DOMITIAN, THE EMPEROR CULT AND \textit{REVELATION}*

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All students of the religious history of the early Roman Empire ought to have at least a tentative view of the date and interpretation of \textit{Revelation}, the last of the New Testament documents, because of the unique picture it offers of communities in Asia Minor and of the political constraints under which the first Christians practised their faith. What is offered here is a brief assessment of the two main conflicting theories about the circumstances which gave rise to the book, and in particular some comments on the earlier dating which has been advocated afresh by John A.T. Robinson in his \textit{Redating the New Testament} (1976).

Although \textit{Revelation} is a very difficult work to interpret in detail, there can be no doubt about its main thrust. It is a ‘tract for the times’, addressed by one John to particular churches in Asia which were under both external and internal pressures. Most of the book is occupied with the former; in dramatic, highly coloured language the present and future course of the powers of evil abroad in the Roman world is depicted, and the eyes of the faithful are drawn away from their actual and anticipated sufferings to the ultimate victory of God, to be manifested both on earth and in the world to come. It is the most renowned example of a literary genre to which it has given its name, apocalyptic, and a proper understanding of this background is essential to the good expositor.

Our question, however, is basically the historian’s one — where to place the book, how to understand various passages which seem to reflect contemporary events, and thence to the propriety of otherwise of relating it to the Roman emperor cult and its ramifications for Christians. The only times we know of pressures on Christian groups or individuals from Roman authorities, either local or imperial, are:

(i) in the fifties and sixties, as recorded in \textit{Acts} and sometimes reflected in the New Testament letters, for example at Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica.\footnote{1. \textit{Acts} 16-18; \textit{Eph.} 4.17-24, 5.15-18, 6.12-13; \textit{Phil.} 2.14-15, 3.18-20; 1 \textit{Thess.} 2.1-2, 3.4; 2 \textit{Thess.} 1.5-6, 3. 2.} The general picture is of some confrontation, much unpopularity, but certainly nothing like a persecution of any extent.

(ii) in A.D. 64 at Rome, the punishment of a large number by Nero following the devastating fire. There is no question of the severity

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of the treatment, of the large numbers who suffered, and of the repercussions in Rome and beyond.  

(iii) c A.D. 112 in Pontus-Bithynia, towards the end of Pliny's governorship, when large numbers were prosecuted and an unknown proportion executed.

The other period where circumstantial evidence is adduced of the repression of some Christian communities is in Asia Minor during the nineties, at the latter end of Domitian's rule. Revelation has accordingly often been placed c. A.D. 95, in preference to the Neronian period. There is substantial and relatively early testimony in favour of the later date from Irenaeus, who came from Asia Minor and knew Polycarp the disciple of John the apostle. Writing c. A.D. 180, he said that this John saw his visions, recorded in Revelation 'not long ago, almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian'. The question of authorship may be left aside for our purposes, as can most of the evidence about the book from later Christian sources. It is well-known that from the late second century onwards Christian writers built up a picture of a severe persecution under Domitian, inspired by the emperor himself, but recent study has strengthened the doubt that we can speak at all of widespread prosecutions and condemnations at this time. But this is not to say that there was not a strong expectation building up that Domitian and over-zealous Roman governors would initiate strong measures against an unpopular and, as it was thought, dangerous religious minority. This is the situation, it is here argued, which forms the backdrop to Revelation.

A number of points in Robinson's case for an immediate post-Neronian date may first be singled out. Much is made of the link with 1 and 2 Peter and Jude, letters which also reflect ordeals through which the churches are passing. What stands out, however, in regard to 1 Peter is the strong contrast in the attitudes towards Rome and the secular authority. In the letter the tone is respectful and in general obedience is enjoined; in Revelation we have a deep-seated and sometimes violent hostility to the imperial power. Surely these two documents were not being circulated and winning approval (both claiming apostolic authority) at one and the same time? Secondly, there is the common theme of Judaizing in 2 Peter and Jude and in the messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, that is, the disrup-

5. Tertullian, Apol. 5: 'a replica of Nero's cruelty'.
6. R's re-examination of dates started from 'one of the oddest facts about the New Testament — that what on any showing would appear to be the . . . single most debatable and climactic event of the period — the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 . . . — is never once mentioned as a past fact'. op.cit. p.13.
tive work of teachers advocating a return to Judaism. My contention here is that this is not a central theme of Revelation, and even in the messages to the churches it is secondary to the theme of external pressures and coming martyrdoms. Robinson cites expressions from 2.9 and 3.9 about ‘those who profess to be Jews but are really members of the synagogue of Satan’ and believes this must have been written before A.D. 70 and before the widening gap that developed between Jew and Christian. But presumably for the writer of Revelation the Christians were ‘the new Israel’ in any case, and a continuing respect for sincere and non-agitating Jews was not out of place.

