the socio-cultural evidence of the uneasy Jew/Christian mixture. These suggest Revelation was written prior to the destruction of the Temple in August, 70, and even before the death of Nero Caesar, which occurred on June 8, 68. I believe we can even press it back before the formal engagement of the Jewish War in 67, though not before the outbreak of the Neronic persecution beginning in November, 64.

Were time available we could consider the external evidence. I believe a case may be made for the reconstruction of Irenaeus’ famous statement, which is the major evidence from tradition. This would allow for an early-date for Revelation by applying his reference to the reign of Domitian to John himself regarding his active ministry, rather than to John’s writing of Revelation.

With a great number of biblical scholars, I am convinced that the Shepherd of Hermas shows dependence on Revelation. I also believe there is evidence for the Shepherd’s date of writing in the late 80s. The Muratorian Canon says John wrote letters to seven churches before Paul finished his church letters, which were to seven different congregations.

Tertullian relates a tradition that seems to indicate John was banished at about the same time as Peter and Paul were martyred. Clement of Alexandria informs us that all revelation ceased under Nero’s reign. He makes this claim while elsewhere holding that John’s Revelation was inspired of God. Epiphanius dates Revelation under Claudius’ reign. This is either a wild, unaccountable, and unique error, or it is a reference to Nero by his other name. Nero’s full adoptive name was Nero Claudius Caesar. Various Syriac manuscripts specifically assign John’s banishment to the reign of Nero. Arethas interprets many of the prophecies of Revelation as being fulfilled in the Jewish War and Andreas has to combat such interpretations in his day.

I believe the early-date of Revelation may be firmly established in the seventh decade of the first century, not the last. In the next issue we will consider the theme of the Book of Revelation.