

## The Author of the Book of Revelation: Apostle or Incognito

### Old Arguments

There is a near unanimous tradition in the Church, dating from the earliest times, that identifies the author of the Book of Revelation with St. John the Apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of the Apostle James. The clearest expression of this tradition is to be found in the *Church History (H.E.)* of Eusebius of Caesarea.<sup>1</sup> Only in the last century have scholars seriously begun to doubt and deny the apostolic authorship and authority of the Apocalypse. Although they have built upon a long and complex history of dispute on this issue, their main arguments can be reduced to the following three tenuous premises, which will then be refuted one by one:

1. *John the Apostle, the author of the Apocalypse and Gospel according to Church tradition, was martyred by King Agrippa's men, along with his brother James, in 42-43 CE.*
2. *Accepting the propositions of St. Dionysius of Alexandria (c. 250 CE) and Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 320 CE), it is claimed that the author of the Apocalypse was an otherwise unknown writer called John the Elder, who may have been a disciple of John the Apostle.*
3. *The author of the Apocalypse was writing under the pseudonym of John the Apostle, but his real identity is unknown. According to some, it was Cerinthus, a heretic from Ephesus.*

**1. *John the Apostle, the author of the Apocalypse and Gospel according to tradition, was martyred by King Agrippa's men, along with his brother James, in 42-43 CE. However, there is no unambiguous evidence for the early death of the Apostle John before 5th century CE, and there is ample evidence for his survival to the end of the first century CE, in Ephesus.***

Denial of the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation by John, son of Zebedee, is often linked to the claim that he suffered martyrdom at an early age, despite the absence of any direct, contemporary record of this. It is alleged that John was killed by Herod Agrippa's men, c. 43 CE, along with his older brother James, though only James' murder is reported in Acts 12,2. Furthermore, St. Paul encounters John in Jerusalem about 5 years later, along with Peter and James, the brother of the Lord, and calls them 'pillars' of the Church (Gal 2,9).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, a number of scholars are persuaded of the Apostle John's early martyrdom on the basis of documentary evidence that is both indirect and ambiguous. The most celebrated example of this

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of references, in the *Church History* of Eusebius, to John's residence in Ephesus, his exile in Patmos, and his authorship of the Johannine Apocalypse, Gospel and Letters, in various combinations, would look like this: III.1.1; 18.1-3; 20.11; 23.1-4,6; 24.7-14; 24.17-18; 31.2-3; IV.14.6; 18.8; V. 8.4-7; 18.13; 24.3; VI.25.9-10. It is a huge body of evidence collated from the earliest Christian sources in Ephesus, Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean. For a modern presentation of the Church tradition, among the more cogent is that of Isbon Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, New York: Macmillan & Co, 1919; 343-362.

<sup>2</sup> It can be objected that, in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, John is not called 'apostle' (Gal 2,9), so we cannot be certain that he is referring to the same John. However, Paul and Luke travelled together before Luke wrote the Acts, so it is highly likely that they use the same names for the same people, especially those in leadership positions. It is therefore entirely reasonable to identify the Church leader who is called 'John' by Paul (Gal 2,9) as the same Church leader who is called 'John' by Luke (Acts 1,13; 3,1; 5,13; 8,14), especially since both writers mention this John as being in Jerusalem and close to Peter. It should also be noted that in none of these references to John is he specifically called an apostle (Gal 2,9; Acts 1,13; 3,1; 5,13; 8,14; 12,2).

evidence is an excerpt by the Byzantine Church historian Philip of Side (c. 440 CE),<sup>3</sup> claiming that Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis near Ephesus, had written in his long-lost work *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* (c.110-120 CE) that “John the theologian and James his brother were done away with by Jews”, without giving any details of time, place or manner. Four centuries later, this excerpt was echoed in a single, ninth-century manuscript of a work by another Byzantine historian called George Hamartolos.<sup>4</sup> So, the entire narrative is built upon the fifth-century report of a vague second-century statement about the martyrdom of James and John, echoed in only one of the surviving manuscripts of a collection compiled by a ninth-century historian.

