

Dating the Seven Churches

From John A. T. Robinson - Redating the New Testament (1976)

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In turning to the evidence supplied by the book itself, we may consider first the historical and geographical situation which occasioned its writing. This demands to be considered under two heads. First there is the situation presupposed by chs.1-3, together with the coda of 22.6-21; and secondly there is the situation presupposed by the main body of the book, the visions of 4.1-22.5. In the former the scene is set in Asia Minor; in the latter the focus, in so far as it is upon earth at all, is in Rome and to a lesser extent in Jerusalem.

In this the book of Revelation corresponds to what we observed in I Peter. There we argued that while the opening and closing verses were directed towards the recipients of the epistle in Asia Minor, the background for understanding the homiletic material which makes it up was to be located rather in Rome. In fact the parallels between these documents are instructive. Both are dominated by a political situation that calls for the symbolic pseudonym of 'Babylon' and by an eschatological situation that compels the hope that the consummation cannot now be long delayed (I Peter 4.7; Rev.1.7; 3.11; 22.6f., 12,20). Both also presuppose that persecution has gone a good deal further in Rome than in Asia. Yet there are differences too. The area of Asia Minor is different, northern in I Peter, western in Revelation; and the author of the latter clearly reveals an informed personal acquaintance with place and circumstance of which the author of the former shows no sign. Above all the whole situation is considerably further advanced. In I Peter the judgment is only now beginning with the household of God, even in Rome (4.17); in Revelation Babylon is already gorged with the blood of the apostles and prophets and people of God (16.6; etc.). In Asia Minor too things have clearly gone beyond the verbal abuse that in I Peter mainly characterized the attack on Christians - though still in Revelation the pressure for some consists of slander, with the suffering (confined to a symbolic ten days in jail) yet to come (2.91.); and in all the churches there is as yet but one martyr to record (2.13). But what has decisively changed is the attitude to the state - from one of guarded reverence to one of open hostility. Yet there is nothing here so far to demand an interval of more than a few years the other side of that fiery ordeal which Peter had already recorded as starting (4.12) and which we saw good reason to identify with the Neronian program of 65.

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A further instructive parallel is provided by the situation presupposed in Jude and II Peter, which we gave grounds for supposing to be addressed to Jewish Christians in some part of

Asia Minor in 61-2. At that time indeed there was no hint of persecution, but there was plenty of evidence of insidious attack from gnosticizing, Judaizing heretics who were making false claims to leadership of the church and were scoffing at the Christian hope.

We have already seen that the nearest parallels both for the gnosticizing tendencies and for the eschatological teaching in these epistles is not with second-century literature but with other New Testament writings to be dated in the late 50s and 60s - and with the book of Revelation. The themes in common with the last are sufficiently striking to merit more extended treatment.

In both, the false teachers are accused of the error of Balaam (Jude 11; II Peter 2.15; Rev.2.14), which in Revelation is closely associated with the teaching of the Nicolaitans (2.6,15). In both Christians are described as being lured into immorality (II Peter 2.14, 18; 3.17; Rev.2.20), into contaminating their clothing (Jude 23; Rev.3.4), and into disowning their Master (Jude 4; II Peter 2.1; Rev.2.13). There is the same contrast between the true and false $\gamma\nu\bullet\sigma\iota\varsigma$ (Jude 8; II Peter i.2f., 16; Rev. 2.17,24). The heretical teachers are claiming to be shepherds and apostles of Christ's flock (Jude 1.1f.; Rev.2.2), and there is a similar appeal to remember the teaching of the true apostles (Jude 17; II Peter 1.12; 3.if.; Rev.3.3), who are the foundation of the church and of its faith (Jude 3; Rev.21.14). The eschatological symbolism too shows remarkable parallels, with the day of Christ being likened not only, as in the common Christian tradition, to the thief (II Peter 3.10; Rev.3.3; 16.15) but uniquely in these two documents to the morning star (II Peter 1.19; Rev. 2.28; 22.16). In both the existing heavens and earth disappear (II Peter 3.10; Rev. 6.14; 16.20; 20.11) to be replaced by new (II Peter 3.13; Rev.21.1); in both the fallen angels are chained in the depths of hell (Jude 6; II Peter 2.4; Rev.20.1-3, 7), and appeal is made to the theme of a thousand years (II Peter 3.8; Rev.20.2-7).

