

IMPERIAL PERSECUTION AND THE DATING OF 1 PETER AND REVELATION

DUANE WARDEN*

Important interpretive questions concerning the books of 1 Peter and Revelation revolve around the dates when the two documents were written, but a consensus for either continues to elude NT scholars. The issues involved for the dating of 1 Peter are different from those of Revelation, but they tend to converge on two considerations: (1) Both documents are addressed to the same general geographical region;¹ (2) the texts of both suggest that the addressees were experiencing significant conflicts with society and that suffering had resulted for the believers. Related to both considerations is the noteworthy fact that only these two NT documents apply the appellation "Babylon" to Rome (1 Pet 5:13; Rev 17:5, 18).²

The dating of 1 Peter is tied to questions of authorship. If the apostle Peter is the author, it is generally agreed that the book must be dated by the late 60s.³ Those who see a social and ecclesiastical setting in the book that postdates the 60s have tended to reject Petrine authorship, a viewpoint well represented by Best.⁴ Beare maintains that the persecution setting reflected in the book so closely resembles the description of Pliny as

* Duane Warden is professor of Bible and religion at Ohio Valley College in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

¹ Peter addresses a geographical area that encompasses the cities addressed in Revelation. If the author of 1 Peter is actually addressing a particular readership in a given social setting, however, it is hardly possible for him to have had in mind the diverse population of a land mass encompassing essentially the whole of Anatolia. Peter is more likely to have received information about churches located in the Greek cities of western Asia Minor, and his letter is more likely to reflect that setting.

² Rome is also designated Babylon in *Apoc. Ezra* 3:1-2, 28-31; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 10:1-3; *Sib. Or.* 5:143, 159. V. C. Hunzinger, "Babylon als Deckname für Rom und die Datierung des 1. Petrusbriefes," in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land* (ed. H. G. Reventlow; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1965), argues that this name is applied to Rome because she, like Babylon, had become the destroyer of the temple in Jerusalem. He concludes that both documents must have been written after A.D. 70.

³ So E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1947; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 56-63; with more reservations J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969) 32-33.

⁴ E. Best, *1 Peter* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 49-64. But W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 70* (3d ed.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894) 282-288, argues that the letter is written by the apostle but dates from c. 80. He challenges the tradition that Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero. His arguments, while forcefully advanced, have found little following.

to demand the same time frame for the authorship of each. Hence he dates the book, or at least large portions of it, to the time of Trajan.⁵

Revelation too has been variously dated. Such notables as Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort of a previous generation dated the book in the time of Nero, a position recently revived by Robinson and supported by Hill and Bell.⁶ More commonly, at least in recent times, the book has been placed in the time of Domitian.

The concern of this article is with one narrow aspect of the methodology used in dating 1 Peter and Revelation. In the attempt to delineate the social context in which the readers lived, scholars frequently find points of comparison between the persecution setting of the books on the one hand and actions taken by Nero and Domitian to suppress Christianity on the other. The thesis of what follows is that a persecution of Christians by Domitian in Rome, even if such a thing happened, is essentially irrelevant for the dating of either 1 Peter or Revelation. The development will continue as follows: (1) a review of the process by which scholars seek information relevant to the dating of 1 Peter and Revelation from a Domitianic persecution, (2) an examination of the evidence for a persecution by Domitian, (3) a consideration of the relationship between Christian persecution in Rome *vis-à-vis* persecution in Asia, and (4) conclusions concerning persecution as a factor in establishing the dates of 1 Peter and Revelation.

I. DATING AND THE PERSECUTION OF DOMITIAN

When the specter of Christian persecution is encountered in either Revelation or 1 Peter it is frequently an invitation to enter into an extended discussion of the persecuting emperors. The reason for such an approach is easy enough to understand. Information on persecutions instigated by Nero and Domitian is contained in relatively concise literary sources and has been hallowed through much repetition. On the other hand, the reactions of the dominant culture and the ruling authorities in Asia to early believers is more difficult to determine.

Appeals to the persecution of Domitian for aid in dating Revelation are found in the most respected sources. Swete comments that "Domitian's jealous insistence on his claims to Divine honours . . . belong to the later years of his reign." On the basis of this statement he pushes the date of Revelation into the 90s. He continues: "The apocalypse refers in terms which are necessarily obscure to Nero and Domitian as successive embodiments of the Beast; the Beast itself is properly the hostile World-power which was identified with the Roman Empire, and personified in the first two persecuting emperors."⁷ When Swete moves from the persecution of Christians in Rome to the *Sitz im Leben* of Revelation's first readers, he

⁵ F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (3d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970) 41-43.