Not only is this evidence insufficient to justify the claim for the Apostle John’s early death, but it is also readily disprovable, as pointed out by Paul N. Anderson. In one of the surviving fragments (*Frag. 4.3*), Philip of Side goes on to confirm exactly what Eusebius had written in his *Church History*, that John the son of Zebedee lived a long life, culminating in Ephesus, where he died at the start of Trajan’s reign, and that during Domitian’s persecution against Christians, harsher than that of Nero, John the Apostle and Evangelist was banished to Patmos.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, George Hamartolos, the ninth-century historian who echoes Philip of Side’s reference to Papias’ remark on the martyrdom of James and John, also agrees with Eusebius about the elderly Apostle John’s residence in Ephesus.<sup>6</sup>

So, whatever Philip of Side may have understood from reading the long-lost work of Papias, it was clearly not about the early martyrdom of St. John. It was, in fact, perfectly consistent with Church tradition, as recorded by Eusebius in his *Church History*. After all, Eusebius, Justin, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and many other early Church Fathers had read the *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* by Papias, and none of them had ever noted in writing that it referred to the Apostle John’s early death. In fact, they all remained convinced that John had lived to an old age in Ephesus and was the author of the Johannine Gospel, Apocalypse and Letters.<sup>7</sup>

Misinterpreting this silence, some scholars have seized on the suggestion of R.H. Charles that there must have been an ecclesiastical conspiracy to cover-up the evidence of the Apostle John’s early death. Suffice it to say that the early Church welcomed martyrdoms and was never known to conceal them. On the contrary, they were, and are, solemnly commemorated every year. Furthermore, as the martyrdom of John and James had been foretold by Christ (Mk 10,39; Mt 20,23), there would have

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<sup>3</sup> The excerpt survives in a seventh-century collection preserved in a single 14<sup>th</sup>– 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript called *Codex Baroccianus* 142 (also known as the ‘De Boor fragment’).

<sup>4</sup> The ninth-century *Chronicle* by George Hamartolos survives in 26 manuscripts dated to 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century. 25 of these manuscripts record that John died peacefully, but one recalls the excerpt of Philip of Side (*Codex Coislinianus* III.134): “John has been deemed worthy of martyrdom. For Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis, having been an eyewitness of him (or of it?), says in his second book of his ‘Dominical Oracles’, that he was killed by Jews, having evidently fulfilled with his brother the prediction of Christ concerning them”. Quoted from R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 171.

<sup>5</sup> “The Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel: Some Clues to John’s Authorship and the State of the Johannine Question”, by Paul N. Anderson, p. 19, accessible at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) ; published in “El Evangelio de Juan. Origen, Contenido, Perspectivas—The Gospel of John. Origin, Content, Perspectives”, *Colección Teología Hoy*, No. 80. Edited by Bernardo Estrada and Luis Guillermo Sarasa (Bogota: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana / Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, 2018), 17-82. Presented at the 2016 Montreal SNTS meetings. From the introduction on [academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) website: “this expansive analysis of the last 130 years of discussion on Johannine authorship suggests that the state of the Johannine Question is still open for discussion. The “Early Death of John” is an embarrassment to critical scholarship--neither Philip Sidetes nor George Hamartalos ever believed it--and Pierson Parker's 21 "assured results of critical scholarship" should be critically parked by the curbside. None of them is compelling, and every other theory of Johannine authorship brings with it new critical problems even more formidable than a modified traditional approach.”

<sup>6</sup> Also affirmed by Paul N. Anderson, *op.cit.* p.19.

<sup>7</sup> See note 1.

been an additional incentive to make it known as the fulfilment of Christ's prophecy. It is baseless to propose that the Church would have hushed up the Apostle John's martyrdom, in order to falsely claim he had written the books attributed to him, but—according to these modern scholars—were written by someone else.

Also relevant, here, is the establishment of a date in the liturgical calendar, December 27<sup>th</sup>, to celebrate the “martyrdom of the apostles John and James at Jerusalem”. It appeared first in the Syrian martyrology of Edessa in 411 CE, but ultimately derived from a Greek martyrology composed at the Byzantine city of Nicomedia c. 360 CE, more than 300 years after the alleged event. The factors leading to the adoption of this commemoration are not known, but it is likely to have been the presumed fulfilment of Christ's prediction about the sons of Zebedee (Mk 10,39, Mt 20,23). The joint commemoration spread to a few areas, but not to all, and certainly not to Jerusalem, where the absence of a memorial to the martyrdom of St. John the Apostle, up to this day, is strong evidence against its veracity.