All this could doubtless have come from almost any period, and if II Peter and Jude are not early the argument falls. Yet there is good reason to suppose that the Apocalypse too presupposes a time when the final separation of Christians and Jews had not yet taken place. For is it credible that the references in Rev.2.9 and 3.9 to those who claim to be Jews but are not' could have been made in that form after 70? For the implication is that Christians are the real Jews, the fullness of the twelve tribes (7.4-8; 21.12), and that if these Jews were genuinely the synagogue of Yahweh (as they claim) and not of Satan they would not be slandering 'my beloved people'.

Even by the time of the Epistle of Barnabas, [For the date of this, cf. pp. 313-9 below.] which, unlike the book of Revelation, clearly presupposes the destruction of the temple (16.1-4) and the irrevocable divide between 'them'.....

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....and 'us' (cf. •διαθ•κη•ε•ς••••ς•ε•ς•κε•νου•ς), such language is no longer possible. Hort makes this point in his commentary on Rev. 2.9, but I have not noticed anyone else who does - apart again from Torrey. [Apocalypse,82f.] If it is valid, it helps to confirm that the remainder of this language belongs, as we argued earlier, to this same period.

The most noticeable feature in the account of what has actually been suffered by the churches of Asia, or is immediately likely to be, is the absence of any clear reference to the imperial cult, which pervades the rest of the book. There is nothing in the warnings and encouragements given to the congregations that requires us to pre-suppose more than Jewish harassment, the action of local magistrates, and general pagan corruption. Even in Pergamon, which is stated to be 'Satan's throne' (2.13), there is no compelling evidence that the allusion is to emperor-worship. In so far as Satan is characteristically for this writer 'the old serpent' (12.9; 20.2), the allusion may well be to the snake-worship associated with the shrine of Asclepius, of which the city was a centre.

[So Hort, ad loc.; Zahn, INT III, 411f.] Even if, as later commentators tend to argue, the reference is to the temple consecrated there to 'the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma', [I.T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, New York 1919, 456, notes that Pergamon was the first place in the province of Asia to have such a temple. Yet Augustus also sanctioned temples in Ephesus and Nicea with the inscription 'To the goddess Roma and the divine Julius' (Dio Cassius, Hist.51.6).] this had been founded in 29 bc [Tacitus, Ann. 4.37; cf. 3.63; 4.55; and Suetonius. Aug. 52.] and does not of itself require a late date. Yet though emperor-worship can be read into the letters to the seven churches it is not demanded by them (in strong contrast with the visions that follow).

Even if a gigantic statue of the Emperor Domitian was indeed erected in a temple at Ephesus, [Cf. Reicke, *NT Era*, 279, for the references.] there is absolutely nothing in the letter to the Christians there to suggest that this was the issue they faced: their struggle was not with the state but with false apostles, the Nicolaitans, and loss of fervour within the church (2.1-7). This is not, of course, to deny that for the seer the final battle with the 'beast' underlay everything else. But the development of emperor-worship in the province of Asia cannot be used for determining the historical context into which the letters fit.

While on the subject of the letters to the churches, it will be appropriate to consider the objection often raised that they presuppose a state of affairs so far beyond that of Paul's time as to point to a later generation.[So e.g. Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, 207, who refers vaguely to 'a considerably long interval'.] This is one of those contentions that it is very difficult to handle.

