

The Authenticity of the Book of Revelation

Introduction

Many conservative scholars note a stark departure in the Book of Revelation from Paul's teachings. J.B. Lightfoot notes the emphasis is on the ongoing validity of messages in the Hebrew Scriptures:

The whole book [of *Revelation*] is saturated with illustrations from the Old Testament. It speaks ***not the language of Paul***, but of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Daniel. (J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) at 361.)

Other scholars such as Baur argue that Revelation was intentionally anti-Paul. He cited its emphasis on physical Israel's place in God's eternal plan, the validity of the Law, the mention of Jesus returning to Mount Zion (*where the Law was given*), and salvation doctrines apparently at odds with Paul. Baur asserted these elements were designed to send a clearly "anti-Pauline" message.

Indeed, in Revelation we can find direct conflict with Paul's teachings. However, there is no point to examining the challenge Revelation poses to Paul unless we are thoroughly convinced Revelation is properly in canon. Of course, since Jesus is speaking in Revelation, it derives from a true valid Prophet. The question of its authenticity then falls upon whether Apostle John actually wrote it.

Canonicity of the Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation purports to be written by the Apostle John. Revelation says it was written while he, John, was exiled on Patmos. (Rev. 1:9.) The island of Patmos was just offshore of Ephesus, a large town in *Proconsular Asia*, present day Western Turkey. After John's release from Patmos, John moved to Ephesus. There he *later* wrote the Gospel of John.¹ Thus, Revelation was written first at Patmos (Rev. 1:9). The Gospel of John came later when John moved to Ephesus.

Prompt Acceptance in Region Near Ephesus

As we would expect if John truly wrote Revelation, the bishops of the Roman territories nearby to Patmos and Ephesus were the first to accept it as John's writing. The nearby Christian bishops who accepted it as John's writing were Justin Martyr of Rome (ca. 135 A.D.), Irenaeus (bishop in Gaul which is modern France)(120-200 A.D.), Theophilus (bishop of Antioch in Syria) (ca. 177 A.D.), Tertullian, a famous church leader at Carthage of North Africa (155-200

1. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on "St. John the Evangelist" states: "Justin Martyr refers to 'John, one of the Apostles of Christ' as a witness who had lived 'with us,' that is, at Ephesus. Irenaeus speaks in very many places of the Apostle John and his residence in Asia and expressly declares that he wrote his Gospel at Ephesus (*Adv. haer.*, III, i, 1), and that he had lived there until the reign of Trajan (*loc. cit.*, II, xxii, 5)." (See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08492a.htm>.)

A.D.) and Clement of Alexandria, Egypt (180-200 A.D.)² Likewise, it was accepted ca. 175 A.D. by Melito, a bishop over one of the seven churches addressed, Sardis. Melito even wrote a commentary on it.³

This trail of church leaders accepting Apostle John as the author is strong evidence of the authenticity of Revelation. As a highly respected Bible commentator, A.R. Fausset, reasoned:

If the Apocalypse were not the inspired work of John, purporting as it does to be an address from their superior to the seven churches of Proconsular Asia, it would have assuredly been rejected in that region; whereas the earliest testimonies in those churches are all in its favor.⁴

Thus, it is no surprise that in the two earliest recognized *unofficial* canon lists—the Muratorian Fragment of 170-200 A.D. and Origen’s list of 240 A.D.—we find the book of Revelation in each list. (See Appendix B: *How the Canon Was Formed*.)

Bishop Papias Vouches Identity of Author of Revelation

More important, the earliest Christian leader who attested to the validity of Revelation was Papias. He was bishop of Hieropolis in nearby Syria (which borders the eastern edge of Turkey). He wrote about 100 A.D. This is important because of Papias’ close association with Apostle John. Papias’ own writings mention frequent personal contacts with Apostle John. This is likewise corroborated by Euse-

2. Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001) at 338-39.

3. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, IV, 26.

4. A. R. Fausset, “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997) (reprint of 1877 edition), Rev. 1:1.

bias in a quotation from a book entitled *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*. This excerpt appears in Eusebius' famous work *Ecclesiastical History* at III: 39. In section IX, *Exposition* mentions "Papias of Hierapolis, the illustrious, **a disciple of the apostle who leaned on the bosom of Christ...**" Clearly, *Exposition* is saying Papias is a disciple of Apostle John. In section VIII of *Exposition*, we read *further* about Papias' view about the Book of Revelation:

With regard to the inspiration of the book (Revelation), we deem it superfluous to add another word; for the blessed Gregory Theologus and Cyril, and even men of still older date, **Papias**, Irenaeus, Methodius, and Hippolytus [of Rome], bore entirely satisfactory testimony to it.

Irenaeus likewise corroborates Papias knew Apostle John. Irenaeus writes that Papias was "a hearer of [Apostle] John" who wrote a volume in "five books." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.1.)

Thus, to discount Revelation, you have to believe that a pupil of Apostle John and a bishop in Syria (Papias) wrongly ascribed it to his teacher. That theory just doesn't make any sense.

