

# Lesson 2

Last week we looked at the time frame of Revelation and the context of Revelation. In a word, the time frame of the book was “soon.” From the opening verse to the closing verses, the book tells us that it concerns things that were to shortly come to pass.

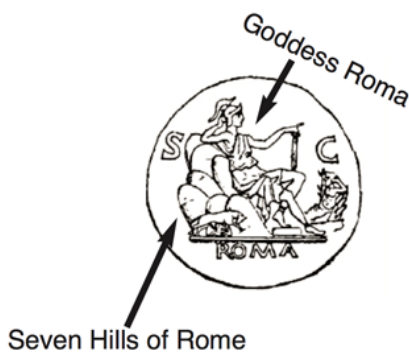
As for the context, we will find that when we get to Chapters 2 and 3 and read the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor. Those letters are our best source for the context of Revelation. We will also have some more to say about the context when we look at the history of Rome in our introduction.

Having looked at the time frame and the context, the next big question is *when* was the book written. But before we get to that question, let’s start with a related question.

Who is the villain in Revelation? Everyone agrees there is an evil earthly villain in this book, but not all agree on the identity of that villain. My view is that the earthly villain in Revelation is first century Rome, and more particularly, the first century emperors of Rome. They had put themselves in the place of God, and they had persecuted and sought to destroy the church in its infancy. Who would win? Revelation answers that question.

Why am I so sure this book is about Rome and not about something else, such as Jerusalem for example? The main reason is the text itself, as we will see as we study it. But that isn’t the only reason.

A coin minted during the reign of Vespasian (the time when, I believe, Revelation was written) depicts the goddess Roma sitting upon the seven hills that surrounded the city of Rome. Chapter 17 depicts the villain in Revelation as a bloodthirsty harlot sitting upon seven hills. If you lived in the first century, if you lived in one of the seven cities of Asia Minor, if you had that Roman coin in your pocket, if you were being persecuted by Rome, and if you read Revelation 17, who would you think John was writing about? How could there be any answer other than first century Rome? Here is how one commentary addresses this point:



Perhaps no point is more obvious in Revelation than this one: Rome is the one city in history that has been distinguished for and universally recognizable by its seven hills. ... Suetonius and Plutarch record for us that in the time of Domitian the festival of Septimontium (“the feast of the seven hilled city”) was held annually in December to celebrate the seven hills enclosing Rome. ... This point is well nigh indisputably certain. Indeed, “there is scarce a poet that speaks of Rome but observes it.”

If our view of this book would not make any sense to its initial recipients, then our view is wrong! This book was intended as a message of comfort to those who first read it. We need to see it through their eyes to properly understand it. There can be no doubt who they would have seen as the villain in this book — the mighty Roman empire, which was persecuting the first century Christians at the very time they received this book.

They were *not* being persecuted by Jerusalem; they were *not* being persecuted by modern day Rome; they were *not* being persecuted by Russia or China. They were being persecuted by first century Rome.

How did Rome begin? Rome’s early history is shrouded in legend. According to Roman tradition, the city was founded by the twins Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. Archaeological evidence supports the view that Rome grew from settlements on the Palatine Hill very possibly from the middle of the eighth century BC. The original settlement developed into the capital of the Roman Kingdom (ruled by a succession of seven kings, according to tradition), and then the Roman Republic (from 510 BC, governed by the Senate), and finally the Roman Empire (from 27 BC, ruled by Emperors).

The prophet Daniel lived around 600 BC, and in Daniel 2 we find the following:

**Daniel 2:40,44** — *And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. ... And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.*

That fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 is first century Rome! That was the kingdom, as strong as iron, that ruled the earth when God's eternal kingdom was established in Acts 2. No one looking at those Roman settlements in 600 BC would ever have predicted that they would someday subdue all other worldly kingdoms, and yet Daniel knew 600 years before it happened!

Rome was part of God's plan in ushering in his kingdom. We know that because Daniel tells us, but we also know that from the New Testament and from historical evidence. In Galatians 4, Paul wrote:

*Galatians 4:4-5 — But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.*

It was not by accident or happenstance that Jesus came into this world when he did. God had been planning for his arrival since the foundation of the world, and those plans had become very specific by the time of Daniel in 600 BC.

