

The *Book of Revelation* and the First Years of Nero's Reign

According to ecclesiastical tradition, the *Book of Revelation* was written by the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, about the year 95, during his exile in Patmos, shortly before writing the fourth gospel in Ephesus. Most scholars support this late dating (last days of Domitian's reign), but the early dating (between the years 64 and 70) has the support of many important authors⁽¹⁾. In this article I will try to demonstrate that (a) the external evidence is not conclusive in favor of a late dating, because there is an important patristic tradition in favor of Nero's reign; and (b) the internal evidence provides important arguments affirming that the definitive version of *Revelation* was redacted after Nero's ascension to power in the year 54 and before the earthquake of Laodicea in the year 60.

I. External Evidence

Most scholars affirm that the first and most important patristic testimony in favor of a late dating of *Revelation* (at the end of Domitian's reign) is the work of Irenaeus (130-202), *Adv. haeres.* (5.30.3), which was written about 180-190. The original Greek version of this passage was preserved by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.18.3; 5.8.6). But Irenaeus' testimony has been objected to by several authors who argue that there is a grammatical ambiguity which makes room for two possible translations. In the most accepted translation Irenaeus made reference to the time in which the revelation was seen. According to the alternative translation, the text referred to the time in which the apostle was seen alive, which is more logical in consideration of the context. In fact, Irenaeus proposes that it is not necessary to try to decipher the cryptogram 666. Because if John had

⁽¹⁾ Cf. J.A.T. ROBINSON, *Redating the New Testament* (London 1976), with bibliography (chap. VIII); K.L. GENTRY, *Before Jerusalem Fell. Dating the Book of Revelation. An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-A.D. 70 Composition* (Tyler, TX 1989), with bibliography (17-18, 24-38); R.B. MOBERLY, "When was Revelation Conceived?", *Bib* 73 (1992) 376-393; J.C. WILSON, "The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation", *NTS* 39 (1993) 587-605; T.B. SLATER, "Dating the Apocalypse to John", *Bib* 84 (2003) 252-258.

wanted to reveal the name, he would have done it, since he still lived at the end of Domitian's reign⁽²⁾. On the other hand, although Irenaeus has an acknowledged reputation in the patristic tradition, his work is not exempt from inaccuracies due to, mostly, his uncritical acceptance of not so reliable traditions⁽³⁾. This questionable methodology weakens not only Irenaeus' testimony, written almost a century after the death of Domitian, but the whole testimony of a patristic trend that simply repeated his words. This happens due to the absence of coetaneous and independent testimonies related to Irenaeus to confirm his supposed late dating⁽⁴⁾.

But there is another tradition headed by Papias (c. 60-130), who wrote that the brothers John and James, sons of Zebedee, were killed by the Jews⁽⁵⁾. The *Canon Muratorianus*, written between the years 170 and 220, states that Paul wrote only to seven churches by "following the rule of his predecessor John", who wrote to seven churches in *Revelation*⁽⁶⁾. Tertullian (c. 160-220), apparently, affirms that the exile of John to Patmos happened in the same time in which Peter and Paul were executed (*De praescriptione haereticorum*, 36). On the other hand, although Tertullian mentions the perversity of

⁽²⁾ In the past the following supported the reinterpretation of Irenaeus: J.M. MACDONALD, *The Life and Writings of St. John* (London 1877) 169-170; S.H. CHASE, "The Date of the Apocalypse. The Evidence of Irenaeus", *JTS* 8 (1907) 431-435; G. EDMUNDSON, *The Church in Rome in the First Century* (London 1913) 164-165, among others. Nowadays, GENTRY, *Before*, 45-59.

⁽³⁾ Cf. F.W. FARRAR, *The Early Days of Christianity* (New York 1884) 398; E.C. SELWYN, *The Christian Prophets and the Prophetic Apocalypse* (London 1900) 125; D. GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL 1970) 17; J. MOFFATT, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine, The Expositor's Greek Testament* (ed. W.R. NICOLL) (Grand Rapids 1980) V, 320; MOBERLY, "Revelation", 380-383.

⁽⁴⁾ On Irenaeus as the only source of this tradition, cf. M. STUART, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Andover 1845) I, 281-282; II, 269; M.S. TERRY, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids [1883] 1974) 237-239; W.H. SIMCOX, *The Revelation of St. John Divine* (Cambridge 1898) xiii; C.C. TORREY, *The Apocalypse of John* (New Haven 1958) 78; B. NEWMAN, "The Fallacy of the Domitian Hypothesis. Critique of the Irenaeus Source as a Witness for the Contemporary-Historical Approach to the Interpretation of the Apocalypse", *NTS* 10 (1962) 133-139.