Politics & Religion Don't Mix: Eusebius Attack on Papias

Eusebius in about 325 A.D. wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History* a very harsh attack on Papias. His purpose was to undermine the canonicity of Revelation. Eusebius made it appear his attack was objective, never explaining what political or theological problems might be motivating his attack.

Most commentators believe that Eusebius was doing this for political reasons. Eusebius had baptized Emperor Constantine, and was Constantine's favorite bishop. Thus, Eusebius could be influenced by the political aims of Constantine. How could Constantine's interests be harmed if Revelation were treated as inspired?

Previously, the church had uniformly believed in how Revelation literally reads: *we are at a premillennial point waiting for Jesus to return and usher in the millenium. The prophecy of the Beast and Great Whore in Revelation ch. 17 who were to arise from the City on Seven Hills (Rome). The early church never understood Revelation as having been fulfilled in Nero, as Gundry teaches today.*

As a result, in Eusebius' day it was still an open issue whether some Roman leader yet to come was going to be the Beast. In Revelation, the Mother of Harlots (17:5) is described as the "great city" (17:18) and this woman sits on "seven hills." (17:9.) Rome is the proverbial city on seven hills.⁵ Constantine could worry that is how his Christian subjects would view the prophecy. Rome also fit because it says this city is "drunk on the blood of the saints" (17:6). Of course, Rome had persecuted Christians.

Revelation could then be viewed as warning of a future Roman emperor as the Beast. It says this Mother of Harlots which represents a City on Seven Hills was "carried by" the beast. (17:7.) Therefore, this City/Mother of Harlots sits atop the beast. Who is the beast? He is described as an earthly ruler. The beast is identified as an eighth "king" in Rev. 17:11.

It doesn't take a genius to realize Constantine did not want anyone looking in his direction to identify the Beast. Revelation was a potentially *seditionous* writing.

Constantine had a second reason to fight off Revelation. The Book of Revelation depicts the Jews of the pre-Christian era as still the key covenant partner with God. There is no replacement theology in the book of Revelation. Furthermore, Revelation focuses attention on Jerusalem as the future center of world power, not Rome. A Roman emperor certainly would prefer associating his local Roman church as the New Israel. He would favor spiritualizing away 'Jerusalem' as the center of God's plans. Instead, he wanted to move the

5. These hills are the Palatine Hill, the Aventine Hill, the Capitoline Hill, the Quirinal Hill, the Viminal Hill, the Esquiline Hill, and the Caelian Hill. (See "Seven Hills of Rome," *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* (online).)

focus of Christianity to Rome. In fact, a theology developed under Constantine that Peter moved the church headquarters to Rome. (This was a myth.) Thus, under Constantine, the official doctrine of the Roman Bishop (who began calling himself ‘Pope’) was that he had supremacy over the entire church. He also claimed Peter moved the headquarters of Christianity to Rome. Hence was born the Roman Catholic Church in the 300s. All these pro-Roman doctrinal changes in Constantine’s church would be undermined by the message in Revelation. This explains Eusebius’ attack on the book of Revelation.⁶

Whatever Eusebius’ underlying reason, he tried to undermine belief John wrote Revelation. Eusebius knew Papias was strong proof that Revelation was written by Apostle John. So Eusebius cast aspersions on Papias as “a man of exceedingly small intelligence.” (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.13.)

Eusebius had no proof for this but his own opinion. What can we say? Eusebius engaged in pure slander. He does not demonstrate it from anything foolish that Papias might have said.

Eusebius goes on and next casts doubt that Papias knew Apostle John that well. He notes Papias’ writings (quoted from a book called the *Expositions*) mention more often that he is talking to a “disciple of the Lord” whom Papias calls “John the Presbyter.”

While some argue that Papias was referring to Apostle John by this title of “John the Presbyter,”⁷ the actual quote Eusebius provides from *Exposition* does appear to identify a second *John* distinct from Apostle John. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3-7, viz. 4.)

6. “[The] key reason for the rejection of the book among some in the early church [was because they] viewed any fulfillment of Old Testament promises involving the Jews with great disdain.” Tony Garland “Acceptance into Canon,” *Commentary on Revelation* http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Book_of_Revelation/commentary/htm/index.htm#6

7. See the *Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on “St. John the Evangelist” available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08492a.htm> (10-2-04).

However, all Eusebius proved from the quote is that Papias knew both Apostle John and John the Elder. Eusebius could not win his case of impugning the authenticity of the Book of Revelation unless he proved Papias actually did not know Apostle John. Since Eusebius in that same context proved and elsewhere admitted that Papias was the pupil of Apostle John, his argument goes nowhere. Papias' friendship with Apostle John is something also attested to by Jerome and by Irenaeus.

Accordingly, we must reject Eusebius' effort to make it appear Papias' acquaintance with Apostle John was so minimal that it has no bearing on the authenticity of the Book of Revelation. There is no such a thing as knowing a person too slightly that it is the same as not knowing them at all. Thus, Eusebius could never and did never discount completely that Papias knew directly from Apostle John whether he was *the hand that wrote Revelation*. Eusebius made the most valiant effort to disprove Revelation was written by John. Yet, in doing so, he actually helped preserve the proof to the contrary.