⁶ J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 226-228; D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 218-219 n. 1; A. Bell, "The Date of John's Apocalypse: The Evidence of Some Roman Scholars Reconsidered," *NTS* 25 (1979) 93.

⁷ H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (2d ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1907) xcvi.

assumes that initiatives taken against Christians in Rome amount to empire-wide events. Such an assumption requires a critical look.

A similar development is taken by Charles: "But Domitian insisted on public recognition of these claims [to divinity] and in the last years of his reign began to persecute the Church in the capital of the Empire." He continues: "There is no evidence of any kind to prove that the conflict between Christianity and the imperial cult had reached the pitch of antagonism that is presupposed in the J^{ap} before the closing years of Domitian's reign"⁸—to which we might rejoin that the evidence for a conflict between the Church and the imperial cult in Asia, Revelation aside, is roughly the same before Domitian's reign as it is during his reign (i.e. it is tenuous at best). The basic line of reasoning followed by these earlier commentators has been continued by Kümmel, Caird and others.

Of particular interest is the recent, well-done work by Hemer on the seven churches.⁹ Though with more reservation Hemer continues to appeal to a "Domitianic persecution" as a means for dating Revelation. It is by no means the only or even the principal argument he advances for placing Revelation in the 90s. It is, however, an argument and as such deserves attention. The essence of the reasoning seems to be as follows: (1) Historical records indicate that Domitian suppressed the Christian Church; (2) Roman government in Asia was subject to constant modification from the Roman capital city; (3) actions taken against Christians by Domitian in Rome would therefore have moved Roman officials in Asia to persecute Christians; (4) it follows that when one encounters the persecution of Christians in NT documents it is helpful to date each book by relating it to what is known of Domitian's persecution. Each premise in this reasoning process can be and has been strongly challenged.

II. THE DOMITIANIC PERSECUTION

We begin with the following premise: After the beginning of the second century, references to the persecution of believers by Christian authors must be read in light of the fact that it served Christian purposes to identify Nero and Domitian as persecutors of the Church. A casual reading of Tacitus or Suetonius will demonstrate that in influential Roman circles the memory of both emperors was an occasion for dredging up every despicable deed that anyone might have imagined either to have perpetrated. Both, of course, marked the end of their respective dynasties. After his memory had been damned by the Roman senate, the great temple dedicated to Domitian in Ephesus was rededicated to Vespasian. Even the cult statue became a representation of the earlier emperor.¹⁰ As far as

⁸ R. H. Charles, *Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920), 1. xciv-xcv.

⁹ C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (JSNTSup 11; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1986) 8-9.

¹⁰ See the discussion and references in S. R. F. Price, *Ritual and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984) 178. D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1950), 1. 572, 2. 1432 n. 18, suggests that the temple was built under the principate of

Christians were concerned, it was fitting that emperors like Nero and Domitian, despised by the Romans themselves, should have suppressed the Church. It is interesting that we have two clear instances of persecution under Trajan—namely, Pliny's letter, and the arrest and presumed martyrdom of Ignatius. But Trajan somehow figures small in Christian records as a persecutor when compared to Domitian.

Outside Christian circles the case for a persecution of Christians by Domitian is built on the thinnest evidence. Suetonius makes the bare mention of Domitian putting to death his cousin, Flavius Clemens, near the end of the latter's consulship. The historian thinks Clemens likely to be innocent of wrongdoing because he was too lazy and worthless to have been involved in an intrigue.¹¹ Dio Cassius from the third century adds that the consul's wife Flavia Domitilla, also a relative of Domitian, was an object of the emperor's wrath:

And the same year Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor's. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned.¹²

It requires considerable imagination to read into Suetonius and Dio an empire-wide persecution of Christians instigated by Domitian.

Eusebius provides more exact information:

The teaching of our faith shone so brilliantly in the days described that even writers foreign to our belief did not hesitate to commit to their narratives the persecutions and the martyrdoms in it, and they even indicated the time accurately, relating that in the fifteenth year of Domitian, Flavia Domitilla, who was the niece of Flavius Clemens, one of the consuls at Rome at that time, was banished with many others to the islands of Pontia as testimony to Christ.¹³

The historical accuracy of Eusebius at this point has been variously assessed. Dio, of course, can be read as confirming Eusebius' testimony if one understands "atheism" and "Jewish ways" as indicating that his subjects were Christians.¹⁴

Dio aside, it is difficult to understand why Suetonius, "hostile to Christianity and contemporary with the events," does not associate the fall of Flavius Clemens and his wife with the practice of Christianity if he knew of any such associations.¹⁵ In contrast it is easy to understand the eagerness with which Melito of Sardis, quoted by Eusebius, associates Domitian

Vespasian, later dedicated to Domitian, and then dedicated a second time to Vespasian after Domitian's damnation.

