

APOCALYPSE OF JOHN Session 4: Historical Backgrounds—Part 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS (INTERNAL EVIDENCE)

A. Internal Evidence—Key Texts from John’s Apocalypse:

1. Revelation 1:4 (NIV):

⁴John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia.

2. Revelation 1:9-11:

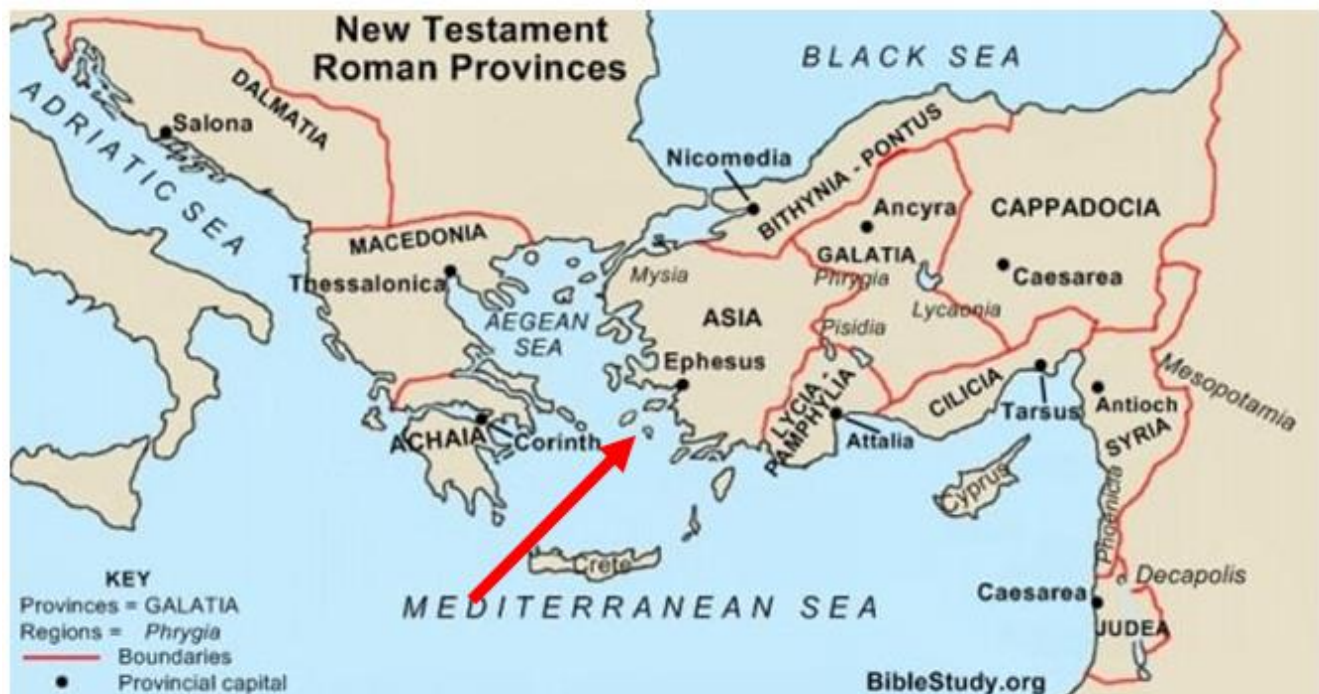
⁹I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

B. Who wrote Revelation?

C. Where was the author located?

D. Who were the intended recipients and where were they located?

E. What were the circumstances? (compare Rev 2:3, 9-10, 13, 19; 3:8-10; 6:9-11; 17:6)



(Source: <https://www.biblestudy.org>)

AUTHOR OF REVELATION (EXTERNAL EVIDENCE)

A. Who is the “John” who wrote Revelation?

1. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (ca. A.D. 180, translation in *Early Christian Fathers*):

Book III, Part 1, Sections 1-2 (p. 370):

. . . **Matthew** among the Hebrews issued a Writing of the gospel in their own tongue, while Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel at Rome, and founding the Church. After their decease **Mark**, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing what Peter had preached. Then **Luke**, the follower of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel as it was preached by him. Finally **John**, the disciple of the Lord, who had also lain on his breast, published the Gospel, while he was residing at Ephesus in Asia.

2. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (ca. A.D. 325):

Book III, Part 24 (pp. 131, 134):

Now let me indicate the unquestioned writings of this apostle [John]. Obviously his gospel, recognized as it is by all the churches in the world, must first be acknowledged. . . .

Of John's writings, besides the gospel, the first of the epistles has been accepted as unquestionably his by scholars both of the present and of a much earlier period: the other two are disputed. As to the Revelation, the views of most people to this day are evenly divided.

Book III, Part 39 (pp. 149-51):

. . . [Papias, bishop from Phrygia who lived in the early 2nd century] twice includes the name of John. The first John he puts in the same list as Peter, James, Matthew, and the rest of the apostles, obviously with the evangelist in mind; the second, with a changed form of expression, he places in a second group outside the number of the apostles, giving precedence to Aristion and clearly calling John a presbyter. He thus confirms the truth of the story that two men in Asia had the same name, and that there were two tombs in Ephesus, each of which is still called John's. This is highly significant, for it is likely that the second—if we cannot accept the first—saw the Revelation that bears the name of John. Papias, whom we are now discussing, owns that he learnt the words of the apostles from their former followers, but says that he listened to Aristion and the presbyter John with his own ears. Certainly he often mentions them by name, and reproduces their teachings in his writings.

DATE AND OCCASION OF REVELATION (EXTERNAL EVIDENCE)

A. First-Century Roman Emperors:

Trajan (98-117)

Nerva (96-98)

Domitian (81-96)

Titus (79-81)

Vespasian (69-79)

Galba/Otho/Vitellius (68-69)

Nero (54-68)

Claudius (41-54)

Caligula (37-41)

Tiberius (A.D. 14-37)

Augustus (30 B.C. – A.D. 14)

B. Two Great Persecutions Against the First-Century Church:

1. Emperor Nero (A.D. 64 or 65):

Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book XIV, Part XLIV:

But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [of Nero]. Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car[riage]. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

2. Emperor Domitian (A.D. 95-96):

Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (ca. A.D. 325), Book III, Parts 17, 18, 20 (pp. 125, 127):

Many were victims of Domitian's appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were executed without a fair trial, and countless other eminent men were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally, he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God. He was, in fact, the second to organize persecution against us, though his father Vespasian had had no mischievous designs against us.

There is ample evidence that at that time the apostle and evangelist John was still alive, and because of his testimony to the word of God was sentenced to confinement on the island of Patmos. Writing about the number of the name given to antichrist in what is called the Revelation of John, Irenaeus has this to say about John in Book v of his *Heresies Answered*:

Had there been any need for his name to be openly announced at the present time, it would have been stated by the one who saw the actual revelation. For it was seen not a long time back, but almost in my own lifetime, at the end of Domitian's reign. . . .

After fifteen years of Domitian's rule Nerva succeeded to the throne. By vote of the Roman senate Domitian's honours were removed, and those unjustly banished returned to their homes and had their property restored to them. This is noted by the chroniclers of the period. At that time too the apostle John, after his exile on the island, resumed residence at Ephesus, as early Christian tradition records.

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (ca. A.D. 180), Book III, Part 3, Section 3 (p. 374):

The church in Ephesus also, which was founded by Paul, and where John survived until the time of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.

C. Date and Occasion of Revelation:

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Eusebius. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated by G. A. Williamson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975.

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Richardson, Cyril C., trans. and ed. *Early Christian Fathers*. In collaboration with Eugene R. Fairweather, Edward Rochie Hardy and Massey Hamilton Shepherd. The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 1. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970.