The persistent ‘rumours’ that the Apostle John died an early death are unfounded, for the evidence is near to non-existent. In contrast, the evidence that he lived to the end of the first century in Ephesus and was exiled for a time on Patmos, is pervasive and persuasive. Eusebius refers to “ample evidence”, from “early Christian tradition” (e.g., *H.E.* III.18.1-3; 20,11; 23.1-6). If this early tradition is accepted, there is no need to speculate who wrote the Apocalypse, for the John who wrote the Gospel and lived to a great age in Ephesus, was the same John who was exiled for a time on Patmos, the island where he wrote the Apocalypse (Rev 1,9). The question is no longer who wrote the Apocalypse and Gospel, but how was this achieved by the same person, John the Apostle, son of Zebedee.<sup>8</sup>

***2. Accepting the propositions of St. Dionysius of Alexandria (c. 250 CE) and Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 320 CE), it is claimed that the author of the Apocalypse was an otherwise unknown writer called John the Elder, who may have been a disciple of John the Apostle. On the contrary, there are good reasons to identify references to John the Elder with John the Apostle and to see them as the same person.***

Around 250 CE, St. Dionysius argued that whereas the Apostle John wrote the Fourth Gospel, he could not have written the Apocalypse, because it uses different terms and expressions and is full of grammatical mistakes, which he calls ‘barbarisms and solecisms’ (*H.E.* VII.25). On this everyone is agreed: the Greek of the Apocalypse is inelegant and often grammatically incorrect. For Dionysius this could only mean that it was not written by the apostle, to whom God had surely given the gift of good writing. Instead, he suggested, it was written by another John, who lived and died in the same area as the apostle.

But the very same argument can, and should, be applied in reverse: the poor literary quality of the text is exactly what you would expect from a first-century Galilean Jew who had learnt Greek as a third language, after Aramaic and Hebrew. It is an unmistakable sign of authenticity, especially when attached to a severe warning against changing the text (Rev 22,18-19). The unpolished Greek eliminates the suspicion that it was written by an educated priestly scribe. Moreover, shining through the barbarous Greek is an Aramaic text written in the Biblical Hebrew narrative style, somewhat similar to the ancient Targums. This is also what you would expect from a Galilean Jew, whose

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<sup>8</sup> See ‘Ch.2 The Author of the Book of Revelation’ for this author's explanation ([link 5](https://www.newtorah.org/pdf/Essenes%20ch2.pdf)): <https://www.newtorah.org/pdf/Essenes%20ch2.pdf> .

memory of the Scriptures was first formed by the Aramaic Targums. And by prohibiting alterations to the text, the Apostle John was ensuring that this mark of authenticity is preserved. In this way, he may be indicating that the text should be retranslated literally into Hebrew or Aramaic—the traditional language of prophecy.

Impressed by the literary argument of St. Dionysius, though continuing to identify John the Apostle as the head of the Ephesian church, who was exiled to Patmos (e.g., *H.E.* III.18.1-3; 20,11; 23.1-6)<sup>9</sup>, Eusebius of Caesarea tentatively proposed that the Apocalypse was written by someone called John the Elder, who is mentioned in another excerpt from the long-lost *Exposition* of Papias, which he quotes in full (*H.E.* III.39.1-7).<sup>10</sup> The crucial part of this excerpt is a description of the sources used by Papias: “And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter said (εἶπεν), or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, are saying (λέγουσιν)” (*H.E.* III.39.4).<sup>11</sup>

The traditional interpretation of this passage is guided by the fact that Papias freely uses the terms ‘elder’ (underlined by me) and ‘disciple’, but does not allow himself to use the term ‘apostle’, even though the first list of ‘elders’ are all well-known ‘apostles’. In this short list of names, it appears that wherever Papias writes ‘elder’, ‘apostle’ can be substituted. Applying the same rule in the second list, the ‘elder’ John can thus be identified with the ‘apostle’ John. The ‘apostle/elder’ John is repeated again in the second list, because Papias needed to stress that he was still a living source when he was collecting sayings for his book. There is no logical reason here to distinguish John the ‘apostle/elder’ in the first list from John the ‘apostle/elder’ in the second list, and so they should, from the wording itself, refer to the same person. No one until Eusebius himself (c. 325 CE) had ever expressed a doubt that John the Elder, mentioned here as a source, referred to John the ‘apostle/disciple’ of the Lord, and up to this day there is no documentary evidence anywhere for the existence of a second John in Ephesus, a ‘non-apostolic John the Elder’, at that time or at any other time. One modern scholar has referred to this figure as an “elusive ghost”, and another as having a

