

Unlocking the Apocalypse

An Investigator's Guide to the Book of Revelation

If these words from Matthew comprise the still photograph, the Book of Revelation is the movie. In a day when the visual and cinematic take precedence over the written word, the genre of Revelation seems particularly suitable.

— **Derek Thomas**



The Paradox of the Apocalypse

The Book of Revelation is known as the **Apocalypse**, a Greek word that means “a revealing” or “an unveiling.” Yet, it is one of the most perplexing books in Scripture, filled with highly imaginative and symbolic language.

Many scholars argue it was written in a form of “code” during a time of intense persecution. The author needed to communicate a message of hope to contemporaries while veiling its meaning from hostile authorities.

Our challenge is to understand the tools scholars use to interpret this unveiling. The safest principle is to see how its images and language are used elsewhere in Scripture.



The Field of Investigation: Eschatology

The study of Revelation falls under a specific branch of theology called **Eschatology**: the science of the “last things,” focusing on the consummation of the kingdom of God.

Key Topics Covered by Eschatology:

- The Parousia (the Second Coming of Christ)
- The Rapture
- The Great Resurrection
- The Manifestation of the Antichrist
- Heaven and Hell

This is an area of vast disagreement among Christians, largely due to the challenges of interpreting prophetic material.


Four Competing Theories of the Case

While there are many systems of eschatology (pre-millennialism, post-millennialism, etc.), most differences can be traced back to four basic approaches to interpreting the Book of Revelation itself.




1.

**The
Preterist
View**



2.

**The
Futurist
View**



3.

**The
Historicist
View**



4.

**The
Idealist
View**

The interpretive approach one adopts will produce a significantly different understanding of the book's message.

Visualizing the Interpretive Frameworks



IDEALIST
Sees the book as fundamentally symbolic, depicting the ongoing conflict between God and evil that occurs in all eras, rather than a specific chronology.

The Pivotal Clue: When Was It Written?

While there is a wide consensus that the Apostle John wrote Revelation, the single most critical question for its interpretation is the **date of composition**.

The debate centers on one pivotal event: the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
This date is one of the most well-attested in ancient history.



If the book was written *after* 70 AD, the Preterist view (which sees it as prophecy about 70 AD) becomes nearly impossible to hold without accusing the author of fraud.

The Investigator's Methods: Two Types of Evidence

To determine the date of any biblical book, scholars perform detective work using two distinct categories of evidence.



External Evidence

Testimony and data found outside the book itself.

- References from contemporary or near-contemporary writers.
- Quotations from the book found in other datable, early documents.



Internal Evidence

Clues and information found within the text of the book.

- An explicit date mentioned by the author.
- Clear references to people or events known to have occurred at a specific time.

External Evidence: The Testimony of Irenaeus



The Key Witness:

The chief external evidence for dating Revelation comes from Irenaeus, a highly respected church father and theologian from the 2nd century.

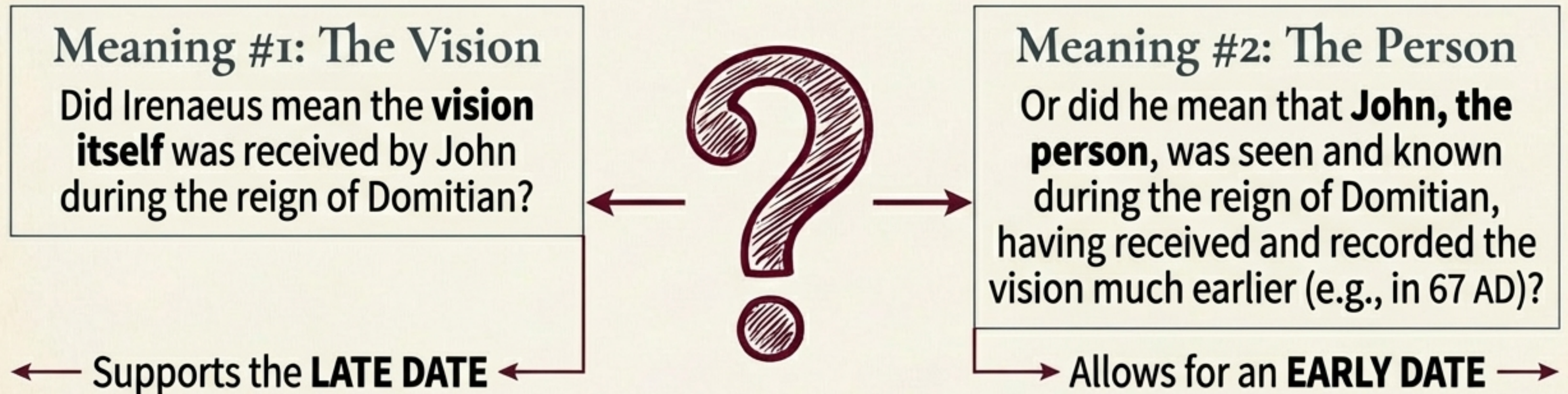
The Testimony:

Irenaeus made a specific reference to the vision John received on the Isle of Patmos. He explicitly connected this event to the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian.

Since Domitian reigned in the 90s AD, this testimony has historically been the primary support for the traditional late date of composition (c. 95-96 AD).

A Critical Ambiguity in the Testimony

While Irenaeus's testimony is significant, there is a crucial ambiguity in his original language that leaves the question open.



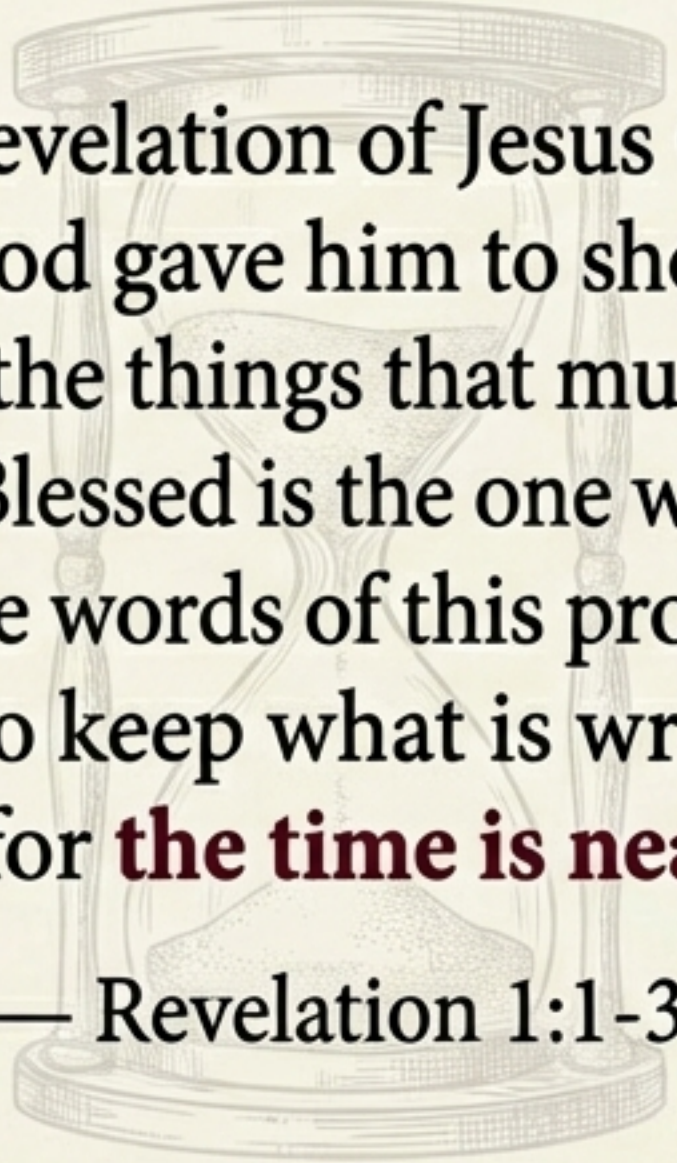
This linguistic question has not been settled once and for all, meaning the strongest piece of external evidence is not conclusive.