Regardless, you have the Book of Revelation accepted by so many bishops and early leaders in the surrounding territories that it defies all likelihood that Apostle John was not the author. Furthermore, if you regard Papias as having at least normal intelligence from the fact he was appointed a bishop, then you have a pupil of John who in 100 A.D. directly links Revelation to John the Apostle.

How Revelation Ranks No. 1 In Confirmation

In fact, what is frequently overlooked is that the canonicity of Revelation is established on stronger evidence than any other book of the New Testament. No other book of the New Testament has a contemporaneous account from a third party, bishop, church leader, etc. that an actual apostle wrote the work. You will never find an associate of Mark, Luke, or even Paul who leaves a memoir confirming any of them wrote the books that bear their name. It is simply historians referencing unnamed sources who tell us these were the authors of these

works. (*Matthew* was attested to by the Ebionite community as written by Matthew. Yet the Ebionites are a controversial group so I am not weighing their claim at this point.)

Yet, the author of Revelation as Apostle John is actually proven by a Christian bishop who was a friend of Apostle John. Please recall that *Expositions* quoted above by Eusebius stated “[as to] the inspiration of the book (Revelation)...Papias...bore entirely satisfactory testimony to it.”

If one claims this is insufficient to prove authenticity, one would have to dismiss all the other books of the entire New Testament. They have even less confirming evidence of authenticity. As to every book other than Revelation (and Matthew), we are all assuming that tradition provides an adequate foundation to know the author’s identity. Only with Revelation do we have something better than tradition: we have a contemporaneous record that a friend of Apostle John confirmed its authenticity.

Accordingly, most experts now regard the authenticity of Revelation as beyond question. (See John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966) at 14-15.)

Reformation Doubts About the Canonicity of Revelation

While Eusebius was motivated by politics to dispute Revelation, there were theological problems with Revelation for Reformers like Luther. While Luther did not explain his hostility to Revelation, he rejected it as non-canonical. (Luther, 1522 *Preface to the New Testament*.)⁸

Why? Because it is obvious that Revelation’s doctrines did not square with the teachings of Paul. Revelation emphasizes the Law, Israel, Moses, Mount Zion, and the “sons of Israel.” Most important of all is Revelation’s doctrine on grace and works. Revelation comes about twenty years after Paul is dead. Paul’s writings on

grace are well-known. Yet, Revelation purports to be Jesus talking to seven churches but never once mentioning grace as a doctrine in any positive way. Moreover, Jesus' emphasizes in Revelation the crucial importance of works. Revelation's doctrines on their face are foreign to Pauline thinking. Luther must have realized Revelation fails to endorse any of Paul's doctrines. If it really were written by Apostle John inspired by Jesus' words, then why doesn't John/Jesus endorse Paul and his doctrines? Why instead would Apostle John/Jesus give grist for the opponents of Paul?

Thus, Martin Luther in 1522 initially rejected Revelation as canonical. Apparently for similar theological concerns, Calvinists in their first draft of the Westminster Confession of 1643 declared *Revelation* as non-canonical.⁹ (The Westminster Confession's final draft of 1647 restored Revelation fully into canon. WCF, ch. 1, para. 2.)

Luther and the Calvinists gave no grounds to reject Revelation. They denied its validity in conclusory statements. No details were provided. Thus, there was no hint of what was the basis for concern. We may never know for certain why Luther and Calvinists wanted Revelation ignored.

However, the theology in Revelation is so obviously at odds with Paul that this must be the explanation. The fact Jesus is actually the Revelator in Revelation, and John is merely transcribing what he is seeing and hearing, means Jesus is potentially correcting the record. Paul is long gone. His letters are all well-known. Jesus is

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8. "Luther wrote in 1522 that he could find 'no trace' of evidence that the book 'was written by the Holy Spirit.' In other words, he rejected its divine inspiration." (Larry V. Crutchfield, "Revelation in the New Testament," *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (Mal Couch, ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001) at 21, 33.) Luther modified his view some years later. However, to the end "Luther remained doubtful about the book's authenticity." *Id.*
 9. Larry V. Crutchfield, "Revelation in the New Testament," *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (Mal Couch, ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001) at 34, 25 ("Article three [of the Westminster Confession composed in 1643] rejected it as canonical Scripture.") Crutchfield is Professor of Early Christian History at Columbia Evangelical Seminary, Longview, Washington.

potentially dealing with the issue of Paul. Thus, ***if authentic and anti-Pauline, the source of that message is Jesus, and not merely an apostle.*** The variances between Paul and Jesus in the Book of Matthew cannot be ascribed any longer to Paul having later been given a better insight from Jesus. When the Book of Revelations is written, Paul is dead. If Jesus is revealing new things to Apostle John, it is supplanting potentially the message of Paul. Therefore, the contradictions and variances between Jesus and Paul in the Book of Revelation, if irreconcilable, potentially prove Paul was not a true apostle. Jesus expects us to obey His word, and test Paul by it as well.