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<sup>9</sup> Eusebius’ position on the authorship of the Apocalypse was ambiguous: he was so impressed by the literary argument of St. Dionysius of Alexandria, against apostolic authorship, that he published it in full (*H.E.*, VII.25). Taken with Dionysius’ suggestion that it may have been written by another John, he searched Papias’ book and found the passage quoted here, which he interpreted as indicating the existence of a second John, whom he tentatively proposed as author of the Apocalypse. He also placed the Apocalypse in both the ‘Accepted’ and ‘Disputed’ categories of writings, saying that opinions were evenly divided. However, at the same time, he repeats over and over again the early Christian tradition (see note 1 above), which records John the Apostle living in Ephesus until the end of the first century CE, exiled on Patmos from 95-96 CE, where he wrote the Apocalypse, and then returning to Ephesus to write the fourth Gospel before dying c.98 CE. However, despite all his prevarication on the authorship of the Apocalypse, Eusebius never questions the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel and First Letter.

<sup>10</sup> In this context, it is of particular significance that, in the Prologue of his Commentary on the Apocalypse (c. 611), Andreas of Caesarea in Cappadocia included Papias in a chain of Church Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Methodius of Olympus and Hippolytus) who not only ‘bear witness to the trustworthiness’ of the Apocalypse, but also affirm, in their own writings, that it was written by the Apostle John. As Andreas shows familiarity with the work of Papias by quoting it in his commentary, it is fair to suppose he knew that Papias also attributed the Apocalypse to the Apostle John. The author of a comprehensive study of Andreas’ work, Eugenia Constantinou (*Andrew of Caesarea and the Apocalypse in the Ancient Church of the East: Studies and Translation* by Eugenia Constantinou, PhD thesis, Quebec: Université Laval, 2008; [www.theses.ulaval.ca](http://www.theses.ulaval.ca)) puts it like this: “Andrew would not have cited Papias as part of a string of witnesses to apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse if Papias had not ascribed it to the apostle John” (op.cit. Pt.I, p. 54). And again “...because Andrew cites Papias as supporting Johannine authorship, through Andrew we have the earliest attestation of apostolic authorship of Revelation” (op.cit. Pt.I, p. 243). For the passages in the Commentary referred to above, see Part 2: Prologue, text 10, p.11 and ch 33, text 129, p.134.

<sup>11</sup> This is our translation from the Greek text published in the Loeb Classics Series.

‘phantom-like quality’.<sup>12</sup> The alternative is to view him as a literary fiction, invented by Eusebius, under the influence of St. Dionysius (*H.E.* VII.25), in order to explain obvious literary differences between the Apocalypse and John’s Gospel and Letters, a point that troubled the early Church, and continues to create discord and discussion up to this day.<sup>13</sup>

With this fragment of Papias, however, the root of the discord is exposed, and it concerns the use and meaning of the terms ‘apostle’ and ‘elder’. It is caused by making a rigid distinction between John the Elder and John the Apostle solely on the basis of the descriptive title, ‘elder’, or ‘apostle’. This is now recognized as a common mistake, based on an anachronistic tendency to interpret first-century usage of the terms ‘apostle’ and ‘elder’ from a later perspective, when ‘elder’ (πρεσβύτερος) had become the title of a particular office and rank within the Church hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> In the first century CE, however, there was no such distinction between ‘elders’ and ‘apostles’.