Internal Clue #1: A Pervasive Sense of Urgency

The book itself contains several timeframe references that suggest the events described were on the immediate horizon.

The Preterist Argument

Proponents of an early date argue this language is the strength of their position. How could events 2,000+ years away be described as “shortly” or “near”?



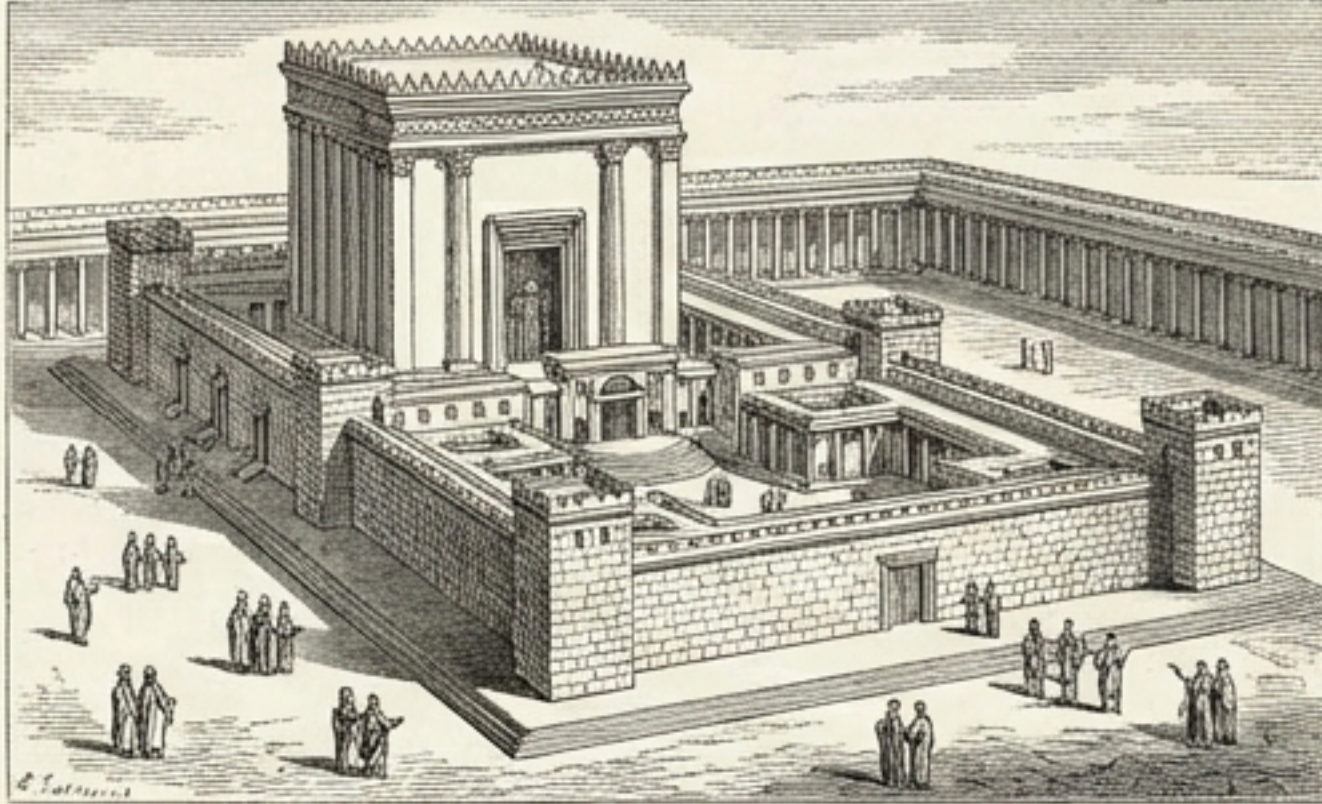
“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must **shortly place**... Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy... and who keep what is written in it, for **the time is near**.”