⁽⁵⁾ Papias was quoted by Philip of Side (*TU*, II, 170) and Georgius Hamartolus (*Chronicon* 3.134). Swete has stated that Papias does not affirm that the brothers suffered martyrdom at the same time. Therefore, John might have died at any date before the last days of Jerusalem. Cf. H.B. SWETE, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids [1911] 1977) clxxix-clxxx.

⁽⁶⁾ Cf. GENTRY, *Before*, 93-94.

Domitian, he does not mention John and his exile (*Apol.* 5). Finally, Epiphanes (c. 315-403) affirms in *Haeres.* 51.12,33 that John wrote *Revelation* during the reign of Claudius⁽⁷⁾.

The testimony of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) is not conclusive because it affirms that the apostle John left Patmos "after the death of the tyrant" (*Quis Salvus Dives* 42). Although most authors presume that Clement was referring to Domitian, in Jewish, Christian and Pagan literature, the qualifier "tyrant" is linked to Nero⁽⁸⁾. On the other hand, there does not seem to have existed a persecution campaign against the Christians during the reign of Domitian. His repressive policy was rather selective and aimed at influential people on suspicion of conspiracy, including members of his own family⁽⁹⁾. It is probable, in consequence, that Clement had thought of Nero when he wrote about the time when the apostle John left Patmos after the death of the "tyrant". The same thing can be inferred from Origen (c. 185-254), disciple of Clement, because he asserts that John was exiled to Patmos by "the King of the Romans" (*Matthew* 16.6) without identifying him⁽¹⁰⁾.

In conclusion, the external evidence cannot date with certainty the *Book of Revelation* at the end of the reign of Domitian, because there is an important patristic tendency that attests or points to an early dating during the reign of Nero or even before it.

II. Internal Evidence

1. *The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple*

In *Revelation* there is no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. It would be inexplicable in terms of religious identity if the work had been written after the year 70, because John belonged to a mentality and a culture that was notably Hebrew. He considers himself a genuine Jew, a member of the true Synagogue (Rev 2,9;3,9),

⁽⁷⁾ Cf. GENTRY, *Before*, 104-105. Recently, M.-É. Boismard has defended the tradition of the early martyrdom of the apostle John, son of Zebedee (*Le martyre de Jean l'apôtre* [Paris 1996]).

⁽⁸⁾ Cf. GENTRY, *Before*, 68-83.

⁽⁹⁾ EDMUNDSON, *The Church in Rome*, 168; G.W. BARKER – W.L. LANE – J.R. MICHAELS, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York 1969) 368; L.L. THOMPSON, *The Book of Revelation. Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford 1990) 95-115.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Cf. GENTRY, *Before*, 97-99.

Holy Priest of the future Kingdom (1,6;20,6), specially concerned with the rules of ritual pureness (3,4-5; 14,4; 21,8.27; 22,11.14-15), one of the 144.000 saved ones of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (7,4-8; 14,1-5; 21,12).

After the year 70, this silence would be inexplicable in terms of scriptural exegesis, because the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple was prophesied by the synoptic gospels⁽¹¹⁾ following the tradition from Micah and Jeremiah⁽¹²⁾. Under the influence of Daniel⁽¹³⁾, the destruction of Jerusalem was linked to the profanation of its Sanctuary⁽¹⁴⁾.

But John contradicts this prophetic tradition by affirming in one of his prophecies that the believers are inside the Sanctuary and that the exterior court has been taken by the gentiles, who will trample on the Holy City for 42 months (Rev 11,1-2). The Temple, in consequence, is still standing. Moreover, John prophesies that a tenth part of Jerusalem will be destroyed by an earthquake (11,13). It is clear that when John wrote his prophecy, Jerusalem and his Temple had not been destroyed yet. Therefore, *Revelation* must have been redacted before the year 70⁽¹⁵⁾.

It is not strange that John had contradicted the synoptic tradition, since in the beginning there were two antagonistic positions in the Community of Jerusalem in respect of the Temple. It is necessary to recall the great persecution against the Community in the year 36. Everything began with the execution — or lynching — of Stephen (Acts 6,8–7,60) in the context of a revolt which was started among the Hellenist Jews, specially those from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6,9.12). Then, a wave of arrests was ordered by the religious authorities: “with authority received from the chief priests (26,10; cf. 22,4-5), Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison”

⁽¹¹⁾ Mark 13,1-2; Matt 24,1-2; Luke 21,5-6.

⁽¹²⁾ Mic 3,12 (cf. Jer 26,18); Jer 7,12-15.

⁽¹³⁾ Dan 9,27; 11,31; 12,11.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Mark 13,14; Matt 24,15. Cf. Luke 21,20.

⁽¹⁵⁾ During the nineteenth century the following supported this position: F. BLEEK, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Edinburgh 1870) II, 226; MACDONALD, *The Life and Writings of St. John*, 159; F. DÜSTERDIECK, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John* (New York 1886) 46-47; B. WEISS, *A Manual of Introduction to the New Testament* (New York 1889) II, 82. In the twentieth century: TORREY, *The Apocalypse*, 87; ROBINSON, *Redating*, 240-242; GENTRY, *Before*, 165-192; WILSON, “The Problem”, 604.

