

**God's Gracious Covenant With Israel:
The Foundation For Worldwide National Covenanting #27 (Pt. 15)**

Revelation 1:9
April 11, 2010
Rev. Greg L. Price

We have focused our attention in recent sermons upon the INTERNAL EVIDENCE alleged by Preterists, who claim that the Apostle John received the inspired visions found in the Book of Revelation prior to the death of Nero in 68 a.d. and prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. We have concluded from our study of the INTERNAL EVIDENCE **that Revelation 11:1-2 DOES NOT demonstrate that Jerusalem or the temple were still standing when John received this Revelation from Jesus Christ, that Revelation 13:18 DOES NOT reveal that the number of the Beast (666) is Caesar Nero in Hebrew letters, that Revelation 17:10 DOES NOT indicate that Nero was the sixth head of the Beast that was reigning at the time John saw this vision, that the time indicators used in the Book of Revelation (like “shortly”, “at hand”, and “quickly”) DO NOT add weight to the claim of Preterists that John received this vision before the death of Nero in 68 a.d. or before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d., and finally that the time periods (like “1,260 days, 42 months, or 3 ½ years) DO NOT demonstrate that the prophesied events revealed in the Book of Revelation occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. The Preterist seems to believe that the strongest case for Preterism is found in the INTERNAL EVIDENCE within the Book of Revelation itself. But I pray that after having now considered the alleged INTERNAL EVIDENCE offered by the Preterist, we might see that their claims are built upon a foundation of sand.**

We now proceed in the present sermon to examine briefly and summarily the EXTERNAL EVIDENCE from history that might be offered in

seeking to locate the period of time in which John most likely received this inspired vision from the Lord Jesus Christ. Dear ones, not only INTERNAL EVIDENCE, but EXTERNAL EVIDENCE as well is a significant matter to consider in dating the Book of Revelation. For when we understand from reading Revelation 1:9 that John had been banished to the Isle of Patmos during a period of Roman persecution which extended to the Churches of Asia, we can examine what is said in history in order to understand when such a banishment and persecution mentioned by John most likely occurred. And as we consider which Emperors of Rome are listed as candidates for the Roman persecution suffered by John in the first century, only two Emperors are really considered as candidates: Nero (who reigned from 54-68 a.d.) or Domitian (who reigned from 81-96 a.d.). In our brief survey of EXTERNAL EVIDENCE, we will seek to identify which of these two Roman Emperors most likely banished John and extended persecution beyond the city of Rome even to the Province of Asia (as we find is the case in Revelation 1:9).

As we present the EXTERNAL EVIDENCE, I would like to do so by answering the following question about our text in Revelation 1:9: Which Emperor's persecution of Christians can directly be shown to have included banishment as a form of persecution and extended beyond the city of Rome? I do not propose to be exhaustive in citing EXTERNAL EVIDENCE in the sermon today, and so I have sought to select evidence that is the most direct and explicit in nature.

I. Which Emperor's persecution of Christians can directly be shown to have included banishment as a form of persecution and extended beyond the city of Rome? Note what the Apostle John writes in

Revelation 1:9. John states that he was a companion (or partner) in the tribulation of Jesus Christ. This particular tribulation into which John was brought had led to his being banished to the Island of Patmos in the

Aegean Sea, for John writes that he was on the Island of Patmos on account of the Word of God and his bearing testimony to Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean he chose to go to Patmos as a place to plant a Church, for Patmos was a desolate island and like other island was used by the Romans as a penal settlement to which they sent political agitators and others which Rome believed to threaten the peace of the empire (cf. *Tacitus Annals*, 3.68; 4.30; 15.71). The question then is not was John being persecuted because of his testimony for Jesus Christ, but rather who was the Roman Emperor that exiled and banished John to the Island of Patmos? For if one can determine which Emperor (Nero or Domitian) banished John and persecuted other Christians outside the confines of Rome (e.g. in the province of Asia where Antipas became a martyr according to Revelation 2:13), one can then date the Revelation received by John to a time around 66 a.d. (Nero's persecution) or to a time around 95 a.d. (Domitian's persecution). And if the preponderance of EXTERNAL EVIDENCE leads one to conclude that the Revelation was received by John during Nero's persecution, it supports the view of Preterism. But if the preponderance of EXTERNAL EVIDENCE leads one to conclude that the Revelation was received by John during Domitian's persecution, it completely undermines the view of Preterism (at least the most popular expression of Preterism).

