

## THEOLOGY UNBOUND — REVELATION SERIES

### Episode 3

#### “When Was Revelation Written—and How Much Should It Change Our Reading?”

**Focus:** Dating (Early vs Late), what’s warranted vs speculative

Rev 1:1–3; 1:9; 2:1; 3:17; 11:1–2; 13:18; 17:9–11

This is Episode 3 in our long-form, four-season, twenty-episode series through the Book of Revelation.

#### RECAP + WHY THIS EPISODE EXISTS (ROADMAP MATCH)

In Episode 1 we laid the foundation in Revelation 1:1–8: genre, purpose, and the “soon/near” time-text tension.

In Episode 2 we walked through Revelation 1:9–20: the risen Christ among the lampstands—present with His churches, comforting without becoming small, confronting without becoming cruel.

Today is different on purpose.

This is our **Dating & Authorship mini-arc**—and we’re doing it early because it changes how people read the whole book, especially **Preterist** and **Futurist** frameworks.

And I want to say this clearly:

If you’ve ever felt like Revelation conversations are just people yelling conclusions at each other, this episode is meant to slow that down.

We’re going to talk about:

- the **two main date options**—roughly **mid-to-late 60s** versus **mid-90s**,
- the **external evidence**—early church testimony,
- the **internal evidence**—clues inside the text,
- what conclusions are **warranted**, what’s **possible**, and what’s **speculative**,
- and then how dating affects the interpretive frameworks without turning Revelation into a battlefield.

And when we finish, we’ll return to the text next episode—**Episode 4**—with **Revelation 2:1–11**, Jesus’ words to **Ephesus and Smyrna**.

So—this is Episode 3: not a detour, but a necessary tool so we read the book with honesty.

#### SET THE STAKES: WHY THE DATE MATTERS (BUT NOT LIKE YOU THINK)

Let’s start with a simple question: **Why does the date matter?**

Here are three reasons—and I’m going to keep them grounded.

##### Reason 1: The “soon/near” language

If Revelation was written in the **60s**, then “soon” and “near” sits right on top of the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem in **AD 70**—and a preterist reading gets a lot more plausible.

If Revelation was written in the **90s**, then “soon” and “near” isn’t immediately about AD 70, and the interpretive options shift.

##### Reason 2: The imperial setting in Asia Minor

A late date often gets tied to Domitian and imperial ideology; an early date often gets tied to Nero and the early imperial period.

But here’s a guardrail: whether it’s early or late, **Revelation is addressed to real churches in Asia Minor under real pressure**. That doesn’t change.

### Reason 3: What kind of fulfillment you expect

If you think much of Revelation was meant to be fulfilled in the first-century horizon, you'll lean early. If you think much of Revelation is future climax, you'll lean late—or at least you won't feel early is necessary.

Now—here's the first discussion prompt. I'm going to ask it, and I want you to answer it honestly:

#### DISCUSSION PROMPT:

Do you want a date because you want clarity—or because you want a weapon?

Because Revelation date debates can turn into a power-play: “If I can prove my date, I win.”

That's not scholarship. That's tribalism.

We're not doing that.

Now let's tether this to Scripture briefly—because the date question doesn't come from nowhere. It comes from the text itself.

#### SCRIPTURE READ CUES: THE TEXT THAT FORCES THE QUESTION

I want you to hear the time language again.

**Revelation 1:1–3 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup> who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. <sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

And I want you to hear John's historical setting again.

**Revelation 1:9 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Alright. That's enough to see why people ask the question.

Now let's define the two big options so we aren't vague.

#### THE TWO MAJOR DATE OPTIONS (CLEAN AND FAIR)

Most discussions land on two major windows:

##### **Option A: An “early date”—mid-to-late 60s**

Usually framed around Nero's reign, and before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

##### **Option B: A “late date”—mid-90s**

Often tied to the end of Domitian's reign, with John exiled on Patmos and later released.

Now, I'm not asking you to pick one right now.

I'm asking you to listen for what the evidence can actually carry.

We're going to evaluate:

1. **External evidence** (early Christian testimony)
2. **Internal evidence** (clues inside Revelation)
3. And then we'll grade our confidence: warranted vs possible vs speculative.

Let's start with the external evidence—because it's the part many people either over-trust or instantly dismiss.

## EXTERNAL EVIDENCE: WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH SAID (AND HOW TO WEIGH IT)

When we talk about external evidence, we mean: what do early Christian writers say about John, Patmos, and when the Apocalypse was seen?

### 1) Irenaeus (late 2nd century)

Irenaeus is the big name that often gets cited for a late date. He wrote *Against Heresies* and makes a statement commonly taken to mean that the Apocalypse was seen toward the end of Domitian's reign.

That's significant because Irenaeus isn't writing in the 800s. He's relatively early, and he claims connections to earlier tradition.