(8,3). While some were flogged, others were sentenced to death (22,19; 26,10). Those who could escape “were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria” (8,1)⁽¹⁶⁾. However it is curious to confirm that this persecution did not affect the apostles who were left undamaged (8,1), but only the Hellenist Jewish-Christians. The cause of this focused persecution can be found in the verbal attack of Stephen — and his followers — against the establishment of the Temple. His ideas were based on Isaiah 66,1-2 (cf. Acts 7,44-50), but the apostles and the rest of the Community did not share this position (Acts 2,46; 3,1; 5,12.20-21.42; cf. 21,20-26). This opposition of opinions explains the various prophetic traditions about the Temple: destroyed according to the synoptic gospels, preserved according to Rev 11,1-13.

Many authors have argued that Rev 11,1-2 would be an independent fragment, written before the year 70 and incorporated into the text later on⁽¹⁷⁾. But it is not convincing that this passage (which prophecies the profanation of the Holy City for 42 months, excepting the Sanctuary where the believers are sheltered) could have been incorporated into the definitive version after the total destruction of Jerusalem, the demolition of the Temple and the annihilation of the zealot resistance entrenched inside of it.

Could John write the passage 11,1-2 at the end of the reign of Domitian, by placing it in a past time with the purpose of antedating it? Could John try to give it a fictitious antiquity which it didn't have?⁽¹⁸⁾. But if it had happened that way, John would not have written about believers inside the Temple. He would not have “forgotten” to mention that the Jewish-Christians — the real believers — did not stay in the Temple, but they escaped from Jerusalem.

There is also another hypothesis that proposes that Rev 11,1-2 does not make any reference to the physical Temple (already destroyed), but it would be a symbolic representation of the Community of the Saints after the year 70, pursued by the Pagans⁽¹⁹⁾. This hypothesis is not convincing either, because the Temple is located in a Holy City which

⁽¹⁶⁾ All biblical citations come from the New Revised Standard Version, unless I indicate the contrary.

⁽¹⁷⁾ R.H. CHARLES, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh 1920) I, lxii-lxiii, xciii-xciv, 270-271; MOFFATT, *The Revelation*, 281-295.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Cf. H.B. SWETE, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London 1906) 221.

⁽¹⁹⁾ W. MILLIGAN, *Discussions on the Apocalypse* (London 1893) 95; G.B. CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York 1966) 132; R.H. MOUNCE, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids 1977) 35.

stays still intact (11,2), including its square (11,8). Therefore, it has not been damaged by the fire and destruction which demolished it almost completely in the year 70. Moreover, John explains that this is the Great City where Jesus was crucified (11,8). Besides, he prophesies that a tenth part of Jerusalem will be torn down by an earthquake (11,13) as punishment for their sins (11,8). It is obvious John did not know what the Roman army did with the city after they conquered it. Therefore, the Sanctuary mentioned in 11,1 is not the Community of Saints after the year 70, but the historic Temple of Jerusalem before the beginning of the rebellion. Inside that Temple the believers will have shelter and will be preserved from the profanation of the Holy City (11,2) and from its partial destruction (11,13).

Others argue that the Sanctuary would be rather a celestial Temple⁽²⁰⁾. But the Sanctuary of Rev 11,1-2 is not in heaven (as in 11,19; 15,5), but in the historic Jerusalem, a holy and sinful city at the same time (11,2,8). The Sanctuary shelters neither the throne of God (as in 7,15; 8,3), nor the Ark of its Covenant (as in 11,19).

Although John writes before the destruction of the Temple, he affirms that at the end of time, in the new Jerusalem, there will not be a Sanctuary, because God and the Lamb will be its Sanctuary. The city will be enlightened by the glory of God with the Lamb as its lamp (Rev 21,22-23). This description has been used as an argument in favor of a late dating of *Revelation*: John affirms that in the new Jerusalem, there will not be a Sanctuary because it was destroyed already. But there is another explanation. In rabbinic literature a symbolic relation between the lamp of the Temple and the lamp of the King Messiah was established⁽²¹⁾. It is stated, moreover, that the light of the Temple will be necessary only in this world, because in the coming world the Messiah will be like a lamp⁽²²⁾. The logical corollary of this rabbinic argument is that during the Messianic era,

⁽²⁰⁾ C.H. GIBLIN, *The Book of Revelation*. The Open Book of Prophecy (Collegeville, MN 1991); M. BACHMANN, "Himmlisch: Der 'Tempel Gottes' von Apk 11:1", *NTS* 40 (1994) 474-480.

