

The Date of Revelation: Clues within the Book Itself?

Scholars have questioned whether the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Nero (54–68) or that of Domitian (81–96). The latter idea was the common view of the early church and remains the favored position today. But arguments can be advanced in support of the earlier time period (Nero).

Some scholars have thought that certain clues to the dating of Revelation may be found within the book itself.

Revelation 17:9–11

Revelation 17:9–11 is usually thought to refer to the Roman emperors and to enumerate them as follows:

- five have fallen;
- one (i.e., the sixth) is living;
- the other (i.e., the seventh) has not yet come;
- an eighth belongs to the seven.

Some scholars suggest that this means that the emperor at the time the book of Revelation was written was the sixth Roman emperor (the one who was “still living”), and Nero was the sixth emperor.

Unfortunately, this does not solve the problem with absolute certainty. For one thing, Nero can be counted as the sixth emperor only if one begins the list with Julius Caesar. Julius did begin the line of Caesars, but he did not rule the empire in a manner that would necessarily merit his inclusion as one of the numbered rulers in this passage. Most historians would say that, strictly speaking, Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor (which would make Nero the fifth). In any case, the passage is perhaps too poetic or symbolic to provide an absolute chronology: it could mean that the sixth emperor (Nero?) is still living in some metaphorical sense (his influence continues to be felt).

Revelation 11:1–2

Scholars have also pointed out that Revelation 11:1–2 portrays the temple as still standing, which would make more sense if John was writing before the year 70 (when the temple was destroyed). But others point out that John is reporting a visionary experience, and it is quite possible that his visions include elements from Israel’s past without concern for historical anachronism. Furthermore, the city of Rome is referred to in this book as “Babylon” (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21), an epithet that would make more sense after the temple had been destroyed (by Rome, just as an earlier temple had been destroyed by Babylon).

Conclusion

Neither of these points is considered to be decisive, though for some scholars they give more credence to the hypothesis of an earlier date for Revelation than might be assumed otherwise.