Alastair Campbell explains this in his study on ‘The Elders of the Jerusalem Church’: “‘The elders’ did refer to those who succeeded members of the original Twelve in the leadership of the Jerusalem church as they died or departed to other places, but the title did not exclude members of the Twelve, since it was never the title of an office separate from that of an apostle. *Some of the elders belonged to the original Twelve, others were replacements.* The term ‘elder’ connoted dignity and authority; it did not denote someone who had not been an original member. Quite the reverse! There were no more worthy bearers of the title ‘elder’ than those who had been there from the beginning”.<sup>15</sup>

Campbell continues, “Support for this can be found in the way a connection between apostles and elders surfaces persistently in Christian writings both in and beyond the New Testament. Thus the writer of 1 Peter has the apostle in whose name he writes style himself ‘fellow-elder’ (1 Pet. 5:1). The author of 2 and 3 John, while doubtless claiming apostolic authority, styles himself “The Elder” (2 John 1). Papias uses the term ‘elder’ either of the apostles themselves (as many think) or of their immediate disciples, but in any case not of a church office (Eus. *HE* 3.39.4). Ignatius, who finds the bishop and deacons to be types of the Father and of Christ, consistently sees the elders as types of the apostles (Ign. Magn. 6.1, Trall. 3.1, etc). Only in the perspective of a later generation did the terms ‘elder’ and ‘apostle’ become mutually exclusive terms of rank within a hierarchy.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the interchangeable use of ‘apostle’ and ‘elder’ in the first century, there arose a preference for the latter, as the apostles died (Acts 15,2.4.6.22.23; 16,4 ‘apostles and elders’; Acts 11,30; 21,18 ‘elders’), and then, from the end of the first century, a complete avoidance of the former, at least in Asia. We noted that Papias did not allow himself to use the term ‘apostle’, even when we would have expected him to do so. Others have noted the same moratorium on the use of this term in the Gospel of John “It seems that the Fourth Gospel, without offering reasons, studiously

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<sup>12</sup> After his survey of the research, R. Alan Culpepper writes: “Most Johannine scholars would probably agree with the sentence of Robert Eisler that nowhere in the whole realm of history is there a more elusive ghost than “John the Elder.” In fact, even the existence of John the Elder has been contested. D.A. Carson recently concluded: “it is far from certain that there was an ‘elder John’ independent of the apostle, and if there was, it is still less certain that he wrote anything. The ambiguity of the evidence, which makes disparate interpretations virtually inevitable, lends the whole issue of John the Elder a phantom quality”, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 298.

<sup>13</sup> See ‘Ch.3 The Johannine Question Answered’ by John Ben-Daniel, on academia.edu, for this author’s solution.

<sup>14</sup> This may explain why Eusebius interpreted the excerpt of Papias in a way that his predecessors had not.

<sup>15</sup> Alastair Campbell, ‘The Elders of the Jerusalem Church’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol 44 (1993), 511-528; quote is from 519 and the italics are mine.

<sup>16</sup> Alastair Campbell, op.cit. 519.

avoids using the title apostle, while presuming the concept and terminology of sending”.<sup>17</sup> In the above passage, Campbell remarks that Ignatius “consistently sees the elders as types of the apostles”. Also, Irenaeus and many of the other Asian writers of the second century adopt the same policy of avoiding the word ‘apostle’ and using ‘disciple’ or ‘elder’ instead.<sup>18</sup> There must have been good reasons for this policy, and since it appears first in John’s Gospel and Letters, it may indeed have originated with the ‘apostle/elder’ John himself. We can suggest two pressing reasons why the leader of the Asian churches may have wanted to ban the use of the term ‘apostle’:

1. In the first century, before the church hierarchy was established, the local churches were served by missionary ministers and preachers who were called ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’.<sup>19</sup> As the letters of Sts. Paul, Peter and John confirm, many of these enthusiasts were not adhering to the teaching of the original apostles, and were therefore identified as ‘false apostles’ and ‘false prophets’. With the rapid expansion of Christianity at the end of the first century, the number of these missionary leaders increased greatly, forcing the institution of a fixed and approved hierarchy. Nevertheless, a large number of the ‘false apostles’ continued to circulate bringing the apostolic role into utter disrepute by the end of the first century.
2. At the same time, hopes were rising among the Jews for their religious and national restoration, centred on Jerusalem. With the passage of time, this hope became mixed with a belief in the imminent coming of their messiah. Their fervour led eventually to the diaspora revolt (‘War of Qitos’, 115-117 CE) and to the second Jewish revolt (132-135 CE). There would have been many Christians in the churches, of both Jewish and Pagan origin, who shared this hope, fed by an expectation that the apostles would return with Jesus and help to bring it about. In order to prevent ‘false Christs and false apostles from deceiving even the elect’ (Mk 13,20-22 et par), the banning of the title ‘apostle’ would have been seen as a necessary step.