⁽²¹⁾ According to the Scriptures, God will be the eternal light that will enlighten Jerusalem (Isa 60,1-3.19-20). His promise of giving David and his lineage a lamp (1 Kgs 11,36; 15,4; 2 Kgs 8,19; 2 Chr 21,7) was transformed into a messianic prophecy: "There I will cause a horn to sprout up for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one" (Ps 132,17). God himself declared that His Chosen one would be "light" to the nations (Isa 42,6; 49,6).

⁽²²⁾ D. FLUSSER, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem 1988) 457-459.

the holy people will not need the material Temple anymore, because God himself will be their spiritual Sanctuary, whose lamp will be the Messiah⁽²³⁾. It is exactly what is stated in Rev 21,22-23: the new Jerusalem will be enlightened by the glory of God, with the Lamb as its lamp. There will not be a Sanctuary, because God and the Lamb will be its new Sanctuary (cf. John 2,19-21). Therefore, it is not necessary to suppose from Rev 21,22 that at the time John described the new Jerusalem, the Temple was already destroyed.

2. *The flight to Pella*

The siege of Jerusalem was announced by Luke (21,20) by following an old prophetic tradition (Jer 6,6). The command of leaving Jerusalem is found in the three synoptic gospels (Mark 13,14-19; Matt 24,15-21; Luke 21,20-24). But in the *Book of Revelation* John asserts that the believers will stay inside the Sanctuary, surrounded by gentiles profaning the exterior court and the Holy City (Rev 11,1-2). Maybe he was inspired by 1 Macc 6,48-54.

In the passage Rev 11,1-13, John places the death of the “two witnesses” in a context of war, of the siege of Jerusalem. That context does not have any relation to the rebellion from 66 to 70. If John had written during or after those years, he would have known that most radical rebels had the control of the Temple during almost the entire rebellion. At first the *sicarii* or assassins — under the command of Menahem, a descendent of Judas the Galilean, the founder of the zealot party — transformed the Temple into their headquarters. Shortly after the murder of Menahem, the zealots regrouped and regained control of the Temple by transforming it into a bastion for their fight against the High Sacerdotal party. They successfully resisted behind the walls the attacks of the troops of another rebel, Simon bar Giora. But the defenders of the Sanctuary split up very soon. John of Gischala, leader of the most numerous faction, kept the control of the exterior court of the Temple, while Eleazar, son of Simon, and the minority zealot faction entrenched themselves inside the interior court and in the *sancta sanctorum*. Despite the violent struggles among the three rebel factions, the sacrifices in the Temple never ceased. The priests and the suppliants had clear access to the altar, after being checked for weapons. However many of them died because of the large quantities of projectiles and arrows cast. When

⁽²³⁾ FLUSSER, *Judaism*, 464.

Titus camped in front of the city with four legions and numerous allied and auxiliary troops, the internal fights ceased for a while. But one day, while many pilgrims were preparing the celebration of the Passover of the year 70 in Jerusalem, the troops of John of Gischala displaced the zealots of Eleazar by surprise from the *sancta sanctorum*. Although the zealots escaped unscathed, they soon gave up their fight against John of Gischala by joining their forces with him against Simon bar Giora. Shortly after, however, a massive assault of the Romans took place in one of the walls of the city, and John and Eleazar accepted to join their forces with Simon in order to defend Jerusalem together. But their reckless courage could not check the slow and steady advance of the Romans. On August 29th, the final assault took place. The interior atrium of the Temple was captured and completely destroyed after being set on fire⁽²⁴⁾.

If John had prophesied during or after these events, could he have written that believers were in the Sanctuary while the exterior court had surrendered to the gentiles and that the Holy City will be trampled on for 42 months (11,1-2)? But, John not only wrote that the believers stayed in the Sanctuary of Jerusalem. He also warned the people of God to escape from Rome, not from Jerusalem⁽²⁵⁾, before it is

⁽²⁴⁾ Josephus, *Bell. Iud.* 2-6.

⁽²⁵⁾ Arguments in favor of Rome as Babylon the Great (Rev 17–18) can be found in: J.E. BRUNS, “The Contrasted Woman of Apocalypse 12 and 17”, *CBQ* 26 (1964) 459-463; A.Y. COLLINS, “Revelation 18: Tount-Song or Dirge?”, *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* (ed. J. LAMBRECHT) (Leuven 1980) 185-204; C.P. THIEDE, “Babylon, der andere Ort: Anmerkungen zu 1 Petr 5,13 und Apg 12,17”, *Bib* 67 (1986) 532-538; R. BERGMEIER, “Die Erzähure und das Tier: Apk 12,18 –13,18 und 17f.: Eine quellen- und redaktionskritische Analyse”, *ANRW* II 25.5 (1988) 3899-3916; MOBERLY, “Revelation”, 383-389; R. BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*. Studies in the Book of Revelation (Edinburgh 1993); A.Y. COLLINS, “Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation”, *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 20-33; H. GIESEN, “Das Römische Reich im Spiegel der Johannes-Apokalypse”, *ANRW* II 26.3 (1996) 2501-2614; J.N. KRAYBILL, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (Sheffield 1996); D.E. AUNE, *Revelation 17–22* (Nashville 1998); G.K. BEALE, *The Book of Revelation*. A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids 1999). Arguments in favor of Jerusalem as Babylon the Great can be found in: J.S. RUSSELL, *The Parousia*. The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming (Grand Rapids [1878] 1999); W. MILLIGAN, *Lectures on the Apocalypse* (London 1892); J.M. FORD, *Revelation* (New York 1975); GENTRY, *Before*; D.K. PRESTON, *Who is this Babylon?* (Ardmore, OK 1999). But Rev 17,18 is too conclusive to have doubts about Rome as Babylon the Great: “And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth”.

