WHEN WAS THE BOOK OF REVELATION WRITTEN?
IRENAEUS, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA,
AND THE MURATORIAN FRAGMENT

INTRODUCTION

There is no consensus among scholars regarding when the Book of Revelation was written. The main proposals suggest dates that correlate with the fall of Jerusalem: an “early date” is before A.D. 70, while a “late-date” is after. The majority of modern commentators make a case for a late-date, sometime during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, probably in A.D. 95-96. This case is made up of perhaps a score of primary arguments.

This short paper will examine a statement by the early church Father, Irenaeus, as well as contemporary testimonies of Clement of Alexandria and the Muratorian Fragment. Irenaeus’s statement is widely accepted as giving important support to the late-date hypothesis—so important, in fact, that often the case for the late-date is made *solely on it alone*, without any other evidence. Therefore, it is critical to understand what he said, and to evaluate accurately what bearing his statement might have on the case for the late-date of the Book of Revelation. The evidences from Clement and the Muratorian Fragment will be examined because they help put the statement by Irenaeus in its proper light.

IRENAEUS AND THE LATE-DATE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

When commentators attempt to establish and subsequently justify the approximate date of the composition of the Book of Revelation, they are in fact acting as historians.¹ The historian’s most basic enterprise is the sifting and selecting of the numerous facts of history to

¹ There are several commentators who have concluded, on the basis of one interpretation of Daniel 9:24, that all New Testament books predate the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. My statement about “acting as historians” does not apply to these commentators, since their position is theologically or exegetically based rather than being based on the interpretation of history.
ascertain which ones are most useful in arriving at the truth they are investigating. Indeed, as historian and well-known author David Hackett Fischer pointedly observed:

To write history, or even to read it, is to be endlessly engaged in a process of selection. No part of the job is more difficult or more important, and yet no part has been studied with less system, or practiced with less method.²

In this paper, I analyze the basis for and presentation of the argument for the late-date of Revelation which stems from a statement made by the respected second-century Church Father, Irenaeus. The argument from Irenaeus is perhaps the main argument in the late-date arsenal, and it is entirely historical. In making this argument commentators must evaluate not only the available historical facts pertaining to Irenaeus himself, but also relevant data contained in other, contemporary sources. I will show that commentators have failed to consider several noteworthy facts—facts which, if included, would significantly weaken the argument arising from Irenaeus.

Introduction to the Argument from Irenaeus

Irenaeus was a bishop of Lyons in southern France during the second half of the second century. In his youth he was a student of Polycarp, who was for many years a disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus’s writings are among the most extensive from his time, and are very important to us in showing what the church believed as well as the various heresies and enemies she faced. In approximately A.D. 185, while commenting on Rev 13:18, Irenaeus wrote the following in book five of his major work, Against Heresies:

We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision.

² David Hackett Fischer, Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought (New York: Harpers and Row, 1970), 64.
For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.

Here Irenaeus appears to teach that John saw the apocalyptic vision in the final years of Domitian’s reign. Although it is not certain that this was his meaning, for the purpose of this analysis I am assuming that it is.³ This would place the seeing, and probably the writing of Revelation, around A.D. 95-96.

In addition to being one of the earliest witnesses to the date of Revelation’s composition, Irenaeus’s statement is thought to represent the view of the early church on this matter, and not his own private opinion. For these reasons, great weight is given to his testimony by those who argue for the late-date. In the overall case for the date, the witness of Irenaeus nearly always occupies the foundational place in the argument from external evidence. In some cases, Irenaeus’s witness is the sole evidence of any kind—either external or internal—that is put forward in the argument for the date.⁴

³ Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5:30:3. Many commentators have acknowledged that there is a certain difficulty in knowing for sure just what Irenaeus’s statement means (see Steve Gregg, ed., Revelation: Four Views – A Parallel Commentary [Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1997], 17-18). As Kistemaker explains, the problem arises because “the subject of the verb was seen is lacking and has to be supplied” by the reader of Irenaeus’s text (Simon J. Kistemaker, Exposition of the Book of Revelation [New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001], 27, emphasis in source). According to the context, was seen could refer either to John or to the apocalyptic vision. In other words, Irenaeus could be saying that if it were necessary for us to know the name of the Antichrist, then John would have proclaimed it, since he saw the vision not so long ago, toward the end of Domitian’s reign. On the other hand, Irenaeus might mean that John, who was seen not too long ago, would have annunciated the name of the Antichrist had it been something profitable for us to know. It is not my purpose to resolve the interpretive issue; nevertheless, it is not without significance. If the apocalyptic vision is the subject of the sentence, then Irenaeus’s statement constitutes second-century testimony to the late-date. Then again, if John is the subject, this statement tells us nothing about the date, but rather indicates that John lived well into the reign of Domitian. There appear to me to be good arguments supporting either meaning. For what it’s worth, later patristic writers appear to have understood Irenaeus to mean that John saw the vision toward the end of Domitian’s reign. This accords with the assessment of the majority of modern scholars. My evaluation of the argument from Irenaeus assumes that his statement supports the late-date. However, in the same section of Against Heresies, just two paragraphs before the above quotation, Irenaeus refers to the number 666 as “being found in all the most approved and ancient copies” (5:30:1). Note here that Irenaeus refers to “ancient copies” of the Apocalypse. This raises the question: How could there be “ancient copies” of a book which was written “almost in our day”? See Gregg, Four Views, 18; and Kenneth L. Gentry, Before Jerusalem Fell: Redating the Book of Revelation, rev. ed. (Atlanta, Ga.: American Vision, 1998), 58-9.

Yet, the argument from Irenaeus is not without its challenges. The argument depends upon two key premises: that Irenaeus is a reliable reporter of tradition and history, and that his comment represents the uniform view of the church in the second half of the second century. If Irenaeus’s reliability as a historian is in doubt then the value of his witness would be reduced accordingly. Likewise, if there were other credible contemporary patristic testimony that contradicts Irenaeus’s witness, then we would have to conclude that there was more than one early tradition regarding the date of the Book of Revelation. But if there were two or more traditions, then the picture of Irenaeus as a representative of “the view” of the church is inaccurate and the value of his testimony is substantially diminished. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate both that Irenaeus’s credibility as a reporter of tradition is in fact open to serious doubt, and that his testimony represents just one of the views articulated in the early church.

**Challenge #1: Irenaeus’s Reliability is Suspect When Reporting History and Church Tradition**

An essential, yet unstated, premise in the argument from Irenaeus is that his testimony about the date of Apocalypse is historically accurate. Late-date commentators uniformly presume that Irenaeus is accurately conveying correct information when he says that John saw the visions which comprise the Book of Revelation during the reign of Domitian. No consideration is given to the possibilities that Irenaeus may have faithfully reported inaccurate information, or that he may have mistakenly misreported the information he sought to convey. This is very significant, considering that Irenaeus is demonstrably less than reliable when it

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comes to the recording of history. The following are among the most spectacular of his inaccuracies.

Example #1: The Age of Jesus at His Death

Irenaeus believed and wrote that Jesus was between forty-five and fifty years old when He was crucified. Furthermore, he claims that he is accurately reporting what is taught in the Gospel, as well as what has been handed down by those in Asia who knew the apostle John and had heard John himself give this teaching. “Yet,” as Kenneth Gentry has remarked, “no

4. Being thirty years old when He came to be baptized, and then possessing the full age of a Master, He came to Jerusalem, so that He might be properly acknowledged by all as a Master. For He did not seem one thing while He was another, as those affirm who describe Him as being man only in appearance; but what He was, that He also appeared to be. Being a Master, therefore, He also possessed the age of a Master, not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in Himself that law which He had appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to Himself. For He came to save all through means of Himself— all, I say, who through Him are born again to God — infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, He came on to death itself, that He might be the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence, Colossians 1:18 the Prince of life, Acts 3:15 existing before all, and going before all.