A. **IRENÆUS** (c. 130-202 a.d.)

1. Irenaeus was the Bishop of Lyon, France and has a connection to the Apostle John according to ecclesiastical history. As a child, Irenaeus listened to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna—Smyrna being one of the seven Churches of Asia addressed by the Lord Jesus in Revelation 2:8-11. Moreover, Polycarp is noted by various ancient writers to have been a student of the Apostle John. Thus, the testimony of such an early witness and one indirectly connected to the Apostle John himself should be carefully weighed. In fact, Irenaeus is the earliest witness of whom we

have an explicit record for the time period in which John received the Revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The citation by Irenaeus is actually included in *Ecclesiastical History* (III:18:3) written by the Eusebius (died c. 340 a.d.) and who is often referred to as the “Father of Church History”. In the testimony of Irenaeus cited by Eusebius, Irenaeus is addressing the fact that the specific identity of the Antichrist (in Revelation 13:18) is not explicitly stated by the Apostle John. Eusebius cites Irenaeus as saying,

If it were necessary for his name [i.e. the name of Antichrist—GLP] to be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been declared by him [i.e. the Apostle John—GLP] who saw the revelation. For it [i.e. the revelation—GLP] was seen [i.e. by John—GLP] not long ago, but almost in our own generation, **at the end of the reign of Domitian** [emphases added].

3. Note that this early witness connected to the Apostle John through Polycarp states that the Revelation seen by John on the Isle of Patmos was at the end of the reign of Domitian.

4. Some Preterists have sought to neutralize the testimony of Irenaeus by seeking to make an issue of the proper translation of the words of Irenaeus. The translation question raised by Preterists is this, what was seen at the end of Domitian’s reign? Was it the revelation given by Christ that was seen by John at the end of Domitian’s reign? Or was it John himself that was seen at the end of Domitian’s reign?

a. Even Preterists themselves admit “most scholars doubt there is a problem of translation” (*Before Jerusalem Fell*, Gentry, p.47), which is to say that the preponderance of scholarship is on the side of those who understand Irenaeus to mean that it was the Revelation that was seen by John on the Isle of Patmos at the end of Domitian’s reign rather than John himself that was seen. Even Professor Moses Stuart, the most prominent early American Preterist wrote (in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p.265, 1845) the following:

It is plain, then, that **an ancient tradition** existed, and was propagated through succeeding ages, that the Apocalypse was written near the close of Domitian's reign, i.e. about 95 a.d., for Domitian died in September of 96. . . . And although the ἐωράθη, [translated as "it was seen"—GLP] in the passage of Irenaeus has been differently interpreted by different critics, **yet I cannot think that any other Nominative than Ἀποκάλυψις** [translated as "revelation"—GLP] **can be fairly supplied here**. So most of the ancients clearly understood the matter; **and we may well acquiesce in their judgment, for it is supported by the obvious principles of interpretation** [emphases added].

b. After all the historical research Eusebius had done collecting testimony from various sources, it was his own view (and that of his historical sources) that John received the Revelation at the end of Domitian's reign. It also seems very presumptuous to cast suspicion on Eusebius and his understanding of what Irenaeus meant, especially when Eusebius was much closer to the time in which Irenaeus lived and was also a fluent scholar in the Greek language so that he had the expertise to understand what Irenaeus meant who also wrote in Greek.

5. Thus, I submit that Irenaeus states that the revelation from Jesus Christ was seen by John at the end of Domitian's reign, not Nero's reign. Obviously, Irenaeus also becomes an implicit witness to the fact that Domitian persecuted Christians in the province of Asia in as much as Irenaeus no doubt knew from Revelation 1:9 that John suffered persecution on the Island of Patmos for his faith in Jesus Christ.

B. **TERTULLIAN** (c. 160-220 a.d.)

1. Tertullian was an early Christian apologist who was trained in law. As a lawyer, his propensity for research and evidence is manifested in the apologetical treatises he has left us in defense of the Christian faith.

2. Tertullian, the Christian lawyer, writes to Emperor Septimius Severus (who reigned from 193-211 a.d.) in defense of Christians as follows (in his *Apology*, Chapter 5):

Consult your annals, and there you will find Nero the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood, when our religion was but just arising **at Rome**; but we glory in being first dedicated to destruction by such a monster: for whoever knows that enemy of all goodness will have the greater value for our religion, as

knowing that Nero could hate nothing exceedingly, but what was exceedingly good. A long time after, **Domitian**, a limb of this bloody Nero, **makes some like attempts against the Christians**; but being not all Nero, or cruelty in perfection, the remains of struggling humanity stopped the enterprise, and made him **recall the Christians he banished** [emphases added].