When Daniel prophesied that a fourth kingdom as strong as iron would rule the world at the time of Christ, and that three kingdoms would precede it, the history of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome was predetermined for the next 600 years. Daniel and Revelation are bookends surrounding those four great earthly kingdoms.

Rome played an important part in God's plans. History shows us the hand of God in the great historical events that occurred between the days of Daniel and the time of Christ.

How else can we explain the rise of Greece under Alexander the Great? How else can we explain the ascendancy of Rome over such great powers as Carthage, and the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon, Syracuse, and the Seleucid empire?

Listen to a few sentences from the introduction to the recent book, *Rome and Her Enemies: An Empire Created and Destroyed by War*, by Jane Penrose:

Lying at its heart is a mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization. How on earth did the Romans do it? How did a single city, one that began as a small community of castle-rustlers, camped out among marshes and hills, end up ruling an empire that stretched from the moors of Scotland to the deserts of Iraq?

The answer to that question is that it happened because God made it happen, just as God had already told Daniel that it would happen.

It is interesting to study the interplay of Greek and Roman culture at the time of Christ. As Horace famously stated, Rome may have conquered Greece, but Greek culture conquered Rome. The combination of Greek culture with Roman might created the perfect cradle for the coming of Christ and the beginning of his kingdom, and it was not by accident!

The Greeks brought reason, rationality, logic, and language. Rome brought peace, roads, trade, law, and communication. Although Roman religion later brought emperor worship and persecution, initially it was open and tolerant. This situation allowed Paul to do what he did and take Christianity beyond Jerusalem into the Greek world.

The Roman peace, the *pax Romana*, was vital in the spread of the gospel. The Greeks' hobby was war. The church would have had a much more difficult time reaching beyond Jerusalem had the Greeks still been in charge.

Another important factor was the Greek language, which had been around since 800 BC and had twice the vocabulary of Latin.

Those who believe that Christianity is anti-intellectual and irrational should note that Christianity began at a time of Greek intellectualism and rationality, and again that was no accident. Greek philosophical thought is admired to this very day. In fact, it has been said that the Greek contribution to western philosophy was western philosophy! It is no accident that the church was established, not in a time or place of superstition, but in a time of rational inquiry and clear thinking.

We are going to spend quite a bit of time discussing the early Roman emperors. Who were they and why should we care?

We should care about them because Daniel, Zechariah, and John wrote about them. In fact, Daniel sketched out the history of the first eleven Roman emperors 600 years before they came to power. John described them while some were already in power. We will need to understand that historical context if we are to understand this book.

As we discussed earlier, our focus will be on the first eleven emperors. Julius Caesar was killed by those who feared that he was leading Rome toward a monarchy. His death in 44 BC marked the end of the Roman republic. His adopted son Octavius became Augustus—the first Roman emperor.

Some argue that the list should begin with Julius Caesar. But history and historians tell us that Augustus was the first emperor. Also, Augustus was the emperor at the time of Christ, which is another reason to start with him. And, as we will see, the internal evidence supports using Augustus as our starting point.

The first five emperors make up the **Julio-Claudian Dynasty**:

- **Augustus** was the first emperor.
- Next came **Tiberius**, the stepson of Augustus.
- Next came **Caligula**, the adopted grandson of Tiberius.
- Next was **Claudius**, the uncle of Caligula.
- And then came **Nero**, the stepson of Claudius.

The next three emperors ruled during the civil wars of AD 68-69. They, along with Vespasian, make up the famous set of four emperors who all ruled in a single year, AD 69.

- **Galba** reigned seven months and then was hacked to pieces in front of the Forum on Otho's orders.
- **Otho** reigned 95 days and then killed himself after Vitellius defeated his army.
- **Vitellius** reigned eight months and then was killed after Vespasian's army entered Rome.

The next three emperors make up the **Flavian Dynasty**:

- **Vespasian** (along with his son Titus) put down the Jewish revolt of AD 67-70 and destroyed the Jewish temple.
- **Titus** was Vespasian's eldest son and reigned for only 26 months.
- **Domitian** was Titus's younger brother and died in AD 96.