The apostle John would also have had his own reasons to prefer being called ‘elder’ rather than ‘apostle’: as the sole surviving apostle in the last decade of the first century, John would have had to contend personally with misplaced messianic fervour in the Church, directed towards Jewish national restoration. As a member of the ruling body of the mother Church in Jerusalem, he had remained at the head-quarters of the Church’s mission. In this role, ‘elder’ was the more appropriate name for him than ‘apostle’, which denotes one who is sent out from there to accomplish a mission. Finally, in the local churches of Asia Minor, St. Paul had become known affectionately as ‘the Apostle’, so an alternative was needed for St. John. For all the reasons given above, and for others no doubt, ‘the Elder’ was an optimal title for John, in addition to simply being ‘a disciple’ of the Lord.

**3. *The author of the Apocalypse was writing under the pseudonym of John the Apostle, but his real identity is unknown. According to some, it was Cerinthus, a heretic from Ephesus. On the contrary, the Apocalypse is neither pseudonymous, nor heretical.***

As with the Gospel of John, a certain mystery surrounds the author’s self-presentation in the Apocalypse: his name is John, he was familiar with the situation in at least seven churches in Asia Minor, where he was so well-known that he felt no need to state his credentials. To the extent that he wanted to be recognized as the author, he trusted the local churches to let this be known quietly to

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, ‘Apostle’, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. D.N. Freedman, 6 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1992; vol 1, 311.

<sup>18</sup> Noted by Isbon Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 368.

<sup>19</sup> *Didache*, 11-13.

other communities and future generations. We could call this type of presentation ‘semi-anonymity’. Since the author was writing at a time of persecution (cf. Rev 1,9; 2,10.13), it can easily be understood as a means of protecting the author from libelous accusation and further persecution.

However, over the centuries, this semi-anonymity has been misunderstood. Instead, it is often claimed that the Apocalypse is an example of ‘pseudonymity’, which is when someone pretending to be John the Apostle uses the name of John as a ‘pseudonym’. In fact, all of the pre-Christian and contemporary apocalypses had been written in this way, under the name of a celebrated figure from the past (e.g., the apocalypses of 1Enoch, 2Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Daniel, 4Ezra, 2Baruch, Isaiah). The reasons for this pseudonymous attribution are still debated, but there can be no doubt that it gave the text an authority and readership it would not otherwise have had.

Since the earliest times, the tradition of pseudonymity has been attributed to the Apocalypse of John, by people who disliked the book and wanted to deter the faithful from reading it. Around 200 CE, a Roman churchman called Gaius declared that the Apocalypse was written pseudonymously by a heretic called Cerinthus, a contemporary of John the Apostle, who also lived in Ephesus (*H.E.* III.28). According to Epiphanius (c. 375 CE), Gaius’ claim was echoed by others whom he nicknamed the *Alogi*, meaning ‘without the Logos’, therefore ‘without reason’, because they rejected both John’s Gospel and the Apocalypse, saying again that they were written by the heretic Cerinthus.<sup>20</sup> They were all successfully challenged by another Roman priest, St. Hippolytus, in a lost work called “Chapters against Gaius”, and in the Western Church the idea that the Apocalypse was written by the heretic Cerinthus was laid to rest.

In the modern era, the academic study of apocalyptic writings has brought renewed attention to the tradition of pseudonymity and its characteristic association with this literary genre. Some went so far as to suggest that the Apocalypse was written pseudonymously. More recently, however, biblical scholars have unanimously rejected the view that Apocalypse of John was written pseudonymously.

This development began in 1979, when the definition of ‘apocalypse’ was updated by the Society of Biblical Literature’s Genres Project on Apocalypse, led by John J. Collins.<sup>21</sup> The new definition does not include pseudonymity as one of the defining characteristics of the genre. A work can be a true apocalypse, arguably even more true, without being pseudonymous, the main examples being the Apocalypse of John and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In the 1980’s, Adela Yarbro Collins applied the new definition specifically to John’s Apocalypse: “In modern times, some scholars have argued that the book of Revelation was written pseudonymously, because pseudonymity is a typical feature of ancient Jewish apocalypses. This argument is not compelling because there was a revival of prophecy among the followers of Jesus, which led, for a short time at least, to the willingness to prophesy and write books of prophecy in one’s own name. The apocalyptic work from the second century called *The Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, was written by a Christian in Rome, Hermas, in his own name. Another reason that this argument is unpersuasive is that the author would probably

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<sup>20</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 51.3.1-6.