3. Note the following observations from Tertullian's defense.

a. First, Tertullian calls the Emperor to "consult your annals" i.e. the secular histories written by Roman historians to confirm what he is about to say. Now why would Tertullian, trained as a lawyer, challenge the Emperor to consult his Roman historians about Domitian's persecution of Christians, in particular by banishment, if such things never happened?

b. Second, though Tertullian mentions the bloody sword of Nero that was dyed in Christian blood (which no one denies), it is interesting that Tertullian only mentions Nero's persecution in connection with the city of Rome (and not beyond it), and additionally he states that Domitian (not Nero) had banished Christians as a form of persecution.

C. **HIPPOLYTUS** (c. 170-236)

1. Hippolytus was a Presbyter at the Church of Rome, and was a prolific writer. He was especially noted for his learning and scholarship.

2. He writes in complete agreement with Irenaeus and Tertullian concerning John's banishment to Patmos by Domitian (*The Twelve Apostles*, XLIX).

John, again, **in Asia**, was **banished by Domitian the king to the isle of Patmos**, in which also he wrote his Gospel and saw the apocalyptic vision; and in Trajan's time he fell asleep at Ephesus, where his remains were sought for, but could not be found [emphases added].

3. It is noteworthy that Hippolytus specifically mentions the fact that John was persecuted by Domitian while John was in Asia. In other words, the persecution of Christians by Domitian extended beyond

the borders of the city of Rome, whereas the persecution of Christians by Nero seems to have been confined to the city of Rome.

D. **VICTORINUS** (died c. 304 a.d.)

1. Victorinus was a Bishop of the Church and wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation. He was martyred during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. In his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, he writes the following comment concerning Revelation 10:11:

“And He says unto me, Thou must again prophesy to the peoples, and to the tongues, and to the nations, and to many kings.” He says this, because when John said these things he was in the island of Patmos, **condemned to the labor of the mines by Caesar Domitian**. There, therefore, he saw the Apocalypse . . . [emphases added].

2. Not much can be added to this clear testimony. John was condemned by Domitian and banished to the Island of Patmos.

E. **EUSEBIUS** (260-340 a.d.)

1. Eusebius, the Father of Church History, likewise confirms the testimony that John was banished to Patmos by Emperor Domitian. His testimony bears much weight because as a historian, he had researched the various writers and historians in order to state the EXTERNAL EVIDENCE he was able to find from all the ancient resources at his disposal.

2. In his *Ecclesiastical History* (III:18:1), Eusebius places the condemnation of the Apostle John to the island of Patmos at the hand of Domitian.

It is said that in this persecution [i.e. Domitian’s persecution of Christians—GLP] the apostle and evangelist John, who was still alive, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos in consequence of his testimony to the divine word.

3. Likewise in his *Ecclesiastical History* (III:18:4-5), Eusebius refers to the persecution under Domitian and even draws attention to the fact that many Christians were banished by Domitian.

To such a degree, indeed, did the teaching of our faith flourish at that time [i.e. at the time of Domitian's persecution of Christians—GLP] **that even those writers who were far from our religion did not hesitate to mention in their histories the persecution and the martyrdoms which took place during it.** And they, indeed, accurately indicated the time. For they recorded that **in the fifteenth year of Domitian**, Flavia Domitilla, daughter of a sister of Flavius Clement, who at that time was one of the consuls of Rome, **was exiled with many others to the island of Pontia in consequence of testimony borne to Christ** [emphases added].

Why do we never directly read of Nero's use of banishing Christians in the historical record, but read of Domitian's use of banishment by many writers?

F. **JEROME** (c. 347-420 a.d.)

1. Jerome was above all else a scholar skilled in research and in the biblical languages, and was known as a "Doctor of the Church".

2. Jerome confirms (in *Lives of Illustrious Men*, Chapter IX) the ancient testimony that is beginning to mount to the effect that it was not Nero, but Domitian that was responsible for John's banishment to Patmos.

In the fourteenth year then after Nero, **Domitian having raised a second persecution, he [i.e. John—GLP] was banished to the island of Patmos, and wrote the Apocalypse**, on which Justin Martyr and Irenaeus wrote commentaries [emphases added].