Irenaeus's exact statement regarding Revelation reads: "We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in the present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For **that was seen no very long time since**, but **almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign**."<sup>1</sup>

This text survives in both Latin form through Irenaeus and in Greek through Eusebius.<sup>2</sup> The passage appears in Irenaeus's chapter 30 of *Against Heresies*, where he discusses the number and name of the Antichrist (Rev. 13:18)<sup>3</sup>, and is also preserved in the Latin translation found in *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), book 5, chapter 30, section 1.<sup>4</sup>

But—here's where we need to be honest—there's a real debate about the grammar of his statement: does "was seen" refer to the **vision** or to **John**?

Some scholars argue the sentence could be read either way.

So: Irenaeus is important, but we should not pretend the argument is over with one quotation.

## DISCUSSION PROMPT:

What do you do with external testimony when it's strong—but not absolutely airtight?

### 2) Clement of Alexandria (late 2nd / early 3rd century)

Clement's account describes how John "removed from the island of Patmos to Ephesus" after "the death of the tyrant."<sup>5</sup> This is the primary historical claim Clement makes about John's departure from Patmos.

It's worth noting that Clement does not explicitly name the tyrant in this passage. Scholarly tradition has identified this figure as the Roman Emperor Domitian, whose reign ended in A.D. 96, though Clement's text itself leaves the identity implicit rather than stated directly.

That's important because it supports the idea of exile and return.

But it still leaves the question: which "tyrant"? That identification is often supplied by later writers.

### 3) Eusebius (early 4th century)

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<sup>1</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 20:26–27.

<sup>2</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 20:26–27.

<sup>3</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 20:26–27.

<sup>4</sup> H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *St. John*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), lxxii.

<sup>5</sup> T. E. Page et al., eds., *Clement of Alexandria*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, 1960), 357.

Eusebius records a tradition that John returned from exile after Domitian's death.

Now: Eusebius is later than Irenaeus and Clement. He's compiling. He's useful, but he's not first-line in the same way.

#### 4) Victorinus (late 3rd century)

Victorinus, in a commentary on Revelation, explicitly connects John's Patmos exile with Domitian and says John later published after Domitian's death.

Again, useful—but later than Irenaeus.

So what can we responsibly say from external evidence?

Here's a fair, sober summary:

- External evidence **leans late**, because multiple streams of tradition connect John's exile and Revelation to a Domitian setting.
- But the external evidence is not a mathematical proof, and at least one key line of evidence—often Irenaeus—has a grammatical question attached to it.

Now, I need to add one more external factor, because it often gets oversold:

#### **“Domitian persecuted Christians”—how certain is that?**

Some popular presentations make it sound like Domitian ran an empire-wide, organized persecution like Nero. But modern scholarship debates the extent and nature of persecution under Domitian.

There may have been actions against certain groups and exiles, but sweeping claims can be overstated.

There is no solid evidence that Domitian inaugurated an empire-wide persecution of Christians.<sup>6</sup> The traditional theory of officially sanctioned, empire-wide persecution does not hold up under scrutiny, as there is no record of any Roman law outlawing Christianity at that time nor any evidence that Christians were bound by law to worship the emperor's image.<sup>7</sup>

What that means is this:

A late date does not require a Hollywood-level persecution narrative to make sense of John's exile.

And an early date doesn't automatically win by poking holes in a persecution story.

So external evidence gets you a lean—**not** a slam dunk.

Now we shift to internal evidence, and this is where people often get very confident... sometimes too confident.

### **TRANSITION: HOW TO USE INTERNAL EVIDENCE WITHOUT CHEATING**

Internal evidence is anything inside the book that seems to point to a time or setting.

Here's the danger: we can smuggle in our conclusion and then call it evidence.

So we'll handle internal evidence by asking:

1. What does the text actually say?
2. What are the plausible readings?
3. Which reading depends most on assumptions?

Alright—let's take the biggest internal arguments in a fair order.

### **INTERNAL EVIDENCE: THE MAJOR ARGUMENTS (PRO AND CON)**

I'm going to walk through four major internal arguments that show up constantly.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Poon and James Crossley, [\*The Identities of the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land in Revelation 13\*](#) (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Greg Stevenson, [\*A Slaughtered Lamb: Revelation and the Apocalyptic Response to Evil and Suffering\*](#) (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2013).

### Internal Argument 1: The Temple in Revelation 11

Revelation 11 describes measuring the temple area.

**Revelation 11:1–2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, “Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, <sup>2</sup> but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months.

Early-date advocates often argue: “If the temple is being measured, it must still be standing—so pre-70.”

Late-date advocates respond: Revelation is full of symbolic temple imagery, and measuring can be visionary or theological rather than architectural.