5. They, however, that they may establish their false opinion regarding that which is written, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, maintain that He preached for one year only, and then suffered in the twelfth month. [In speaking thus,] they are forgetful to their own disadvantage, destroying His whole work, and robbing Him of that age which is both more necessary and more honourable than any other; that more advanced age, I mean, during which also as a teacher He excelled all others. For how could He have had disciples, if He did not teach? And how could He have taught, unless He had reached the age of a Master? For when He came to be baptized, He had not yet completed His thirtieth year, but was beginning to be about thirty years of age (for thus Luke, who has mentioned His years, has expressed it: Now Jesus was, as it were, beginning to be thirty years old, Luke 3:23 when He came to receive baptism); and, [according to these men,] He preached only one year reckoning from His baptism. On completing His thirtieth year He suffered, being in fact still a young man, and who had by no means attained to advanced age. Now, that the first stage of early life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, every one will admit; but from the fortieth and fiftieth year a man begins to decline towards old age, which our Lord possessed while He still fulfilled the office of a Teacher, even as the Gospel and all the elders testify; those who were conversant in Asia with John, the disciple of the Lord, [affirming] that John conveyed to them that information. And he remained among them up to the times of Trajan. Some of them, moreover, saw not only John, but the other apostles also, and heard the very same account from them, and bear testimony as to the [validity of] the statement. Whom then should we rather believe? Whether such men as these, or Ptolemaeus, who never saw the apostles, and who never even in his dreams attained to the slightest trace of an apostle?
respected New Testament scholar asserts that the biblical record allows for a fifteen year or
more ministry for Christ, or of His having attained an age in excess of forty.\textsuperscript{6}

Example #2: The Teaching of the Lord Regarding
The Material Nature of Kingdom Blessings

According to Irenaeus the blessings to be enjoyed by God's people during the
Millennium are material in nature. He specifically denies that passages referring to Christ's reign
are to be interpreted spiritually and he states that they cannot be understood to refer to anything
but an earthly kingdom.\textsuperscript{7} In the following example, he claims that his source for this teaching is
the Lord Jesus, who passed it on to the apostle John who later communicated it to the elders
who heard him.

When the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the
creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all

\begin{quote}
Οἱ δὲ θεοὶ πάρ Ζηνὶ καθήμενοι ἠγορόωντο ἕν δαπέδῳ:
\end{quote}

which we may thus render:

The gods sat round, while Jove presided o'er,
And converse held upon the golden floor.

\begin{quote}
6 Gentry, \textit{Jerusalem}, 64.
7 Irenaeus, \textit{Against Heresies} 5.35.
\end{quote}
kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth: as the elders
who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him how the
Lord used to teach in regard to these times, and say: The days will come, in which vines
shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs,
and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand
clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when
pressed will give five and twenty metretes of wine. And when any one of
the saints shall lay hold of a cluster,
another shall cry out, ‘I am a better
cluster, take me; bless the Lord
through me.’ In like manner [the Lord
declared] that a grain of wheat would
produce ten thousand ears, and that
every ear should have ten thousand
grains, and every grain would yield ten
pounds of clear, pure, fine flour; and
that all other fruit-bearing trees, and
seeds and grass, would produce in
similar proportions; and that all animals
feeding [only] on the productions of the
earth, should [in those days] become
peaceful and harmonious among each
other, and be in perfect subjection to man.8

Boniface Ramsey refers to Irenaeus' perspective on the Millennium as “extravagant
materialism,”9 an understanding that clashes with the New Testament's view of the spiritual
nature of the blessings in Christ's kingdom, as explained in the commentaries examined for this
paper.

Further Examples with Concluding Thought

Irenaeus reported several other things that he maintained were in full accord with the
teaching passed on from the Lord to the apostles, through their disciples, and finally to his own
generation. Among these supposed catholic teachings are baptismal regeneration, the primacy
of the Roman church and bishop, and the purgatorial purpose of the millennium.10 Furthermore,