G. **SULPICIUS SEVERUS** (c. 363-425)

1. Severus was also a Christian historian who wrote his *Sacred History* as a summary of sacred history from the beginning of the world to his own times. This history by Severus had the distinction of being used as a textbook of sacred history in the schools of Europe during the middle ages.

2. Severus confirms as a historian the ancient testimony of John's banishment to the Isle of Patmos in his *Sacred History* (Chapter 31).

Then, after an interval, Domitian, the son of Vespasian, **persecuted the Christians**. At this date, **he banished John the Apostle and Evangelist to the island of Patmos** [emphases added].

However, notice that Severus not only confirms the banishment of John to Patmos, but also confirms the fact that Domitian likewise persecuted Christians in particular.

H. What is presented above is only a summary of some of the more explicit EXTERNAL EVIDENCE prior to the sixth century demonstrating an agreement among many early Church Fathers in answering the question: **Which Emperor's persecution of Christians can directly be shown to have extended beyond the city of Rome and included banishment as a form of persecution?**

1. Clearly, according to these witnesses, it was Domitian's persecution rather than Nero's persecution that extended beyond the walls of Rome. The noted and reputable historian that wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon, one who was ever so familiar with the historical documents dealing with the Roman Empire, dispels any doubt in regard to the extent of Nero's persecution beyond the city of Rome when he says that "it is evident that the effect, as well as the cause, of Nero's persecution were **confined to the walls of Rome**" (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I:415, emphases added). Taken at face value from such a thorough historian who sifted through all the evidence he could find, we must conclude that John who was in the province of Asia could not then have been banished by Nero to the Isle of Patmos. Though Nero's persecution was intense within the confines of Rome, it did not extend beyond those borders.

2. Moreover, the earliest explicit piece of EXTERNAL EVIDENCE stating that John was banished by Nero is found in the subscription to a Syriac version of the Book of Revelation (written about the beginning of the sixth century). Other appeals to alleged EXTERNAL EVIDENCE by Preterists for John's banishment by Nero are gathered from inferences drawn from various ancient writers (and many of these inferences upon examination will be found to be invalid inferences). Thus, clear and explicit testimony to John's banishment by Nero is late and lacking in preponderance, but clear and explicit testimony to John's banishment by Domitian is early and preponderant.

3. If there was the explicit and preponderant EXTERNAL EVIDENCE for a banishment of John by Nero as has been presented for Domitian, Preterists would reveal it and would claim that the EXTERNAL EVIDENCE clearly weighs in their favor. However, when one finds some of the chief proponents of Preterism from the past, like Professor Moses Stuart who was quoted earlier in the sermon and like Dr. Fenton John Anthony Hort of Cambridge who stated that "if external evidence alone could decide, there would be a clear preponderance for Domitian" (*The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. xx), it becomes clear that EXTERNAL EVIDENCE weighs far more heavily in the direction of Domitian (c. 95 a.d.) having banished John to the Isle of Patmos for his bearing testimony to Christ (in accordance with Revelation 1:9) rather than Nero (c. 66 a.d) having banished John to the Isle of Patmos.

Dear ones, as we read concerning John that he was a partner in tribulation with the Christians in the seven Churches of Asia at that time, so we must see ourselves as a partner in what tribulation we suffer for the cause and testimony of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul was clear that the Christian life when lived to the glory of Christ will not be easy or comfortable (Acts 14:22; Romans 8:17). Popular Christianity wants its Churches full, and so it tickles the ears of its members with prosperity,

comfortable doctrine, worship that appeals to man and that makes a person feel good about himself. However, dear ones, the truth of the matter is that Christ says that the truth will bring division, and that we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ. Dear ones, the prosperity, feel good religion of popular Christianity blurs the truth, whereas biblical Christianity is willing to suffer the loss of all things in order to gain Christ. How we must ever cling to the promise we find in Romans 8:35-39.

Copyright 2010 Greg L. Price. Distributed by Still Waters Revival Books (<http://www.swrb.com>) by permission of the author, Greg L. Price. More free online written Reformation resources by Greg Price (John Calvin, John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, *et al.*) are at <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/newslett.htm> and more free audio (MP3) Reformation resources by Greg Price (and many other Puritans, Covenanters, and Reformers) are at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/go/699> or at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/swrb>.