¹¹ Suetonius *Domitian* 15.1.

¹² Dio Cassius *Roman History* 67.14.

¹³ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.18.3-4.

¹⁴ See Bell, "Date" 94-95, for a criticism of the value of Dio's testimony.

¹⁵ W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (New York: New York University, 1965; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 214-215.

and persecution. "The only emperors," writes Melito, "who were ever persuaded by malicious men to slander our teaching were Nero and Domitian, and from them arose the lie, and the unreasonable custom of falsely accusing Christians."¹⁶ The uncertainty of non-Christian evidence, coupled with the advantage that Christians saw in associating persecution with unpopular emperors, makes suspect the basis for asserting a Domitianic persecution. Frend is no doubt correct when he concludes: "In Rome . . . the persecution of Domitian does not appear to have amounted to very much."¹⁷ Indeed it is questionable whether there was a persecution as such under Domitian.

The record is considerably stronger that Domitian did, in fact, demand divine recognition to a degree that his predecessors generally had not done. Suetonius reports that the emperor's procurators were to begin edicts with the words, "Our Lord and our God bids that this be done."¹⁸ He adds that the emperor allowed only statues of himself of minimum size and content of gold and silver to be erected. Dio adds this: "So many honours were voted to him that almost the whole world (so far as it was under his dominion) was filled with images and statues constructed of both silver and gold."¹⁹

Is one to see in these words evidence for an upsurge of emperor worship in the province of Asia? Does Domitian's claim to divinity lie behind the two beasts of Revelation 13? Is it Domitian's claim to divine honors, coupled with Christian refusal, that lies behind the persecutions addressed in Revelation or 1 Peter? The tendency has been to answer these questions in the affirmative in spite of the tentative nature of the evidence.

There are unanswered questions. For example, the reign of Domitian dates from A.D. 81 to 96, between fifteen and sixteen years. According to Eusebius it was in the fifteenth year of his reign that he exiled certain Christians. Suetonius sings the praises of the emperor during the early part of his reign. His excessive claims to divinity seem to have come toward its close. It is hardly reasonable to suppose that the unprecedented and unpopular actions of an emperor in Rome should immediately, within the course of a year, have had great influence in the provinces, especially a province like Asia under the direct supervision of the senate. In fact there is no evidence that emperor worship was promoted with any particular fervor during the time of Domitian. Price demonstrates that fewer imperial temples and sanctuaries were built during the period when Domitian reigned than for a similar period on either side of him.²⁰

The emperor cult was indeed strong in Asia, but its strength was due to continuous tradition and development for centuries before Domitian. It is

¹⁶ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.24.8-9.

¹⁷ Frend, *Martyrdom* 217.

¹⁸ Suetonius *Domitian* 13.2-3.

¹⁹ Dio Cassius *Roman History* 67.8. Dio's opinion of Domitian might be colored by the emperor's having exiled his famous relative, the orator Dio Chrysostom; see C. P. Jones, *The Roman World of Dio Chrysostom* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1978) 7, 45-51.

²⁰ Price, *Ritual* 59.

entirely possible that Christian conflict with the emperor cult stands behind some of the distress reflected in Revelation and 1 Peter, but it is unlikely that the distress had any direct link with the misguided seeking of divine honor by the emperor in Rome. The Asian emperor cult had adequate inertia and social force to account for Christian conflict independent of any interest the emperor may or may not have taken in it. There is no indication that Domitian himself affected the practice of ruler worship in Asia to any significant degree. It follows that there is no foundation for dating Revelation to the closing years of Domitian's reign based on Suetonius' statement that the emperor expected to be addressed as God. To make such an attempt is to badly confuse imperial gossip and intrigue in the Roman capital city with the *Sitz im Leben* of the Church in Asia Minor.

III. THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN ASIA

The extent and the reasons for conflict between the early Church and the Asian social order are difficult to determine. But the fact of conflict between harbingers of the Christian message and local Asian society from the earliest date is apparent. The artisans of Artemis fomented trouble against Paul in Acts 19. To the Corinthians the apostle alludes to the "wild beasts" with which he had fought in Ephesus (1 Cor 15:32) and adds: "For a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries" (16:9). In 2 Corinthians he takes up the theme of conflict again: "For we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor 1:8). 1 Peter and Revelation, among other NT documents, suggest that the conflicts continued throughout the first century.