These eleven emperors are described in Daniel 7 and in Revelation 17. My view is that the book of Revelation is largely focused on the conflict between the church and the two Roman dynasties of the first century — the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the Flavian dynasty — with the primary focus being the latter Flavian dynasty.

The persecution of the church by Rome was particularly intense during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. In AD 66 a fire destroyed much of Rome. A rumor spread that Nero had set the fire to further his plans to rebuild the city. To dis-

pel the rumors Nero blamed the Christians who, as everyone knew, predicted a fiery end of the world. Tacitus describes the situation as follows:

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 Judea, 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 crowds in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. 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.

This fierce persecution abated for awhile after the death of Nero but began again with renewed intensity when Domitian came to power. Tertullian called Domitian “a limb of the bloody Nero.”

Now we are ready to answer the question we started with today — *when* was the book of Revelation written? How you answer this question goes a long way in determining how you interpret this book. We are going to deal with this question at length when we get to Revelation 17, but since that will be months from now let's briefly look at that question now.

First, what evidence do we have, and how should we sort the evidence?

I am a patent attorney, and patent attorneys spend most of their time arguing about the meaning of the words in a patent. We look at two kinds of evidence: intrinsic evidence (mainly, the patent itself) and extrinsic evidence (such as a dictionary or a technical expert). The intrinsic evidence is by far the more

important of the two. If the patent defines a term, then a dictionary can't override that intrinsic definition — the dictionary might even contradict what the patent says, and it still doesn't matter. The patent's definition is the one that wins.

The same is true with Bible study. The most important evidence we have about the Bible is the Bible itself. If the Bible answers our question, then no amount of extrinsic evidence can override what the Bible itself says on the issue. So, what does the Bible say about the date when John received this vision?

The key verse in dating Revelation is found in Chapter 17.

***Revelation 17:10** — And there are seven kings: five are fallen, **and one is**, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space.*

In that verse, John discusses seven kings, and he tells us that five are fallen, **one is (present tense)**, and one will come and continue only a short time. If we can determine the one king who "is," then we will know when the book was written.

As we just saw, Augustus was the first emperor of Rome. Following Augustus were Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. After Nero, there was a period of civil war in which four emperors came to power in the span of about a year. The first three of those four (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) each reigned for only a short time before they died. The fourth of those four emperors was Vespasian.

So who are the five kings who have fallen? They must be the first five emperors — Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. According to 17:10, those five kings had all died by the time this book was written.

So who is the one king *who is*? We have two choices — either it is Galba, the emperor who followed Nero, or it is Vespasian, the emperor who ruled after the three civil war emperors reigned and died within a single year.

We saw those three kings when we studied Daniel 7, and there we saw them described as being plucked up or uprooted. I think Revelation 17:10 ignores those three uprooted kings, which means that Vespasian is the king who is in Revelation 17:10.

Why would Revelation ignore those three uprooted kings? Two reasons — one historic and one figurative. The historic reason is that they were hardly emperors; they came to power in a period of great turmoil, and they quickly ex-

ited the scene. For all practical purposes, Vespasian was the emperor who followed Nero. But there is also a figurative reason — if Vespasian is the sixth emperor, then Domitian is the eighth. And the number eight depicts a renewal — the eighth day starts a new week, for example. As we already saw, Domitian renewed the persecution that Nero has started.

If Vespasian is the king who is in 17:10, then who is the king who comes next and continues only a short while? That would be Titus, who followed Vespasian and reigned only a few years. When we get to Revelation 17, we will see that it has much to say about the next king — Domitian — and those descriptions will further confirm that we are on the right track in identifying the king “who is” with Vespasian. So, I think that Revelation was written during the reign of Vespasian.

But there is *external* evidence from shortly after the time that tells us John was banished by Domitian, and Domitian’s reign did not begin until AD 81. How can that fit in with our proposed date for the book during the reign of Vespasian?

First, external evidence, unlike internal evidence, can always be wrong. But we don’t have to assume it is wrong here to solve our problem.