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8 Ibid., 5.33.3. In 33.4, Irenaeus notes that Papias, an apostolic father, has recorded the same teaching.
9 Boniface Ramsey, Beginning to Read the Fathers (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1985), 225.
10 For baptismal regeneration, see: Irenaeus, Fragments 34; Against Heresies 1.21.1; 3.12.7-13, 17.1; 4.33.2;
for the primacy of Rome, see: ibid. 3.3.2; for the purpose of the Millennium, see: ibid. 5.31.1, 35.2. Also see
evangelical commentator and late-date supporter G. B. Caird notes that “Irenaeus undoubtedly confused James the apostle with James the Lord’s brother (Against Heresies 3.12.14f.), and wrongly supposed that Papias had been a disciple of the apostle John (Eus. H.E. 3.39.1).”¹¹

While one would hope that Irenaeus and the other early fathers both understood and accurately passed on the teachings they received, this is not always the case. As Caird states, “in fact, second-century traditions about the apostles are demonstrably unreliable.” Caird’s primary evidence for this conclusion is the inaccuracies found in Irenaeus.¹²

There are two possible causes of these inaccuracies: either Irenaeus received incorrect information from others that he then passed on faithfully to us, or he misinterpreted the teachings he received (accurate or not) and passed on those misunderstandings in his writings. In any case, due to the repeated error evident in Irenaeus’ writings, his statements should not be treated as de facto historically reliable. His general unreliability in turn casts doubt on his statement about the date of Revelation. In light of his questionable reliability, the interpreter who uses Irenaeus as a positive witness in his case would appear to be obligated to give the reader sufficient reason to accept Irenaeus’s testimony.

**Challenge #2: Testimony to another “Tradition”**

The other foundational premise in the argument from Irenaeus is that his statement represents the consensus of the Church on the date of Revelation. Sometimes this is explicitly stated, as when B. B. Warfield writes concerning this issue that “the testimony of the early

¹¹ Caird, Revelation, 4.
¹² Ibid.
church… is ancient, credible, and uniform.” Most often though, this is implied by the fact that no contrary testimony by a contemporary writer is offered or even acknowledged to exist. However, it simply is not the case that all early voices are in agreement that the Apocalypse was composed in the reign of Domitian. In fact, there are several early witnesses that suggest that John composed the Revelation prior to the time of Domitian. If only one of these writers is considered to be at least as reliable as Irenaeus, it must be granted that another tradition existed alongside the one reflected by Irenaeus. Two of the more important witnesses will be discussed next.

Witness #1: The Muratorian Fragment

The Muratorian Fragment is an early list in Latin of the books of the New Testament. The list is partial, beginning with the phrase “the third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke” and containing references to nineteen other books, as well as comments on the authors and circumstances of writing. Summarizing its importance, Philip Schaff writes: “It is as far as we know the oldest Latin church document of Rome, and of very great importance for the history of the canon.” The Fragment—now thought to have been written c. A.D. 170—fifteen years prior to Against Heresies—supplies the following testimony relevant to the dating of Revelation: “since the blessed
apostle Paul himself, following the example of his predecessor John, writes by name to only seven churches.”¹⁶ By stating that Paul followed John’s example in writing to seven churches, the author of the Fragment is asserting that the composition of the Apocalypse in some way preceded the writing of Paul’s letters.

Some have understood the author to be claiming that Paul began to write his letters only after John completed the Revelation. This may be what F. F. Bruce is referring to when he says: “This making Paul follow the precedent of John is chronologically preposterous.”¹⁷ However, it is not necessary to read the passage in this way. All the passage says is that Paul followed John’s example in writing letters to seven churches. This requires no more than that Paul completed his last letter after John finished the Apocalypse. Thus the Muratorian Fragment makes the significant assertion that John’s Revelation was completed prior to Paul’s death in A.D. 65.¹⁸ In addition, whether one accepts this claim or not, its very existence points to an equally early tradition that existed alongside the view that some see Irenaeus advocating.¹⁹

While it is not unusual for late-date advocates to appeal to the Muratorian Fragment when arguing for the apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse, these very commentators are silent when it comes to reporting what this same document contributes to the question of the dating of Revelation. Furthermore, because of its very great importance, the Fragment is used

¹⁶ The Muratorian Fragment, lines 47-50.
¹⁷ F. F. Bruce, The Canon of the New Testament (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 164. It should be noted that Bruce gives no reasons for his strong opinion, and so it may rest on other grounds than I have suggested.
¹⁸ One is at a loss to know what B. B. Warfield is referring to when he writes that “the Muratori canon has been misunderstood.” As with Bruce, Warfield provides no elaboration. Warfield “[The book of ] Revelation,” 3:2035.
widely as proof of the early spread and acceptance of the NT books. Its testimony is also used positively to establish the authorship of the other books it names. This causes one to wonder why the Fragment is treated as valid when specifying which books are canonical and who wrote them, but not when it indicates when they were written.