destroyed: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities" (Rev 18,4-5).

According to the prophecy of John, believers living in Jerusalem stay sheltered in the Temple, protected from the profanation of the Holy City, while believers living in Rome are persuaded to escape before the city is destroyed. In conclusion, at the time John wrote the *Book of Revelation*, the Jewish-Christians had not escaped to Pella yet, and Menahem, Eleazar, son of Simon, John of Gischala and Simon bar Giora had not taken control of the Temple and the Holy City yet⁽²⁶⁾.

3. *The deaths of Paul, Peter and James the Just*

John prophesies about two witnesses killed in Jerusalem (Rev 11,1-13). According to an old tradition, Peter would have died in the same year Paul was decapitated, that is to say, in 67⁽²⁷⁾. Did John refer to them when he wrote about the two witnesses? But his description of the death of the two witnesses differs radically from the historical circumstances in which Peter and Paul were executed. While the two witnesses are executed in Jerusalem in the context of a war in which believers are protected inside the Temple, Peter and Paul were executed in Rome during a war in which Jewish-Christians escaped from Jerusalem.

But Peter could have been crucified in Rome in 64, during the repression that took place after the fire in Rome⁽²⁸⁾. This alternative

⁽²⁶⁾ According to Eusebius, the Jewish-Christians went to Pella "before the war", because God ordered it through a revelation received by "approved men" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.5). However, it is very probable that this escape had taken place after the disastrous retreat of Cestius, when "many of the most eminent of the Jews swam away from the city, as from a ship when it was going to sink" (Josephus, *Bell. Iud.* 2.20.1).

⁽²⁷⁾ According to this patristic tradition, Peter and Paul died in the same year, the fourteenth year of Nero's reign (Eusebius, *Chronicon* 2.211; *Hist. eccl.* 2.25; Jerome, *De viris ill.* 5;12), that is to say, between October of 67 and June of 68.

⁽²⁸⁾ Eusebius and Jerome affirmed that Peter and Paul died in the same year. But some Fathers used to present their lives as parallel lives. Irenaeus, for example, assured his readers that Peter and Paul founded the church of Rome. Cf. C.P. THIEDE, *Simon Peter. From Galilee to Rome* (Grand Rapids 1988) 157, 190-191. In my opinion, Peter was probably crucified in 64, during the repression that took place as a consequence of the fire in Rome, three years before the death of Paul in 67.

chronology does not fit with what is described in Rev 11,1-13 either. There are several passages that make reference to the persecution of the saints (6,9-11; 7,14; 12,17; 13,7.10.15; 16,6; 17,6; 18,6.24; 19,2; 20,4), but they are too general and it is difficult to interpret them as a reference to Peter's martyrdom. Could John write his work after the death of Peter without mentioning the crucifixion of the first of the apostles?

The passage about the two witnesses (Rev 11,1-13) does not mention the death of James the Just, "the brother of the Lord", in 62 either. According to Josephus, the unbending High Priest Ananus, son of Ananus, from the Sadducee party, took advantage of the death of the procurator, Festus, and the absence of the new procurator, Albinus, as well. He persuaded the Sanhedrin to sentence James and some others to death by lapidation as Law offenders. The moderate Jews refused with indignation these executions and immediately sent envoys to king Agrippa and the procurator Albinus, who was coming from Alexandria. The High Priest Ananus was accused of acting without Rome's consent. The anger of Albinus was soothed when Agrippa gave instructions for the dismissal of Ananus, who held the pontificate for only 3 months (*Ant. Iud.* 20.9.1).

If John had wanted to refer to James the Just, he would not have written about the death of the "two witnesses" (Rev 11,3), "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (11,4). He would not have stated that believers are sheltered in the Temple, harassed by the gentiles (11, 1-2), because the High Priest and the Sanhedrin were the ones who sentenced James to die by lapidation. On the other hand, the death of James did not delight the population (as in 11,10), because Josephus reports that the most moderate sector and the procurator himself became angry with the sentence (*Ant. Iud.* 20.9.1). John writes that the bodies of the two witnesses were hindered from burial (Rev 11,9), but there does not seem to be any evidence of that in the case of James. Finally, Josephus does not say a word about a great earthquake that had partially destroyed Jerusalem (11,13).