<sup>21</sup> John J. Collins, ‘Pseudonymity, Historical Reviews and the Genre of the Revelation of John’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39, (1977): 329-343; J.J. Collins, ed., “Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre”, *Semeia* 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979, quoted in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998, 39-40, 4-5. The definition has withstood well the test of time, cf. idem, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2015; 1-20.

have taken care to specify more clearly that he was an apostle or a disciple of the Lord, if he had intended to be so recognized”.<sup>22</sup>

This last observation takes us back to the text of John’s Apocalypse and to what we have called its ‘semi-anonymity’: not only did this protect the author at a time when his identification may have led to further persecution, but it also defends against the accusation that the book was written pseudonymously. An author pretending to be John the Apostle would have stated clearly in the text that it was written by John the Apostle and then embellished this attribution with well-known personal details to make sure the reader understood. By contrast, the author of the Apocalypse describes himself as a servant, who is given a prophecy to write, but not as an apostle or disciple. He describes himself with a minimum of detail, just enough to explain why he is writing this prophecy. By maintaining a certain level of anonymity, and not revealing his full identity, he gives no reason to suspect he is writing under a pseudonym.

### **New Evidence**

The author of the Apocalypse clearly states that he was on the Aegean Island of Patmos when he received the revelation whose content fills his Apocalypse (Rev 1,9). His testimony is backed up by numerous reports in Eusebius’ *Church History*, which go further and associate the Patmos exile with John the Apostle and allow us to date it from the end of Emperor Domitian’s reign to the start of Nerva’s (95–96 CE). The same sources confirm that the same John lived in Ephesus and directed the Church there until his death at the beginning of Trajan’s reign, probably around 98 CE (e.g., *H.E.* III.18.1-3; 20.11; 23.1-6).

In fact, Eusebius describes the exile of John the Apostle on Patmos in the context of a final outburst of violence and “appalling cruelty” by Domitian against perceived opponents far and wide, including Christians (*H.E.* III, chs.17-20), and this persecution is reported by other historians as well. The Roman historian Cassius Dio, for example, explains that many of the victims were senators charged with “atheism, for which many others also were condemned having drifted into Jewish ways” (*Roman History* 67.14). Among these were close members of Domitian’s family, including his cousin Flavius Clemens, who was executed in 95 CE, and his niece Domitilla, Clemens’ wife, who was exiled to the Island of Pandateria. Of their seven children, two of whom were future heirs to the throne, no more was heard. It was a path that led directly to Domitian’s assassination at the end of 96 CE. The historian Suetonius ascribes the same outburst of violence at the end of Domitian’s reign to a paranoid frame of mind (*Twelve Caesars: Domitian*, chs.14-15).

To those who have doubts about the traditional attribution of the Apocalypse to the Apostle John, Roman penal law has something important to say. At the end of the first century CE, Roman law allowed convicted citizens of high social class to go into exile rather than face more serious penalties at home. Exile had many grades of severity according to whether it involved retention or loss of citizenship and property, whether it was to be temporary or permanent, and whether it was to be spent *away* from a certain place, or *at* a certain place, usually a remote island. In John’s case, the

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<sup>22</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘The Book of Revelation’, in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, ed. John J. Collins, New York, London: Continuum, 2000; 385; also Adela Yarbro Collins in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984; 27-8. For other arguments, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014; 106-7.



exile was probably the time-limited *Relegatio ad insulam* ('Relegation to an island') rather than the more severe, life-long *Deportatio ad insulam* ('Deportation to an island').<sup>23</sup>

As for the reason for his conviction, John indicates it was due to his preaching the "Word of God and the Witness of Jesus" (Rev 1,9). This agrees well with recent research, which has determined that the aim of exile was to restrict the ability of influential, high-ranking, oppositional figures from exerting their influence against central or provincial government.<sup>24</sup> The provincial governor would have interpreted the success of John's preaching as a threat to public order and state religion, and requested authorization from the Emperor to sentence him to exile. As only the highest-ranking citizens of Roman society (*honestiores*) were punished in this way, it is evident, firstly, that John had acquired Roman citizenship and, secondly, that the governor regarded John as having a high social status.