Robinson argues further that we need not require a later date from the contents of the messages themselves. He cites the rapid development (and sometimes degeneration) that occurred within churches in the first generation, but is surely on weak ground here. The internal situations reflected in chapters 2 and 3 in Asia Minor make far better sense if thirty or forty years have elapsed since the ‘missionary’ decades with Paul when these communities were founded; to take one example, Laodicea is described in the New Testament letters without any hint of the declension which is its hallmark in Revelation. It is undeniable that Revelation refers to a violent repression that has already taken place, and there is no objection to Robinson linking this with Nero. The references are most frequent in chapters 16-20. Here are ‘the souls of all those who have been beheaded for having witnessed for Jesus’ (20.4) or, more often, the victims of Babylon the Great (or the Harlot) who is ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus’ (17.6), by which is meant Rome as the persecutor. But these martyrs are also joined to the prophets who have been killed before the Christian era (16.6), and it seems that they are referred to in order to strengthen the resolve of Christians of a later generation not to falter when their own ordeal comes.

There are two places in the book where the writer seems definitely to invite his readers to recognise an historical figure or event, where the language of apocalyptic is temporarily set aside. One of these is the notorious 666 of 13.18: ‘there is room for shrewdness here: if anyone is clever enough he may interpret the number of the Beast; it is the number of a man, the number of 666.’ Robinson and many before him equate this with Nero, by a variation of the Jewish practice of ‘gematria,’ that is, by first taking the Greek forms ‘Neron Kaisar,’ then transliterating them in the Hebrew script and giving this the numerical values which add up to the triple six. If we are unconvinced by this, we do best to fall back on the undoubted symbolism of the number; it is that which wholly falls short of

7. Colossians 2.1, 4.13-16. N.T. quotations in this paper are in general from the Jerusalem Bible (1966).

8. One difficulty, however, is that most of those reading Revelation were Gentiles who knew no Hebrew.
the perfection of the triple seven and it is the triangular number of eight, and eight is the number of the Beast in Chapter 17. These numerical antics are strange to us, but were of course popular well beyond Jewish circles at this time.

The second passage is the equally notorious crux of 17.10-11: ‘The seven heads are also seven emperors. Five of them have already gone, one is here now, and one is yet to come; once here, he must stay for a short while. The beast, who once was and now is not, is at the same time the eighth and one of the seven, and he is going to his destruction.’ This follows an obvious reference to Rome as the city of the seven hills where the Harlot has her seat. It must be admitted that the straight-forward application of this points to Nero, or rather to the principate of Galba in the latter part of A.D. 68, which is the date favoured by Robinson; the five kings (emperors?) represent Augustus to Nero: Galba (sixth) is here now: Otho (seventh) is ‘yet to come and to stay only a short while’: the eighth, the beast ‘who once was and now is not’ is equated with the beast of 13.14 who had been ‘wounded by the sword and still lived’, ‘who seemed to have had a fatal wound but whose deadly injury had been healed’ — that is, Nero or rather Nero redivivus. This solution is plausible, but why do we stop with Otho, and not with Vitellius or Vespasian? If, on the other hand, we choose a Domitianic date on other grounds and want the present ‘king’ to be Domitian, we would have to start the list with Nero and end with Nerva as ‘the one to come’, and the beast, the eighth and one of the seven must be the re-incarnated Nero who was expected to rise from the abyss, only to go to his destruction. This version of course obliges us to explain why the list should start with Nero, which is difficult. Again, we may retreat as does G.B. Caird9 into a purely symbolic interpretation of the numbers here, which is always a tenable proposition.

There need be no quarrel with the Nero redivivus motif. Robinson wants to link this with the Tacitus and Suetonius references10 to the appearance of a false Nero in 69, but we may equally well link it with Domitian and the later falsi Nerones also mentioned by Tacitus.11 The manifestation of evil in the future was to be feared through both a resurrected Nero and a repressive Domitian.