The conclusion is clear: the passage about the two witnesses (Rev 11,1-13) does not mention the decapitation of Paul in 67; neither the crucifixion of Peter in 67 or 64, nor the lapidation of James in 62. But if John had written after some of these executions, how could he be silent about their deaths and prophesy, in turn, about the death of the "two witnesses", "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that

stand before the Lord of the earth"? Although this argument is not as conclusive as the two previous ones, it is going in the same direction: John did not say a word about the martyrdoms of James, Peter and Paul because he wrote the *Book of Revelation* before 62.

4. *The earthquake of Laodicea*

In his epistle to the Community of Laodicea, John wrote:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. (Rev 3,15-20)

The message is clear. The Community had much material well-being, just like the opulent city of Laodicea, which was known for its banking, wool industry and medical school⁽²⁹⁾. On the other hand, the Community was "wretched" (3,17) due to its spiritual poverty. Therefore, it had to repent before the return of the Messiah.

It is noticeable that, at the time this epistle was being written, the city had not yet been destroyed by the earthquake of 60⁽³⁰⁾. In fact, after sarcastically alluding to its hot springs and warm mud-baths ("I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot"), to its banking ("I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich"), to its black wool manufacturing industry ("and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen"), and to its ophthalmic medicine ("and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see"), it is impossible to imagine that, knowing the magnitude of the disaster, John had not interpreted the earthquake as a sign of God.

In fact, the earthquake is a recurrent subject in the OT: Ps 75,2-3; 97,4-5, Ezek 38,18-19, Joel 3,16, Mic 1,3-4, Zech 14,3-5.

⁽²⁹⁾ W.M. RAMSAY, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and their place in the plan of the Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids [1904] 1963) chap. 29.

⁽³⁰⁾ Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.27.

John himself wrote:

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake. (Rev 6,12)

Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Rev 8,5)

Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them. At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. (Rev 11,12-13)

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. (Rev 11,19)

The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!". And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. (Rev 16,17-19)

According to the three previous arguments, the epistle to the Community of Laodicea was written before the years 62-70. The epistle presents a marked messianic-escathological tendency. It has many allusions to the city's geography and economy. It was written by someone interested in the earthquake as a literary resource linked to God's judgement. With those antecedents, the absence of any reference to the earthquake of 60 shows that *Revelation* was written before that time.

5. *The symbolism of the Beasts*

The "blasphemous names" of the Beast who rises out of the sea (Rev 13,1) allude to the divine titles of Roman emperors. Influenced by the eastern mores of the Tolemaic and Seleucid monarchies, they were called "lord and god" (Augustus, Domitian, maybe Nero), or simply "god" (Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Domitian). Therefore, the argument which links Rev 4,11 to the imperial cult of Domitian is not conclusive⁽³¹⁾.

According to John, one of the Beast's heads seems to be mortally wounded, but its deadly wound is healed and the Beast lives (Rev

⁽³¹⁾ Cf. F.O. PARKER, "'Our Lord and God' in Rev 4,11: Evidence for the Late Date of Revelation?", *Bib* 82 (2001) 209-217, 219-220, 224-226.

13,3.12.14). Many authors have seen in this passage an allusion to Nero's suicide. In my opinion, however, it is rather a reference to Julius Caesar's assassination, which led to a long, bloody civil war, but it did not cause the fall of the Empire⁽³²⁾.

A second Beast rises out of the earth. It has two horns like a lamb, but it speaks as a dragon (Rev 13,11), evidently referring to paganism. It makes everyone on the earth worship the first Beast, except for those whose names are written in life's book. The verses that describe the worship of the Beast (13,8.12-15) are closely connected to Roman imperial cult. After the death of Julius Caesar, the Roman Senate officially decreed the establishment of the cult of *divus Iulius*. The adopted son of Julius Caesar, Augustus, was honoured while alive as *divi filius*. After he died, the cult of *divus Augustus* began. Caligula went still further, since he was worshipped in his own temple in Rome. One of the first actions of Nero was the establishment of the cult of *divus Claudius*, which he joined with the cult of *divus Augustus*. Although Nero stimulated a self-deification policy pretending to be an incarnation of Apollo (among other gods), apparently there was no officially established cult. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the imperial cult had been considered a legal duty for Trajan's government⁽³³⁾.