Witness #2: Clement of Alexandria

Clement, who lived from approximately A.D. 160-220, was a teacher in the catechetical school in Alexandria, Egypt. According to some historians, he was the headmaster from A.D. 190 to the end of his life. Like Irenaeus, Clement left behind a large body of writings that provide valuable insights into Christianity and its opponents in the latter half of the second century. In The Miscellanies (also called The Stromata), written around A.D. 200, Clement made the following statement:

The teaching of our Lord at His advent, beginning with Augustus and Tiberius, was completed in the middle of the times of Tiberius. And that of the apostles, embracing the ministry of Paul, ends with Nero.


22 Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata, or Miscellanies 7.17.
Clement is concerned here to place the teaching of Christ and His apostles in their proper historical setting. Christ, he says, completed His teaching during the middle years of Tiberius’s reign (A.D. 14-37), and that the apostles (Paul included) ceased to teach during the time of Nero (A.D. 54-68). Note again Clement’s subject: he is not saying, at least not necessarily, that all the apostles passed from this earth prior to the suicide of Nero in June, A.D. 68. He is merely expressing his view that divine revelation ceased before the end of Nero’s reign. If Clement believed both that John the apostle was the author of the Book of Revelation and that the Apocalypse was Scripture, then Clement’s statement above indicates his opinion that the apostle John completed the Book of Revelation prior to A.D. 68.

What Did Clement believe about The Book of Revelation?

The Book of Revelation was accepted by its original recipients as apostolic Scripture. However, later some church leaders disputed its authenticity due to their perception that it taught the doctrine of chiliasm, which is an unbiblical and overtly sensual view of the blessings enjoyed by the saints in the Millennial Kingdom. Apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse was challenged as early as A.D. 180. This challenge was renewed c. A.D. 264 by Dionysius of Alexandria, who has been called “the most influential, and perhaps the ablest, bishop in that age.” The disagreement regarding the status of this book was still alive even into the fourth century when church historian Eusebius drew up his list of accepted, disputed, and spurious books. It is revealing that Eusebius listed the Book of Revelation twice—once as “universally

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25 Ibid.
accepted” and again as “spurious!” It is appropriate, therefore to ask: What did Clement believe about the Book of Revelation?

In his extant writings, Clement quotes from the Book of Revelation numerous times. In the words of F. F. Bruce, “Clement seems to have had no hesitation about the Apocalypse of John.” Clement credited “the apostle John with the authorship of Revelation,” and he “accepted the book as apostolic Scripture.”

Given that we know Clement’s view of the authorship and Scriptural status of the Book of Revelation, we can now consider his statement in Miscellanies (already quoted above) in regard to Revelation’s date of composition. Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul accurately summarizes the significance of Clement’s statement: “Since Clement considered the Apostle John the author of Revelation and Clement argues that apostolic revelation ceased with Nero, Clement therefore believes that Revelation was written before Nero died.” Consequently, Clement’s testimony entails that John wrote the Apocalypse not in the reign of Domitian, as appears to be asserted by Irenaeus, but much earlier, before the death of Nero.

As with the Muratorian Fragment, the late-date advocates under consideration do not mention or interact with this statement by Clement of Alexandria, although, surprisingly, they cite another statement of his in support of the late-date hypothesis. This second statement is examined in the addendum to this paper, “Clement of Alexandria as a Witness for the Late-date.”