Chapter 11 contains what appears at first sight to be a reference to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem — that is, if we take it literally as Robinson does. The Holy City, or Great City, is to be trampled on by the pagans for 42 months, and the corpses of two ‘witnesses’ are to lie in its main street for the peoples of the world to exult over. But Robinson admits that the three and a half years is symbolic of the reign of evil, and we may

10. Tac. Hist. 1.2, 2.8f; Suet. Ner. 57.
agree with Caird that for the writer of Revelation Jerusalem was no longer the Holy City; it is here also called Sodom or Egypt, and in his eyes had joined the reprobate cities of the world with the crucifixion of Jesus there c. A.D. 30. So it is better to take the passage as figurative in its entirety.

The imagery of this chapter is fearful enough, but the coming destruction of Babylon the Great in Chapters 14 and 17-18 surpasses it in sheer wealth of colour and also in terror. While we must often hesitate to interpret lesser images in a literal way, it is surely perverse not to recognise in Babylon the Great, and the Famous Harlot, representations of Rome as the godless temporal power. Within his Neronian framework Robinson wants to see in these predictions the expected collapse of Rome in the course of the Civil War, and he compares John's descriptions in Chapter 18 (for example, 9ff. 'There will be mourning and weeping for her by the kings of the earth ... they see the smoke as she burns ...') with those of Tacitus in the Histories, especially on the burning of the Capitol when the fierce battles raged in the city streets between the troops of Vitellius and Vespasian. But if he wants these passages to be descriptive rather than predictive, Robinson must put on his date well into 69, which would upset his interpretation of the passage about the eight emperors. But surely, in spite of the horrors of the Civil War, few expected a total collapse of Rome of the kind portrayed in Revelation. It is better to take the seer's imagery as portraying the final judgement of cosmic evil, exemplified in the coming fall of hated Rome which was to precede the inauguration of the heavenly Jerusalem of Chapters 21-22.

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This powerful motif of hostility to the present earthly power leads conveniently to a brief consideration of the emperor cult in the time of Domitian as the probable background to the whole book. Of the major figures representing evil the Dragon of Chapter 12 is identified with Satan in verse 9 ('the great Dragon, the primeval serpent, known as the devil or Satan who had deceived all the world, was hurled down to the earth and his angels with him') — an identification repeated at 20.2 with his casting into the abyss for the thousand years before his final release and destruction. More interest centres on the First and Second Beast of Chapter 13. The former emerges from the sea, with his seven heads and ten horns, his coronets and blasphemous titles marked on the heads (1). This Beast possesses the full delegated power of the Dragon, who is marvelled at and worshipped in this guise by the nations; he overcomes the saints after they

12. Caird, for example, goes too far in identifying the 'monster ... out of the sea' (13.1ff.) with the proconsul of Asia arriving at Ephesus: op.cit. p.162.
13. 3.72, 83:4.1.
alone refuse to prostrate themselves before him. We may here see a picture of Rome and in particular the emperor as wielding the power of Satan in the eyes of first-century Christians, who are exhorted by John to show constancy and faith (10). What of the Second Beast? He is the servant of the First and extends his authority everywhere, making the world and all its people worship the First Beast, persuading them to erect statues of the Beast and enforcing recognition; he ‘made it illegal for anyone to buy or sell anything unless he had been branded with the name of the Beast or with the number of his name’ (13.16-17). The Second Beast then must represent the many Roman officials who exercised power in the name of Caesar.

It remains now to consider what has been pointed out as the main thrust of Revelation and to propose that a setting of c. 95 is more likely than the close of the Neronian period and that, in consequence, the book may properly be used as evidence of religious reaction at the end of the century, above all against the emperor cult. Revelation opens in an atmosphere of impending crisis — ‘The Time is close’ (1.3), and John the writer, himself on Patmos and exiled because of his witness, is one with the Christians under stress; ‘I am your brother and share your sufferings, your kingdom, and all you endure’ (1.9). This central theme runs through the exhortations to the Asian churches in Chapters 2 and 3; ‘I (the Messiah) will keep you safe in the time of trial which is going to come for the whole world’ (3.10); ‘Satan is going to send some of you to prison to test you ..... even if you have to die, keep faithful’ (2.10). Not only does this theme dominate the first chapters, it is also the key to an understanding of the apocalypse proper, which runs from Chapter 4 to the end of the book. The purpose of the visions recorded is to fortify the faithful against the coming crisis; the watchwords are fidelity, constancy, endurance, and the promises of heavenly rewards to those who prove victorious ring like a refrain through the messages to the churches.