Without considering its legal aspects, the cult of goddess Rome, the deified Caesars, the reigning emperor and the imperial family extended widely into the Greek cities of Asia since the Augustus era, in order to obtain political and economic advantages from Rome. Any sort of omission had to cause hostility towards the local communities. In this sense, Rev 13,15-17 perhaps alludes to some kind of local or regional pressure⁽³⁴⁾. About the worshipped beast's identity, John writes: "the number of the beast" is "the number of a person", that is to say, 666 (13,18), a Nero Caesar cryptogram in the Hebrew language⁽³⁵⁾. The reference to Nero shows that the final version of *Revelation* was written in the first years of Nero's reign, that is, between 54 and 60.

In the famous whore passage, John beholds a woman called

⁽³²⁾ This hypothesis has been proposed by WILSON, "The Problem", 597-604.

⁽³³⁾ Cf. GENTRY, *Before*, 261-276, 279.

⁽³⁴⁾ Cf. MOBERLY, "Revelation", 377-379, 389; SLATER, "Dating", 254.

⁽³⁵⁾ FARRAR, *The Early Days*, 471; D.R. HILLERS, "Revelation 13:18 and A Scroll from Murabba'at", *BASOR* 170 (1963) 65; GENTRY, *Before*, 193-212; WILSON, "The Problem", 598.

“Babylon the great” (Rev 17,5) “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17,18). She is seated on seven hills (17,9), in reference to Rome⁽³⁶⁾. Some authors argue that Rome was called “Babylon” after 70, alluding to the destruction of the first Temple of Jerusalem led by Babylon in 587⁽³⁷⁾. But 1 Pet, including its reference to Rome as Babylon (5, 13), is usually dated to the middle of the 60’s. This shows the weakness of the argument.

John describes the woman as drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus (Rev 17,6). Is this verse a reference to the mass, systematic persecution commanded by Domitian? But the existence of that persecution has been questioned by noted scholars⁽³⁸⁾. It has been proposed that John describes the repression caused by Nero in 64⁽³⁹⁾. If that is true, why did John prophecy the death of the two witnesses in Jerusalem (11,3-13), without referring to the executions of James, Peter and Paul? In my view, the saints and martyrs of Jesus’ blood that Rome spills (17,6) is John’s vision in the future, like the vision about the beast who is given the authority to wage war for forty-two months on the saints and to conquer them (13,5-7). Both visions are closely linked to a previous one, in which martyrs in heaven “were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed” (6,11). Concerning the time John was banished to Patmos (a supposed banishment, since it is not mentioned in 1,9), there is no need to think inevitably about Domitian or Nero. According to Josephus, similar steps were taken by the local authorities. For instance, Cuspius Fadus, procurator of Judaea (44-46), was able to end the hard and bloody fights between the Jews of Perea and the people of Philadelphia (Amman). After three Jewish leaders were arrested, Cuspius Fadus commanded one of them to be executed and the other two to be exiled (*Ant. Iud.* 20.1.1).

⁽³⁶⁾ Cf. note 25. On a coin (or medallion) of Vespasian, Rome is represented as a woman seated on seven hills. Cf. E. STAUFFER, *Christ and the Caesars*. Historical Sketches (Philadelphia 1955) 173.

⁽³⁷⁾ A.Y. COLLINS, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London 1989) 998-999; THOMPSON, *The Book*, 14.

⁽³⁸⁾ Cf. note 9.

⁽³⁹⁾ Cf. F.J.A. HORT, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London 1908) I, xxvi; GENTRY, *Before*, 285-299.

In the same famous whore passage, the woman is sitting on a scarlet Beast, having seven heads and ten horns (Rev 17,3). An Angel explains that the seven heads represent seven hills and seven kings. Five of them have fallen, the sixth one still reigns and the seventh one has not yet come. When he comes, he must continue a little while, so the beast (one of the fallen kings who ascends from the abyss) shall be his successor (17,7-11). Regarding the names of the five fallen kings and the sixth reigning king, the possibilities change depending on whether Julius Caesar is considered the first emperor or not, and whether the brief governments of Galba, Otho and Vitellius are included or not⁽⁴⁰⁾. Therefore, the sixth king might be Nero (54-68), Galba (68-69) or Vespasian (69-79):

1 st fallen king	Julius Caesar	Augustus	Augustus
2 nd fallen king	Augustus	Tiberius	Tiberius
3 rd fallen king	Tiberius	Gaius	Gaius
4 th fallen king	Gaius	Claudius	Claudius
5 th fallen king	Claudius	Nero	Nero
6 th reigning king	Nero	Galba	Vespasian
7 th future king	Unknown to John	Unknown to John	Unknown to John
8 th king (one of the fallen kings who ascends from the abyss)			

According to many scholars, the beast “that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction” (17,11) might be Nero Caesar whose number is 666 (13,18). In fact, there is evidence that, already in 69, there were people who believed that Nero was not actually dead and had sought refuge among the Parthians. They used to place his image upon the rostra, dressed in robes of state. Proclamations were published in his name as if he were still alive and ready to return to Rome, in order to take vengeance on his enemies. In relation to this belief, there were three pretenders who claimed to be Nero⁽⁴¹⁾. The myth was known by Jewish and Jewish-Christian circles (*Sibylline Oracles*, *Ascension of Isaiah*), who began to foretell that Nero was back from death as the Beliar demon⁽⁴²⁾.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ I follow the traditional interpretation of considering the emperors already dead as “fallen”. Cf. Moberly and his hypothesis that the five “fallen” kings are five emperors who died a violent death (Julius Caesar, Gaius, Nero, Galba, Otho). MOBERLY, “Revelation”, 377, 383, n. 22, 385.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.2; 2.8-9; Suetonius, *Nero* 57; Zonaras, *Ann.* 11.15-18.