In view of the curious remark by Bishop Polycrates of Ephesus a century later (c.190 CE) that John had worn the 'petalon', the gold plate worn by the high-priest on his forehead (*H.E.* III.31.3; V.24.2; Ex 28,36; 39,30), it is possible that he was presented to the governor as the 'high priest' of the majority of local Jews. As the most senior leader of the Church worldwide, this title would have been an honest reflection of his position at the time,<sup>25</sup> and also a century later when Bishop Polycrates needed to invoke John's superior authority to try to win over the Pope in a dispute about the date of Easter (*H.E.* III.31.2-3). If not for his high status, John would almost certainly have been put to death, according to the law for the lower classes (*humiliores*).

So, Roman penal law confirms that the exiled author of the Apocalypse was a Christian leader from Asia Minor with Roman citizenship and high social status. It agrees well with the reports that have come down to us in Eusebius' *Church History* and offers a further confirmation of their veracity. It is inconceivable that such a prominent figure, whose high standing was recognized even by the Roman Emperor and his provincial governor, would have been overlooked or confused with any other Johns in the Asian Church at the time. It is even more inconceivable that John could have had his identity stolen and abused by an imposter from the same city and at the same time, without immediate reaction and retaliation on the imposter. The tradition of John's exile on Patmos not only identifies him as the author of the Apocalypse (Rev 1,9), but also with John the Apostle/Evangelist who resided in Ephesus. John's experience of exile would have been engraved on the collective memory of the Asian communities, where it may indeed have been recognized as a kind of martyrdom, or at least as a fulfillment of Christ's prophecy for John (Mk 10,39; Mt 20,23).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52a, Dallas: Word Books, 1997; 78-80.

<sup>24</sup> Fred K. Drogula, 'Controlling Travel: Deportation, Islands and the Regulation of Senatorial Mobility in the Augustan Principate', *Classical Quarterly* 61.1 [2011]; 230-266.

<sup>25</sup> It is possible that the reference to 'high priests' in Didache 13,3 may also be relevant.

<sup>26</sup> One can imagine a situation where John was brought before a local magistrate and sentenced to death for preaching the Gospel. His followers then appealed to the magistrate, saying that he was the 'high priest' of their sect of Jews. Perhaps they even produced a gold 'petalon' to prove this to the official. The case went up to the provincial governor, who, with the approval of the Emperor, offered John the option of exile on an Island, according to the law for the upper social class. It must have been a difficult choice for John: martyrdom for Christ in fulfillment of Christ's prophecy or a lonely death in exile on an Island. Only a word from the Lord would have persuaded John to accept exile. Implicit in the text of the Apocalypse (1,9) is the Lord's instruction to go to Patmos in order to receive his Revelation for the Church, 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus'. Seen in this perspective, the Apocalypse was indeed given to the Church instead of John's martyrdom. The Lord must have considered the Apocalypse to be more important for the Church, as suggested by the prophecy about John 'remaining' until the Second Coming (Jn 21,20-23). In the Apocalypse, John is commissioned to prophecy about the end-times and 'remains' in the Church until this task is fulfilled (Rev 11,10; 11,1-2).

None of the three premises employed to negate apostolic authorship remain standing, after being scrutinized in the light of modern research. John the Apostle was not martyred early in his life, he preferred to be called John the Elder rather than John the Apostle, and he was not a pseudonym, an incognito or a heretic, but a Christian leader in Asia Minor, whose high social status was recognized even by Emperor Domitian and his provincial governor.

## **Conclusion**

The first objection to apostolic authorship claimed that the Book of Revelation was written long after the Apostle John had been killed, the second asserts that it was written by another John, called John the Elder, about whose life we know nothing, and the third objection reckons the author to have been an incognito at best, and a heretic at worst. In one way or another, all of these objections have ignored or downplayed the significance of the author's exile on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1,9). Nevertheless, the Apostle John's exile on Patmos is well attested by the early Church and coincides with the Emperor Domitian's clamp-down on non-state religions, as recorded by other historical sources. The Roman laws of exile confirm that John was a high-ranking Christian leader in Asia Minor and strengthen the earliest traditions identifying him as John the Apostle and Evangelist.

John Ben-Daniel  
Old City, Jerusalem  
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