— Revelation 1:1-3

Counterarguments

Others argue this refers to the *rapidity* with which events will unfold once they begin, or they invoke Peter’s statement that “a day in the Lord’s sight is as a thousand years.”

Internal Clue #2: The Temple Is Still Standing



The Evidence:

Throughout the Book of Revelation, the language used talks as if the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was still standing and operational at the time of writing.



The Logical Problem for a Late Date:

The Temple was utterly destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

It would be **very difficult to explain why a book written in 95 AD would speak of the Temple as if it still existed.** This detail provides another **strong** strong internal argument for a composition date *before* the fall of Jerusalem.

The Toughest Clue: The Riddle of the Seven Kings

Perhaps the most debated internal clue is a difficult passage in chapter 17 that seems to provide a very specific historical marker.

“This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while...”

— Revelation 17:9-11



Who are these seven kings? And more importantly, who is the king who ‘is’ at the moment of writing? If he could be identified, the book could be dated with incredible precision.

The Core Riddle:



Decoding the Riddle: An Imperial Timeline

1. The Detective Work: Scholars analyze the clues from the passage:



The city on seven hills: This was a famous description of Rome in antiquity.



The seven kings: Though Romans didn't use the title 'king,' their emperors were often referred to as such... This likely refers to the Roman Emperors.



The Crucial Phrase: "one is": If the kings are emperors and one is currently reigning, who is he?

2. The Prevailing Theory:

If you begin counting the Roman emperors from Julius Caesar (as many ancient historians did), the list is:



1. Julius Caesar



2. Augustus



3. Tiberius



6. Nero
(the one who "is")



7. Galba
(the one who
"has not yet come"
and reigned only
a short time)

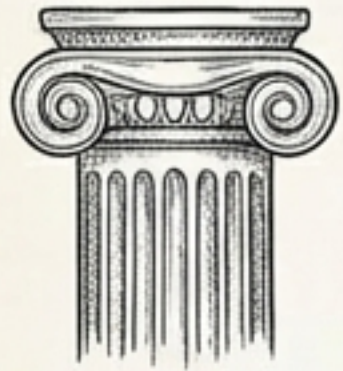
3. The Powerful Implication

If this interpretation is correct, Revelation was written **during the reign of Nero (54–68 AD)**, placing it **squarely before** the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

The Verdict: A Mystery in the Details

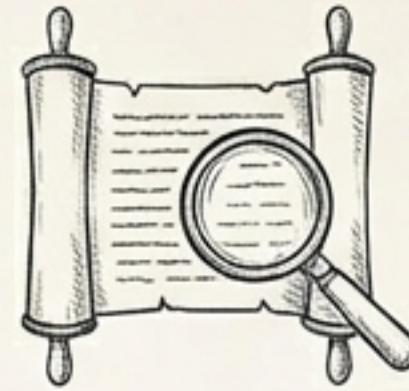
The evidence is complex and points in different directions.

External Evidence (Irenaeus)



Leans toward a late date, but contains a key ambiguity.

Internal Evidence (Urgency, Temple, Seven Kings)



Provides strong arguments for an early date, but relies on interpretation.

As R.C. Sproul notes, these approaches are virtually incompatible, and “somebody is certainly wrong.” The detective work continues, and scholars remain divided.”

However, we “ought not to despair” because getting lost in the debate over the code can cause us to miss the unmistakable message.

The Unifying Truth: The Triumph of Christ



Regardless of one's interpretive view, the central message of Revelation is not in dispute and shines through with magnificent clarity.

The book's purpose is to communicate the inevitable and absolute triumph of Christ and His kingdom.

"...the central message of the triumph of Christ and of His kingdom comes through so magnificently in this book that it has served as a treasure for the church from the first century to this day, giving the encouragement of God to all of those who suffer affliction at the hands of the enemies of God." - R.C. Sproul