26 Eusebius, The History of the Church, G. A. Williamson, trans.; Andrew Louth, rev. and ed., (New York, N. Y.: Penguin, 1989), 3.25. F. F. Bruce offers the following explanation regarding Eusebius’s double listing of the Book of Revelation: “Eusebius’s apparent inconsistency arises from the fact that the Apocalypse was acknowledged by those churches whose opinion he valued most, whereas he himself was unhappy about it—he could not reconcile himself to its millenarian teaching.” Bruce further explains that Eusebius believed that John the Presbyter—not John the Apostle—was the author of the Book of Revelation. F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 199-200.
27 Ibid., 191.
28 Kistemaker, Revelation, 19.
29 Mounce, Revelation, 23.
The Contemporary Testimony of these Witnesses

The Muratorian Fragment and Clement of Alexandria are two early patristic sources that are contemporary with Irenaeus and that point to the existence of an equally early, yet contrary, tradition to the one which he may reflect. It is helpful to note where these three witnesses are on a timeline and in relation to one another. As mentioned, Clement wrote The Miscellanies in about 200—fifteen years after Irenaeus wrote book five of Against Heresies. Since the Muratorian Fragment is dated at A.D. 170, Irenaeus’s statement, written about A.D. 185, is bracketed on either side by patristic writings that indicate the existence of a counter tradition regarding the date of Revelation. See Illustration 1, below.

ILLUSTRATION 1:

EARLY DATE WITNESSES IN RELATION TO IRENAEUS

170 ← 15 years → 185 ← 15 years → 200

“Muratorian Fragment” Against Heresies Clement of Alexandria

Illustration 1 indicates that, contrary to the way it is almost uniformly presented by late-date supporters, Irenaeus’s statement in Against Heresies is not representative of the unvarying tradition of the early church.

How Commentators handle these Challenges to the Testimony of Irenaeus

In addition to Clement of Alexandria and the Muratorian Fragment, Gentry discusses several other early witnesses whose writings suggest that John composed the Revelation prior to the time of Domitian. See Gentry, Jerusalem, 86-109.
The vast majority of the late-date commentators consulted for this paper make no attempt to deal with any of the above in their arguments for the date. Irenaeus is everywhere portrayed as reliably reporting the traditional view of the church. Table 1 (next page) highlights how eleven representative commentators handle the two challenges to Irenaeus’s witness.

**TABLE 1**

THE WAY REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTATORS HANDLE CHALLENGES TO IRENAEUS’S TESTIMONY

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<tr>
<th>Challenges to Irenaeus’s Testimony</th>
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<th>Counter, contemporary Patristic evidence</th>
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Key: 1 = Hinted at but unaddressed.
      2 = Neither acknowledged nor addressed.
      3 = The author explicitly states he does not believe that counter evidence exits.

Table 1 indicates that the challenge to Irenaeus’s reliability as a reporter of history and tradition is not addressed by any of these commentators, although Kistemaker hints that there may be a problem in the final paragraph of his conclusion regarding the date of the Book of Revelation’s composition. The entire paragraph reads:

The veracity of Irenaeus may be questioned because of some doubtful stories [he told] about John. On the other hand, he was acquainted with Polycarp (69-155), who had been a disciple of the apostle and served as a bridge from the latter part of the first century to the latter part of the next. *We would expect both Polycarp and Irenaeus to*...
relate at least something about John that is historically verifiable. The reference to Irenaeus implies that John’s Apocalypse dates from the time when Domitian’s rule ended.33

Among the commentators reviewed, the above paragraph constitutes the only acknowledgment that Irenaeus may be less than a reliable reporter of history.34 Kistemaker is to be commended for making this admission, although he says no more about it.

Nevertheless, there are problems with parts of Kistemaker’s statement. Irenaeus does not say that Polycarp is the source of his information for the date, nor is Polycarp used as a witness in any argument for the date in Kistemaker’s book. The inclusion of Polycarp’s name along with that of Irenaeus at just this point in the argument appears to be an attempt to strengthen Irenaeus’s testimony by attributing it to his mentor.35 Secondly, the argument italicized in the above quotation is not valid. In light of Irenaeus’s evident unreliability, Kistemaker is giving him a high degree of latitude. While I agree with Kistemaker that we would expect Irenaeus to get at least some thing right, it appears to be arbitrary to assume that he got it right in the one place that helps the argument.