There is circumstantial evidence to show that this sombre expectation within the Christian communities of Asia was not unreasonable at the end of Domitian’s principate, evidence which matches the internal testimony of Revelation itself. For a religious minority in this province, which by its teachings set limits to the temporal power and especially rejected the totalitarian state, the claims of Rome and its emperor were inadmissible. The worship of local deities in the Asian cities, whether Graeco-Roman or not, was distasteful enough and made it very awkward for Christians to be seen as non-conformists. When to this was added the imperial cult, non-adherence appeared not merely as a religious protest (say against polytheism and degenerate worship) but as prima facie disloyalty to the state at the very

14. or, ‘the crisis is near’ (ὅ γάρ καιρός ἐγγύς).
15. Qualities that Pliny, for his part, saw only as pertinacia and inflexibilis obstinatio (x.96).
point where it was regularly looked for. In that regard the position of the Jews was by this time, of course, very different from that of the Christians; recognition of their national identity, and of the religion that was inseparable from it, allowed their non-conformity to be tolerated, though it was doubtless often irritating to the Greeks and Romans. But the Christians had extended across national barriers (as well as social and economic) and had never been granted any imperial edict accepting their separatism. Hence the varied treatment they received in the early Empire through the different provinces and at the hands of diverse emperors and governors.

The integration of Caesar worship with that of the local deities has recently been emphasised by Fergus Millar and it was this, surely, which made the position of Christians tenuous, particularly in the Asian cities where devotion to the Caesars and to local gods and goddesses was intense. Of the cities addressed in Revelation, this integration had been characteristic of Ephesus, Pergamum, Smyrna and Sardis. At Ephesus ever since 29 B.C. part of the great temple of Artemis had been dedicated to the cult of Rome and Divus Julius and then to his successors. Amongst several recent inscriptions from the city that is found that at the Nymphaeum: a joint dedication to Artemis and Domitian dated A.D. 92-3:

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\text{[Άρτέμι(ίι Έφεσία χαί | Αυτοκράτορι[[Δομετιανώι]] | Καίσαρι Σεβαστ[[ώι Γερμανικώι]] | ἀρχιερεί μεγίστω, δημαρχικῆς | ἕξουσίας τὸ iβ, αὐτοκράτορι τὸ χγ; | ὑπάτῳ τὸ iς; τειμητῇ, πατρ[ἰ πα]τρ[ί πα]τρ[ί(ίος.}
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The temple wardenship of Artemis boasted by Ephesus was noticed by the writer of Acts (19.35) and occurs in many inscriptions; others illustrate the offerings made at the provincial sanctuary of the Augusti in Ephesus by other cities of the area, and name holders of the coveted high priesthood of the imperial cult. The following from the principate of Domitian will serve as an example:

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\text{Αὐτοκράτορι[[Δο | μιτιανώι]] Καίσαρι | Σεβαστώι[[Γεμμα | νικώι]] ἐπὶ ἀνηπάτου | Λουκίου Μεστρίου | φλώρου | ὅ δήμος ὁ Κερεταπέων | ναόι τῷ ἐν Ἑφέσῳ τῷ[ν] | Σεβαστῶν κοινώι τῆς | Ἀσίας | διὰ Γλύκωνος τοῦ Ἀγα | ὕοκλεὼς ἐρχεπιστάτου | ἐπὶ ἀρχιερείς τῆς Ἀσίας[ες] | Τιθερίου Κλαυδίου | Ἀριστίωνος.}
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Pergamum, once the seat of the proconsul and still as eminent as Ephesus, had received its separate temple for the worship of Rome and the emperor earliest of all, so that John in Revelation could well describe it as the place ‘where Satan has his throne’ (2.13). It was soon to have also a

19. ibid., 426. In this case, unlike the other inscriptions of the group, Domitian’s name had not been erased and replaced by that of Vespasian, following the damnatio memoriae.
temple for the common worship of Zeus and the emperor Trajan. These two cities shared with Smyrna, Sardis and lesser cities the honour of meetings of the koinon Asias, held annually for the maintenance of the imperial cult, the sacred contest Romaia Sebasta and the transaction of provincial business; here was elected from the city delegates the Chief Priest of the province, whose wife was given a corresponding title. The Roman proconsuls were naturally involved in both the civic and the provincial celebrations of the cult, and it would be wrong to think of this as an eastern prerogative. A recent inscription from Messenia reveals that P. Cornelius Scipio, quaestor propraetore of Achaea, conducted the 'Caesarean Games' there c. A.D. 1-2, which included sacrifices for (or to?) Augustus. From Etruria (Forum Clodii) in A.D. 18 there is the elaborate inscription prescribing the ritual for the celebration of the birthdays of Augustus and Tiberius in a temple dedicated to the numen Augusti and containing statues of the two emperors.