And here’s what we have to admit: both moves are possible. The question becomes: what does measuring *do* in the vision? Protection? Identity? Judgment? There’s substantial scholarly discussion about how to read this passage without using it as a simplistic calendar.

So what’s warranted?

- **Warranted:** Revelation 11 is significant and cannot be ignored in dating discussions.
- **Not warranted:** “Temple language automatically proves pre-70.” That’s too easy.

### Internal Argument 2: The “Babylon” question—Rome or Jerusalem?

Revelation uses “Babylon” as a symbolic name.

Early-date readings often identify Babylon with Jerusalem under judgment.

Late-date readings most commonly identify Babylon with Rome as imperial power.

This is a huge debate, but at this stage of the series, I’m not going to litigate Babylon. We’re going to treat that fairly when we’re in the Babylon texts later.

But here’s what matters for dating:

- If Babylon must be Jerusalem, early date becomes more attractive.
- If Babylon is Rome in a mature symbolic way, late date remains very plausible.

So for now, we note it as a pressure point—not a conclusion.

### Internal Argument 3: The churches’ condition (especially Laodicea)

People argue about whether the churches described in Revelation 2–3 “need time” to develop—especially the wealth and self-sufficiency language in Laodicea.

Listen to this line:

**Revelation 3:17 (ESV)** <sup>17</sup> For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Some argue: the city’s wealth is documented after an earthquake around AD 60, where Laodicea rebuilt without imperial aid—often linked to Tacitus’ report.

That can fit either date. If the earthquake was around 60, then by the 90s it’s clearly in the past; but even in the late 60s, it’s still plausible for Laodicea to be wealthy.

So: this is supporting color, not a decisive lever.

### Internal Argument 4: The “Beast” and imperial math (like 666)

Revelation 13 has the famous number.

**Revelation 13:18 (ESV)** <sup>18</sup> This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

Some early-date advocates connect 666 with Nero using gematria, and they tie other features to first-century imperial realities.

The textual variant 616 aligns with the Latin spelling “Nero,” showing a deliberate adaptation for different linguistic contexts.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, the Greek form Neron Caesar written in Hebrew characters (נרון קסר) is equivalent to 666, whereas the Latin form Nero Caesar (נרו קסר) is equivalent to 616.<sup>9</sup>

Two important manuscripts of Revelation—Codex Ephraemi (C04) and Papyrus 115 (P115)—give the number in Rev 13:18 as 616 rather than 666. The 616 variant is likely an attempt to clarify the identity of the beast as Nero to an audience that might not have made the connection otherwise. The Latin spelling of Nero, translated into Hebrew letters, results in the number 616.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore possible that an early copyist changed the number to communicate his belief that “six hundred and sixty-six” refers to Nero.<sup>11</sup> This suggests the variant emerged as scribes sought to make the Nero identification explicit through linguistic adaptation—using the Latin spelling familiar to Western audiences rather than the Greek form that produced 666.

Late-date advocates can respond in a few ways:

- Even if 666 alludes to Nero, it can function as a symbolic type of beastly empire—Nero as an archetype, not strictly a calendar point.
- Or they may dispute how tight the Nero link is.

There’s substantial academic discussion around Nero traditions and how they function in interpretation, including debates about how “Nero redivivus” (Nero’s resurrection) is used in modern scholarship.

So again, what’s warranted?

- **Warranted:** Imperial allusion is real and important; Revelation is not written in a vacuum.
- **Not warranted:** “666 solves the date question.” It doesn’t.

Alright. Let’s take a breath.

At this point, you might feel like everything is uncertain. It’s not. But it’s nuanced.

So now we do something very practical: we grade our confidence.

## WHAT’S WARRANTED vs POSSIBLE vs SPECULATIVE (THE “CONFIDENCE METER”)

Let’s do a “confidence meter,” because Christians need this skill.

### High confidence (warranted)

1. Revelation was written by a **John** who is deeply saturated in the Old Testament and speaks with prophetic authority to seven real churches in Asia Minor.
2. Revelation expects to be read as **apocalypse + prophecy + letter**, and it is aimed at **endurance and worship**, not speculation.
3. The book’s time language is meant to create **urgency** for its hearers.

### Moderate confidence (very plausible)

1. External tradition **leans** toward a **late date** and connects John’s exile and the Apocalypse to Domitian’s era in multiple witnesses.
2. But the way that external testimony is used is sometimes too simplistic, especially when grammar questions are brushed aside.

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<sup>8</sup> Jason L. Quinter, [Rethinking Eschatology: A Postmillennial Perspective](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Reymond, [A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith](#) (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), [1052](#).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew J. McMains, [“Six Hundred and Sixty-Six.”](#) in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Matthew J. McMains, [“Six Hundred and Sixty-Six.”](#) in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

3. Claims about a clean, empire-wide “Domitian persecution” can be overstated, so we shouldn’t build our whole date case on that alone.