The second challenge – the existence of a contemporary, counter tradition, from an equally reliable source – is not acknowledged by anyone.

The challenges presented above are significant and appear to seriously weaken or even cancel out the usefulness of Irenaeus’s testimony. We have seen that Irenaeus is not entirely

33 Kistemaker, Revelation, 38; emphasis added.
34 This does not contradict my earlier statement that “It appears to me that late-date commentators uniformly presume that Irenaeus is conveying correct information when he says that John saw the visions of Revelation during the reign of Domitian.” A reading of this section of Kistemaker’s commentary will reveal that his argument proceeds on the assumption of the accuracy of what Irenaeus reports. The suggestion that Irenaeus might be less than trustworthy appears only in the conclusion to Kistemaker’s section on the date of Revelation.
35 Albertus Pieters also connects Polycarp and Irenaeus in this way (Revelation, 14). Yet Irenaeus himself appears to imply that Polycarp is not the source for this comment. In his preface to book 5 of Against Heresies, Irenaeus states that the source for much of the material in the previous four books was “the preaching of the Church” which “the apostles handed down” to his day. In contrast to this, he names the sources for the material in book 5 as “the rest of the Lord’s doctrine and the apostolical epistles.” While Polycarp may also have believed some, if not all, of the things that Irenaeus relates, it appears to me that Irenaeus is not using him as a source for the statements in the fifth book, including his relevant statement concerning the composition date of the Book of Revelation. In addition, Polycarp is mentioned only once in book 5 of Against Heresies when Irenaeus introduces Papias as one who heard John and was “a companion of Polycarp” (5.33.4).
trustworthy as a historian; indeed, in the words of R. H. Charles, he is “quite untrustworthy.” Since this is the case, late-date commentators who appeal to Irenaeus would seem to be duty-bound to give reasons why the reader should accept Irenaeus’s witness as accurate. It is hoped that in future writings, late-date commentators will adequately address these issues so that readers of their commentaries can assign Irenaeus’s testimony the appropriate weight.

**Conclusion**

In the foregoing discussion of the witness of Irenaeus to the date of Revelation, Irenaeus is thought to provide very important testimony to the late-date. However, this position can only be maintained by overlooking significant facts that challenge Irenaeus as a historical witness. These challenges focus on two vital areas: Irenaeus’s general reliability as a reporter of tradition, and the portrayal that his position is representative of the uniform view of the early church regarding the date of the Apocalypse. In light of these challenges, the evidential value of Irenaeus’s testimony substantially less than is often portrayed. While it is probable that Irenaeus meant that John saw the apocalyptic vision toward the end of the Domitian’s time, it is far from certain that his statement is historically true, since Irenaeus reported as historical facts some things that were clearly inaccurate. Additionally, the fact of a counter tradition regarding the date of Revelation would seem to negate the import of his statement.

It is disappointing that late-date commentators fail to acknowledge or deal with these significant challenges to Irenaeus’s testimony. Facts that should be considered are overlooked or ignored, and other facts thereby distorted. While not specifically discussing the dating of the Book of Revelation, noted author D. A. Carson rightly observed that this “kind of appeal to selective evidence… enables the interpreter to say what he or she wants to say without really

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listening to what the evidence actually says. Carson notes that there are numerous examples of such selective use of evidence in the theological literature. Fischer points to the selective use of facts to support a hypothesis as a major problem in historical interpretation:

Scholars who take a pragmatic view of the task and collect facts that are weapons for a cause are faced with the problem that some facts exist which are useful to their enemies. More than a few able historians, caught up in this predicament, have proposed a kind of fact control, which is profoundly hostile to free inquiry.

As Carson suggests, “what is needed is evenhandedness” in both selecting and presenting the facts.

ADDENDUM
CLEMENT AS A WITNESS FOR THE LATE-DATE

Earlier I quoted Clement of Alexandria’s statement from his book Miscellanies in which he expressed his opinion that the ministry of the apostles ended during the reign of Nero. Among other things, Clement’s statement entails testimony in support of the early date of the Apocalypse. In light of this it is inexplicable that late-date supporters often list Clement of Alexandria as giving testimony in favor of the late-date. The following comment from Clement’s Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved? is interpreted by many late-date advocates to mean that John was banished to the island of Patmos during the reign of Domitian.