The evidence is thus increasing of the personal participation by governors in both local rites and the imperial cult itself — which is not unexpected, since we already knew that they led the celebrations of imperial birthdays in the provinces and also administered the oath on the anniversaries of the dies imperii. Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan provides an example of the latter from Bithynia c. A.D. 110, and it seems that Trajan’s acknowledgement of religio here refers mainly to a prayer to the gods for the emperor as their vicegerent on earth. (Whether the provincials took the oath en masse in the city where the proconsul performed this rite, or whether it was the members of the Council only, is not clear).

It is safe to conclude from the accumulation of evidence that there was a steadily increasing concentration of political and religious attention upon the imperial cult in Asia, probably even more than in other provinces, and the result could well have been a greater suspicion resting upon the Christian communities there. Economic pressures on them are already apparent in the narrative of Acts and in the New Testament letters. They are echoed, it is clear, in parts of Revelation where the faithful who are not branded with the name of the Beast are to be banned from buying and selling (13.16-17) and more broadly in the description of the vast Roman commerce which is to collapse at the time of her judgement. ‘There will be weeping and distress over her among all the traders of the earth when there is nobody left to buy their cargoes of goods; their stocks of gold and silver, jewels and pearls, linen and purple and silks and scarlet; all the sandalwood, every piece of ivory or fine wood, in bronze or iron or marble; the cinnamon and spices, the myrrh and ointment and incense; wine, oil, flour

20. SEG xxiii. 206 (note the curious expression ἐνλείπων μηδὲ τάς ὑπὲρ τὰν διὰ τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ θυσίαν εὐχαριστίας ποτ’ οἱ θεοὺς).
21. ILS 154.
and corn; their stocks of cattle, sheep, horses and chariots, their slaves, their human cargo’ (18.11-13).

Social pressures are not easy to analyse, but they were present in the Asian churches of the New Testament account and later. The repugnance felt by Tacitus and Pliny towards Christians was presumably based in both cases on some personal knowledge. Pliny’s evidence is well-known, and confirms that Christians were on trial during the Flavian period although he happened never to have participated. It is significant for our enquiry that he speaks of lapsed Christians, in Bithynia, some of whom had recanted ‘even twenty years ago’, which puts these events back into the Domitianic setting that we are proposing for Revelation. In the case of Tacitus, who described the new faith as an exitiabilis superstition in the Annals (writing c.120) it is not so often remembered that he himself had been proconsul of Asia c.112-3 and may well have encountered Christians there. What is apparent is that it was open for individuals or groups to count on this general unpopularity in bringing accusations against Christians before the Roman officials. In Revelation some Jews are mentioned as accusers in Smyrna (2.9) but we do not know how often this was the case elsewhere in Asia.

Now it obviously needed something to seriously inflame this situation for the circumstances of Revelation to look plausible, and we may conclude that it was the religious preoccupations and personal stance of Domitian which provoked them. In Rome there were the trials of notable individuals on religious charges, distinct from those whom Domitian suspected of plotting his death. In the latter regard it is worth reflecting on the dread of the Roman power which must have been acutely aroused throughout Asia when their proconsul Vettulenus Civica was executed in office, presumably at Ephesus. This was about A.D.89. Nor is there any reason to doubt the general truth of what Cassius Dio and Pliny report about Domitian’s use of titles that were offensive to many, in spite of a conscientious administrative record in the provinces; Christians could not be expected to acquiesce in the dominus et deus appellation. And they knew what to expect if they were brought to trial — strong pressure to recant, as in the hearing conducted in Bithynia by Pliny not many years later. To this end the proconsul brought into court a statue of Trajan to set beside the images of the gods: those who denied ever having been Christians offered wine and incense before the statue, and those who had lapsed had to prove it by a similar act as well as by cursing the name of Christ. It may be noted that this procedure aroused no adverse comment from the emperor in his reply to the

22. *Ann.* xv.44; *Epp.* x.96.
23. Perhaps Philadelphia (3.9).
proconsul (x.97). Punishments apparently ranged from execution downwards, and one martyr, evidently notable, is mentioned in *Revelation* at Pergamum in the immediate context of the emperor cult (2.13). John, the writer of the book, evidently received the milder form of exile, *relegatio in insulam* (1.9) which the proconsul himself had the power to inflict.