### **Lower confidence (possible but speculative if asserted dogmatically)**

1. “Revelation 11 *must* mean the temple still stands.”
2. “Babylon *must* be Jerusalem” or “Babylon *must* be Rome” without arguing from the text in its later contexts.
3. “666 *proves* the date.”

So if you want a responsible posture, it sounds like this:

**A late date has the stronger traditional support.**

**An early date has non-trivial internal arguments.**

**But neither date is a license to force the whole book into your preferred mold.**

Now we’ve got to connect dating to our four frameworks—because that’s the point of doing this episode early.

### **HOW DATING AFFECTS THE FOUR FRAMEWORKS (STEELMAN, NO CHEAP SHOTS)**

Remember: we steelman. We don’t caricature.

#### **1) Preterist (partial vs full)**

A preterist approach is most sensitive to:

- the “soon/near” language,
- the original audience,
- and the desire to read Revelation as primarily addressing first-century crisis.

So an **early date** often strengthens a preterist reading—especially for judgments and “Babylon” discussions.

But here’s a crucial point: a **partial preterist** can still operate with a late date if they read “soon” differently and locate key fulfillments around Rome and the church’s situation. The date impacts the plausibility of certain identifications, but it doesn’t automatically refute the entire approach.

#### **2) Historicist**

Historicism is less dependent on early vs late, because it tends to see Revelation as a panorama across church history.

- It can work with either date, though a late date is commonly assumed.
- The big question for historicism is less “which year” and more “do you have principled controls on identification?”

So dating matters, but it’s not the hinge.

#### **3) Idealist**

Idealism is the least dependent on early vs late, because it reads Revelation as unveiling patterns that recur in every age.

- An idealist can happily accept late date tradition and focus on symbolic theological power.
- An idealist can also acknowledge first-century referents and still say the visions are meant to train the church in every generation.

Dating doesn’t collapse idealism.

#### **4) Futurist (dispensational and non-dispensational)**

Futurist approaches—especially classic dispensational futurism—often use a late date comfortably, because they locate major fulfillment in future climax.

But here's the steelman honesty:

- Futurists still have to explain “soon/near.”
- And they still have to give real weight to the seven churches as more than a prologue.

A non-dispensational futurist often leans harder into the book's pastoral and symbolic dimensions while maintaining future climax. Again, the date matters, but it doesn't do all the work.

So here's the honest bottom line:

**Dating is influential. It is not absolute.**

If you treat the date as the one magic key that makes every passage obvious, you're going to mishandle Revelation.

Now I want to give you one more discussion prompt, because this is where people reveal their motives.

### **DISCUSSION PROMPT:**

If your preferred date turned out to be wrong, would your faith—or your framework—collapse?

If it would collapse, you've probably built too much certainty on too little evidence.

Now let's close by returning to the spiritual point: why this matters pastorally—and where we go next.

### **LISTENER GUARDRAILS FOR DATE DEBATES (KEEP CHRIST CENTRAL)**

Let me give you some guardrails, because date debates can turn toxic.

1. **Certainty must match evidence.**  
Confidence is not the same thing as faithfulness.
2. **Use primary sources responsibly.**  
Early church testimony matters—but it isn't inerrant. Scripture is.
3. **Don't make Revelation about winning.**  
Revelation is trying to produce worshipful endurance, not internet dominance.
4. **Keep the book's center of gravity: Jesus among His churches.**  
If you lose that, you can “win” the date debate and still lose the point of Revelation.

Alright. That's Episode 3.

Now we pivot back into the text, and we do what Revelation actually tells us to do: hear and keep what Jesus says to His churches.

### **DISCUSSION PROMPTS (READ CLEANLY)**

Here are a few questions to take with you:

1. Which kind of evidence persuades you more—external testimony or internal textual clues—and why?
2. Where do you think Christians most commonly overstate the case on dating?
3. What would a humble but confident posture look like in a church conversation about Revelation's date?
4. How does the “soon/near” language shape the way you read prophecy in general?
5. Do you tend to use Revelation to argue—or to obey?
6. If Jesus is walking among the lampstands, what is He most likely to confront in American Christianity right now?

## OUTRO + NEXT EPISODE TEASE (SERIES MAP MATCH)

Alright, that's Episode 3—our Dating & Authorship mini-arc.

If you were hoping for a one-sentence verdict, you didn't get it—and that's intentional. Because part of maturity is learning the difference between **what we know**, **what we strongly suspect**, and **what we should hold with open hands**.

Next episode—**Episode 4**—we get back into the text with **Revelation 2:1–11**, Jesus' words to **Ephesus and Smyrna**—a church that lost its first love and a church that suffers well.

And as we move into the seven churches, you'll feel why Revelation starts there: Christ cares about the spiritual health of His people before He unveils the cosmic conflict.