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38 Ibid.
39 Fischer, Historians’ Fallacies, 100.
40 Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, 99.
It is then supposed by these commentators that because John saw the apocalyptic vision while on Patmos (Rev 1:9), he must have seen it at this time.\textsuperscript{42} What Clement said was:

\begin{quote}
For when, \textit{on the tyrant’s death}, he [the Apostle John] returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos, he went away, being invited, to the contiguous territories of the nations, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole Churches, there to ordain such as were marked out by the Spirit.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

From the immediate context it is abundantly clear that Clement is speaking about John the apostle and his activities after he returned from Patmos. What is not clear is the identity of “the tyrant”. To their credit, commentators referring to this statement by Clement often acknowledge this problem.\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless, late-date supporters claim that Clement is probably referring to Domitian.\textsuperscript{45} However, this interpretation brings Clement into unnecessary conflict with his other statement, already quoted above, about the ministry of the apostles ending in the reign of Nero. There are other ways to interpret Clement’s statement in \textit{The Rich Man} that do not involve him in self-contradiction. The following table (Table 2, next page) places Clement’s two statements side by side.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The argument from Clement looks like this:
\begin{itemize}
\item Premise #1: John was on Patmos when he wrote the Book of Revelation.
\item Premise #2: John was on Patmos during the reign of the tyrant (i.e. Domitian).
\item Conclusion: John was on Patmos during the reign of Domitian, and this is when he wrote the Book of Revelation.
\end{itemize}
By way of analogy, consider the following argument based on incidents in my life.
\begin{itemize}
\item Premise #1: Chuck was in the hospital when he got his tonsils removed.
\item Premise #2: Chuck was in the hospital in May of 1993.
\item Conclusion: Chuck was in the hospital in May of 1993, and it was then that he got his tonsils removed.
\end{itemize}
In the above, both premises are true and the conclusion is false. In 1993 I was in the hospital for my daughter’s birth. I had my tonsils removed a decade earlier. Since the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises, this argument is also unsound. In a similar way, the argument involving John is also unsound.
\item Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Who is the Rich Man that Shall Be Saved?}, 42; emphasis added.
\item This same assumption is made about a very similar statement of Origen’s. Origin says that John was banished, as tradition says, by an emperor to Patmos” (\textit{Commentary on Matthew} 16:6). Like Clement, Origen does not name the emperor who, according to tradition, banished John.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
TABLE 2
STATEMENTS BY CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA
GERMANE TO THE DATE OF REVELATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miscellanies</th>
<th>The Rich Man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teaching of our Lord at His advent, beginning with Augustus and Tiberius, was completed in the middle of the times of Tiberius. And that of the apostles, embracing the ministry of Paul, ends with Nero.</td>
<td>For when, on the tyrant’s death, he [the Apostle John] returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos, he went away, being invited, to the contiguous territories of the nations, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole Churches, there to ordain such as were marked out by the Spirit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As interpreters, we should assume that Clement is being consistent with himself. After all, this is what we hope others assume about us. We should posit a conflict only when we cannot see how two statements can reasonably be harmonized. If possible, we should employ the standard interpretive rule of letting the clear passage shed light on the unclear one. The statement in Miscellanies is clear and unambiguous: Clement believes that the ministry of John ended in the reign of Nero. On the other hand, the statement in The Rich Man is not clear: Clement does not name the “tyrant” he refers to and so the time period he is speaking of is unknown.

There are several ways to harmonize these passages if we start with the assumption that Clement is not inconsistent and we let the clear passage inform our interpretation of the unclear one. For instance, it could be that 1) Nero is being referred to in both statements; or perhaps 2) while the statement in The Miscellanies refers to Nero, “the tyrant” refers to some other emperor who preceded Nero. Consequently, there are ways to interpret both statements so that Clement remains consistent with himself. The question is why late-date supporters would choose to interpret Clement in a way that makes him self-contradictory.