⁽⁴²⁾ Cf. GENTRY, *Before*, 74-77, 300-307.

But the internal evidence shows that the *Book of Revelation* was written in the first years of Nero's reign: between the years 54 and 60. In fact, Nero is the sixth reigning king, since the ancient Roman, Jewish and Jewish-Christian writers considered Julius Caesar the first emperor⁽⁴³⁾. But if Nero still lived in the time of the prophecy, who is the beast who "was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit" (Rev 17,8)?

According to Paul, the return of Jesus Christ will be preceded by the arrival of a powerful enemy of God:

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? (2 Thess 2,1-5)

It is evident that Paul was not considering Nero when he wrote about the opponent of God, since the epistle was written in 51, when Claudius governed and Nero was 13 years old. So, who was "the lawless one", "the one destined for destruction" that "opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God"? The description fits Antiochus Epiphanes perfectly according to Dan 8,10-12; 11,36-37. In fact, in the synoptic gospels, the eschatological return of Christ is preceded by a "suffering" (NRSV) or "tribulation" (NASB) never seen before⁽⁴⁴⁾, with the "desolating sacrilege" (NRSV) or "abomination of desolation" (NASB) as its symbol⁽⁴⁵⁾, indissolubly connected to the impiety of Antiochus Epiphanes⁽⁴⁶⁾.

But according to John, the beast who "was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit" (Rev 17,8) is one of the fallen kings (17,9-11). Although John did not reveal the identity of the beast who

⁽⁴³⁾ Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.34; Suetonius, *Iulius* 76; Josephus, *Ant. Iud.* 18.2.2; 18.6.10; *4 Ezra* 11-12; *Or. Sib.* 5.12-15. Cf. A.Y. COLLINS, *Crisis and Catharsis. The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia 1984) 60-62; GENTRY, *Before*, 154-159.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Mark 13,19; Matt 24,21.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Mark 13,14; Matt 24,15. Cf. Luke 21,20.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ 1 Macc 1,54; 9,27; Dan 9,27; 11,31; 12,1.11.

ascends from the abyss (17,8), it might be Augustus, explicitly associated with the Messiah's birth (cf. Luke 2,1) and implicitly linked to the scarlet Dragon with seven crowned heads who tries to devour the newborn Messiah (Rev 12,3-5). It might also be Tiberius, probably identified as the beast who crucified the Messiah (11,7-8). But Caligula is very close to the Danielic figure of Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan 8,10-12; 11,36-37), archetype of the Antichrist (2 Thess 2,3-4), since he attempted to be worshipped in the Temple of Jerusalem⁽⁴⁷⁾.

If my hypothesis is correct, it was just at the end of the first century when some Jewish-Christian circles began to relate the beast who "was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit" to the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, due to the increasing veneration to Nero's memory. In fact, in the *Sibylline Oracles* and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, it is foretold that the demon Beliar shall descend from his firmament as a king of iniquity, murderer of his mother.

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* *

The external evidence does not allow us to date the Book of Revelation with certainty the end of Domitian's government, since there is an important patristic tendency in favor of Nero's reign or even before that. The internal evidence shows that as John wrote his prophecy, Jerusalem and its Temple had not yet been destroyed, the rebels had not yet taken the control of the Temple, the Jewish-Christian Community had not yet left Jerusalem, the martyrs James, Peter and Paul had not yet been executed, Laodicea had not yet been destroyed because of an earthquake, and Nero Caesar (666) still was the reigning emperor, the sixth one of the dynasty according to Roman, Jewish and Jewish-Christian literature. Therefore, the work should be dated between the years 54 and 60. In this context, Rev 13,3 alludes to the murder of Julius Caesar, and 17,8 to the Antichrist's return, identified as a fallen emperor who might be Augustus, Tiberius or Caligula.

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⁽⁴⁷⁾ Josephus, *Ant. Iud.* 18.8.2.

SUMMARY

In this article I try to demonstrate that the *Book of Revelation* was written in the first years of Nero's reign, because (a) there is an important patristic tradition in favor of Nero and (b) the internal evidence shows that the text was redacted after Nero's ascension to the throne in 54 and before the earthquake of Laodicea in 60.