In December of AD 69, Vespasian was acclaimed emperor, but for the first half of 70, he was occupied in Alexandria, while his elder son Titus was engaged upon the siege of Jerusalem. His younger son Domitian, the sole representative of the family in Rome, accepted the name of Caesar and imperial residence and was invested with full consular authority, his name being placed at the head of all dispatches and edicts. As Josephus tells us, Domitian was ruler for over six months with the backing of the army until his father showed up. According to one source, Domitian signed so many orders of appointment that Vespasian wrote him to thank him for letting Vespasian himself continue as emperor!

It was perhaps during this time that John was exiled to Patmos. That would have been in early AD 70, near the beginning of Vespasian’s reign.

Vespasian reigned from 69 to 79, which means (if my view of Revelation 17:10 is correct) that the book was written during that window of time. Can we narrow the time down any further? Yes, I think we can.

The condition of the seven churches in Chapters 2-3 suggests quite a bit of time had passed since the time when those congregations had been founded. The churches in Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea were likely founded in the early



fifties, but had by the time of this book suffered a serious spiritual decline. Laodicea suffered a terrible earthquake in AD 60, but seems to have recovered to the point of being rich and self-sufficient by the time of this book. Polycarp says that the church in Smyrna was not founded until after Paul's death in the mid sixties. All of that would suggest we should push the writing of this book forward as far as we can, which in this case is to the *end* of Vespasian's reign in AD 79.

But some of the *external* evidence suggests a much later date for the book, some as late as the nineties. How can we explain that? One possible answer is to recognize that there is a difference between the date the book was *written* and the date the book was *circulated*. The book of Revelation could not have been read by others until either John or the book was able to leave Patmos. That could have occurred much later than when the book was written. So the book could have been written in the late seventies but not circulated until the late eighties or even the early nineties.

Some who argue for an earlier date claim that the book was written during the reign of Nero. As we just saw, I think the text of the book itself suggests otherwise. Whether or not we ignore the three uprooted civil war emperors, there is still no way for Nero to be the king "who is" in Revelation 17:10 — unless we start with Julius Caesar as the first emperor, something with which no historian would ever agree.

But there is another reason why Nero could not be the subject of this book — and again we can turn to the seven letters. Those letters point to persecution by Rome *in the provinces*. The persecution by Nero occurred *in Rome*, not in the provinces. And the persecution by Nero resulted less from the emperor's claims of deity and more because he needed some group on which to lay the blame for the great fire in Rome. It was not until later that a failure to honor the emperor as a god became a political offense punishable by death.

I think the best view is that the book of Revelation was written late in the reign of Vespasian, around AD 79, and was circulated among the churches later, perhaps as late as the early nineties. That view fits both the internal evidence and the external evidence.

Now let's continue our look at Rome. Why was Rome such a problem? In most of the other books of the New Testament, Rome is seen in largely neutral terms and sometimes even positive terms. We think, for example, of Paul's use of his own Roman citizenship in the book of Acts. But in Revelation there is nothing but blazing hatred for Rome. Rome is a Babylon, the mother of harlots, drunk

on the blood of the saints. The explanation for this change in attitude from what we see earlier in the book of Acts lies in the wide development of Caesar worship and its accompanying persecution, which together form the background for Revelation and help explain why Revelation was written.

By the time of Revelation, Caesar worship was the one religion that covered the whole Roman empire, and it was because of the Christians' refusal to conform to its demands that they were persecuted and sometimes killed.

By the late first century, emperor worship touched most aspects of Roman political, social, and economic life. Civic events and legal transactions included pledges of allegiance to Caesar as "Lord" and "God." As they entered the theater, sporting events, gladiatorial games, or public festivals, the people had to toss a pinch of incense on a small altar as a sacrifice to the "divine Caesar." Trade guilds held banquets honoring the emperor and his patron gods as silent guests. These practices were seen by the Romans as expressions of patriotism, national unity, and gratitude to the emperor.

And what about those who refused to do those things? The Romans did not view them as *blasphemers*, but rather as *ungrateful traitors*.