There are two other pieces of evidence from Asia, one of which, Hadrian's rescript, is of particular value because it views the problem of public order from the Roman side. It is dated c.125, is addressed to Minucius Fundanus and refers back to his predecessor as proconsul c.120-1, Serennius Granianus. The background of the document is the agitation of enemies of the Christians, whose mood and whose methods were a source of anxiety to the Roman administration. 'In my view therefore the matter should not be left unexplored, so that people should not be harassed and informers provided with an opportunity for evildoing. If the provincials are able to make a strong case for this petition against the Christians so as to plead it before the court, let them concentrate on this alone and not be influenced by mere demands and shoutings.'

The reference to *sykophantia* which follows may be compared with the 'slanderous accusations' of *Revelation* (2.9) against Christians at Smyrna. Thirty years later at Smyrna the bishop Polycarp was martyred, and the account of his trial provides evidence that refusal to accept the emperor cult was the question on which the proceedings turned. First the eirenarch and his father pressed the bishop to conform: 'Why, what is wrong with saying “Caesar is Lord” and sacrificing and the other actions and so saving yourself?' Then the proconsul himself: 'Swear by the genius of Caeser, change your mind and say, “Away with the atheists”!' This reference to 'atheism' is an echo of the situation under Domitian when Christians were open to the charge of 'atheism' for refusing to acknowledge the Roman gods and, equally serious, the *numen Augusti*.

This paper has confined itself chiefly to Asia Minor and the immediate setting of *Revelation*. Events in Rome in the last eight or ten years of the principate of Domitian provide corroborative evidence of some importance and the trials mentioned above deserve further comment here. It is generally conceded that following the revolt of Saturninus in Upper Germany in 89 Domitian became increasingly suspicious of plots, and this evidently was not the first. Eusebius claim that in 83 many senators were executed or exiled, and four years later the Acta Arvalia record a sacrifice in thanksgiving for Domitian's deliverance from conspirators. In the provinces as well as in Rome the emperor must have appeared cruel and

29. *op.cit.* IX.2.
30. *H.E.* III.xvii
sinister by his execution of his own cousins T. Flavius Sabinus and T. Flavius Clemens. The latter, consul in 95, is of particular interest because he and his wife Domitilla (Domitian’s niece), were charged with ‘atheism, by which many others also who drifted into the customs of the Jews were condemned.’ It is probable that this describes the embracing of Christianity, since the Jewish religion was lawful and not atheistic in Roman eyes, whereas atheism is known soon afterwards to have become a common charge against Christians.\(^{31}\) Domitian rigorously upheld the state religion, and his ready acceptance of semi-divine honours in Rome as well as in the East must be viewed alongside this increasing tendency to strike down his actual or imagined opponents.\(^{32}\)

On the Christian side, there is the opening statement of Clement of Rome in his First Letter to the Corinthians, which, because of its date, c.96, may take on particular significance: ‘Because of the sudden and continuous misfortunes and calamities which have come upon us, brethren, we believe we have been tardy in turning our attention to the matters which are being disputed among you ...’ This could well reflect attacks on the Roman church and its leaders at the hands of Domitian and his supporters.

As a setting for Revelation there would not appear to be a comparable weight of evidence for the Neronian period,\(^{33}\) although this evidence is at present circumstantial and perhaps will always so remain. We may never know the exact chain of events in Asia which impelled John to write his tract, but can judge from the political climate there and also in Rome that the Christian communities of the province had strong cause to suspect that Domitian was about to instigate a widespread persecution with a wave of martyrdoms. It did not come to this; perhaps it was the assassination of the emperor in Rome which forestalled his action. But only this powerful expectation can explain the intensity of the book.


33. Since this article was written my attention has been drawn to Albert A. Bell, ‘The Date of John’s Apocalypse. The Evidence of the Roman Historians Reconsidered’, New Test. Studies 25, 1978, 93-102. This traverses much of the same ground as Robinson (who is not mentioned) in favour of a date under Galba. But it gives too little weight to the urgency of the message, and makes no reference at all to the emperor cult.