How much time is required for the Galatians 'so quickly' to have followed a different gospel (Gal. 1.6), or for the church of Ephesus to have lost its early love (Rev. 2.4), or for the church of Laodicea to have grown lukewarm (Rev.3.i5f.)? - especially since what we can tell about the state of the last

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...from the epistle to the Colossians (2.1; 4.13-16), our only other source, amounts to precisely nothing. It is obviously impossible to set any firm figure. Yet considering all that we know happened to the only well-documented church, that of Corinth, in the seven and a half years between late 49 and early 57, the ten and a half years from mid-58 (on our reckoning, the date of Colossians) to late 68 (the earliest date for the Apocalypse) could surely have seen quite as many changes in the Asian churches -changes indeed which, according to Acts 20.291. and II Tim. 4.31., Paul himself clearly foresaw, and of which the Petrine epistles have already given us more than a glimpse. And, as we have said, there is nothing to suggest that there is any great interval between where these last leave off and the letters of Rev. 1-3 begin.

One objection however can be dismissed, which is constantly repeated from one writer to another. [E.g. Zahn,INT III, 4121.; Moffatt,Revelation, EGT, V,317; ILNT, 507; Charles,Revelation I, xciv; McNeile-Williams, INT, 262; Kummel,INT, 469; and • most recently even the conservative L. Morris, The Revelation of St John (Tyndale NTC),1969,37.] This is that Polycarp in his epistle to the Philippians (i 1.3) states that his own church at Smyrna had not been founded till after the death of Paul - so that it could not therefore be addressed as it is in Rev. 2.8-11 as early as the late 60s. But, as Lightfoot [AF, 166.] observed long ago, all that Polycarp actually says[His words are (in Lightfoot's translation): But I have not found any such thing in you, neither have heard thereof, among whom the blessed Paul laboured, who were his letters from the beginning. For he boasteth of you in all those churches which alone at that time knew the Lord; for we knew him not as yet. Other editors prefer to supply a word in the difficult phrase 'qui estis in principio epistulac eius' and take it to mean 'who are praised (or mentioned) in the beginning of his Epistle'; but this does not affect the issue of dating.] is that 'the Philippians were converted to the Gospel before the Smyrneans - a statement which entirely accords with the notices of the two churches in the New Testament'. [This is recognized by Torrey, op.cit., 78f., and also by Guthrie,NTI, 955.] It is astonishing that so much has continued to be built on so little.

A similar objection has sometimes been brought[E.g. again by Kummel, INT, 469.] against a date in the 60s from the fact that Laodicea, almost totally destroyed in the earthquake of 60-1, is addressed as an affluent church. But the city took pride in having rebuilt itself without waiting for help from imperial funds,[Tacitus, Am. 14.27; cf. Orac. Sib.4.197f.: 'Miserable Laodicea, thee too an earthquake shall one day raze in precipitate ruin, but thou shalt stand built up again as a city.'] and by the end of the decade might well have boasted, How well I have done! I have everything I want in the world (Rev.3.17).

Ironically Moffatt [EG T V, 3 71.] holds that it is irrelevant to connect this with the reconstruction after the earthquake because by the 80s 'the incident is too far back'!

This is an instance of how....

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arbitrary dating procedures so often are. In contrast Charles [Revelation 1,43-6 (44).] regards the letters to the churches as having been written 'at a much earlier date than the Book as a whole ['In the closing years of the reign of Vespasian (75-9) but hardly earlier.' He bases the last qualification solely on the supposedly late foundation of the church of Smyrna (I, xciv).] and re-edited in the reign of Domitian.[His grounds for this re-editing are simply that (a) the reference in 3.10 to 'the ordeal that is to fall upon the whole world' (long previously, one would have thought, a stock feature of Jewish apocalyptic) presupposes the later outlook of the book as a whole, and (b) the beginnings and endings of the letters contain allusions to the thought and diction of 1.13-18 and other passages from the main body of the book. So without a shred of evidence, textual or stylistic, he regards these as later additions. This is characteristic of his procedure with any passage that will not fit his scheme.]

For their outlook, he says, is one in which Christians could still be expected to survive to the parousia ('Only hold fast to what you have, until I come', 2.25) and in which - a significant admission - 'there is not a single reference' to the imperial cult. [Similarly Michaelis, Einleitung, 316, who sees no evidence of state persecution in the letters and regards a Domitianic date for them as too late.]