Our society usually thinks of religion and politics as separate concepts, or at least it likes to pretend that they are separate. But in the first-century Roman world, no one ever pretended religion and politics were separate. Rome claimed that its existence was ordained by the gods, and Rome thought they won battles only when their gods were happy with them. Those who refused to worship those gods must, logically, be opposed to the empire itself and want the empire to lose those battles, or so the Romans thought. That is what had happened earlier with the Jews in Jerusalem — when they ceased to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of Caesar, Rome saw that refusal as an open declaration of war!

The Christians had been commanded to honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:17), to pray for the emperor (1 Timothy 2:1-2), and to obey the emperor (Titus 3:1-2) — all, of course, up to the point given in Acts 5:29 ("we ought to obey God rather than men"). The Christians were having to walk a fine line — be good citizens of Rome without worshipping the false gods of Rome.

Much of Rome failed to appreciate that distinction, and so the name "Christian" increasingly became synonymous with subversion, and, in the eyes of the general public, Christians came to be classed with criminals. (We see that

beginning to happen in 1 Peter 4:14 — “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye.”)

Every Roman household had a set of patron gods. Those in the household worshipped those gods to ensure protection of the household. Can you imagine the situation of a slave in that household who had been converted to Christ and who could no longer worship those false household gods? That Roman family would view that slave as a traitor to the household, as someone who wished harm to come to the family who lived there.

What was the reason behind this cult to Caesar? How did it develop? Rome had a vast heterogeneous empire stretching from one end of the known world to the other. It had in it many tongues, races, and traditions. The problem was how to weld this varied mass into a unity. Rome knew there is no unifying force like that of a common religion. But none of the national religions known to Rome could conceivably have become universal. Caesar worship could. (Constantine later discovered the universal aspect of Christianity as he used it to his own political ends!)

Caesar worship was the one common act and belief that turned the empire into a unity. To refuse to burn the pinch of incense and to say Caesar is Lord was not an act of irreligion, but was an act of political disloyalty. That is why the Romans responded with the utmost severity with the man who would not say Caesar is Lord, and no Christian could give that title to any other than Jesus Christ.

Not every emperor took their supposed divinity seriously, but Domitian did. He was the first emperor to demand directly that he be worshiped as deity. He wanted to be hailed as Jupiter’s son and heir, the earthly representative of the king of the universe.

We might be tempted to think that Rome *hated* the church, but that would likely be an overstatement. Rome was not focused on the church; many Romans likely knew nothing or very little about it. Much of the persecution against the church was an indirect result of the policies that Rome had set up to promote emperor worship and to unify the people. But whether direct or indirect, the persecution was real, and God was going to hold Rome accountable for it.

Caesar worship was not just a problem for Christians; it was also a problem for Jews. The Jews had worked out an agreement with Rome. They had agreed to pray *for* Caesar, but not *to* Caesar. They had agreed to offer sacrifices *for* Cae-

sar, but not to Caesar. Each Jew also paid a special tax to Roman for these exemptions.

Initially, the Christians were seen as a Jewish sect, and thus enjoyed the Jewish exemption. But that slowly changed over time. First, due largely to the efforts of Paul, Christianity became seen as increasingly less Jewish as more and more Gentiles were converted. Second, when the Jews rebelled in AD 66 (leading eventually to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70), Christians became much more reluctant to identify with the Jews for the sake of the exemption. Also, after that revolt, the surviving Jews in the Roman provinces closed ranks and expelled Jewish Christians from their communities and synagogues, often reporting them to the Roman authorities. The seven letters in Chapters 2-3 have much to say about these conflicts with the Jews.

We see an early example of this in Acts 17.

*Acts 17:5-8 — But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things.*

By the time of Revelation, that problem had become much worse. How far had the unbelieving Jews fallen by this time? Twice in this book the inspired text will refer to them as the synagogue of Satan!

Much of the persecution was physical, but much was also economic. If there were two silversmiths in the city, and one was a Christian, the other could turn him in and reduce the competition. Or he could be kicked out the silversmiths' guild for failure to offer the pinch of incense to Caesar. Or he could suffer by refusing to make silver images of false gods. (We are reminded of the bakers who have suffered in our own time for refusing to bake cakes for so-called gay weddings. They have lost their livelihood, and they have been fined

heavily by the state. Rome, it seems, hasn't gone anywhere!) It was to encourage Christians in such times that the book of Revelation was written.