There are many questions: What did unbelievers find offensive in Christians? Are believers steadily harassed, or is it an on-again-off-again thing? In an age of enormous variety in religious and quasi-religious practices, why should not Christians fit in among other cults? Is suffering primarily a matter of recalcitrant neighbors who unofficially make life difficult for believers, or does it spring from official sources? A host of similar questions confronts the student who begins to inquire into the nature of the conflict and suffering encountered in Revelation or 1 Peter. Questions such as these, however, address the Church in the milieu of Asia Minor and are more likely to produce relevant data concerning the dating of the books than is the method of escaping to Rome for a study of Domitian's assessment of himself as a god.

Inquiring into the nature of Church-state conflict in the first century requires one to evaluate the nature of Roman provincial administration and the lines of power that held the society together. What is likely to strike the modern reader as remarkable is the independence of Roman provincial governors. Sherwin-White remarks: "The proconsul in the first century of the Principate was still very much the independent administrator that he had been in the Republican period."²¹ This independence is illustrated by a

²¹ A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1963; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 1.

remark of Cicero to his brother when the latter was to serve as proconsul of Asia. The Roman statesman reminded him of how gratifying it was to be a provincial governor: "So many cities and communities concentrate their gaze upon the nod of a single man." He goes on: "There is no succour for the oppressed, no facility for protest, no senate, no popular assembly."²² It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the policies of Roman governors in Asia are more relevant to Christian persecution than are capricious acts by individual emperors in Rome.

When a governor began his year of office he was expected to present an edict setting forth the general principles under which he would govern. In practice, each governor tended to follow the precedent set by his predecessor both in the framing of the edict and in informal, *ad hoc* matters that might arise from local exigencies. The jurist Marcus Scaevola, governor of Asia in 95/94 B.C., had composed an edict for his tenure of office that had become a model for successors not only for Asia but for other provinces. Cicero was a great admirer of Scaevola and modeled his edict for governing Cilicia on Scaevola's.²³ The Roman governor was no lackey who sent out for instructions every time an unusual situation developed. He acted on his own right as bearer of the Roman *imperium* in the region. An important consideration when inquiring into the conflict of the early Church with Asian society is the way the Roman proconsul went about his work, conducted assizes, and responded to the needs and concerns of the natives of the province.

Powerful as the governor was, it is clear that he could not personally handle every juridical matter that developed in the province. There were also local police forces and local courts that attended to day-to-day law and order in the cities. Numerous inscriptions out of Asia attest to the presence of the *paraphylax*, the police officer, the agent of city administrators. The Romans committed as little resources as possible to the governing of a peaceful province like Asia. They expected cities to attend to their own needs. Any considerations of Christian conflict with the powers of state must consider the jurisdictional makeup of the province in question. Price comments: "With only a small staff, the governor himself could do little more than handle important legal cases and maintain order. The cities continued to organize themselves and they, rather than Rome, were the primary centres of attachment for their inhabitants."²⁴

Once one has delineated the lines of power within the province of Asia he has, of course, only begun his work. The religious patterns of the people, their entertainment, social mores, and economic well-being all enter into the scene as one searches for fundamental sources of conflict between Christians and nonbelieving neighbors. One ought not dismiss too quickly the role of provincial and city governments in opposing the new religion. While the questions raised when these matters are entertained are relevant

²² Cicero *Letter to His Brother Quintus* 1.1.22.

²³ See Magie, *Roman Rule*, 1. 173-174; cf. G. H. Stevenson, *Roman Provincial Administration* (New York: G. E. Trechert, 1939) 69.

²⁴ Price, *Ritual* 2.

to the persecution scene found in Revelation and 1 Peter, it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to deal with them. We can only argue that energies expended in these channels are likely to produce data that will illuminate the *Sitz im Leben* of 1 Peter and Revelation and hence be useful in dating the books.

IV. PERSECUTION AND THE DATING OF REVELATION AND 1 PETER

It is difficult to understand the conclusion reached by Collins in her recent work on Revelation. If I understand her correctly, she would agree with most of the points I have attempted to make in this paper. In addition she takes time to discredit Irenaeus as an historian of the first century. Having destroyed the evidence she concludes: "The tendency to flatter Domitian by giving him divine honors and worshiping his person was probably the occasion for the author of Revelation to view the Roman emperor as the adversary of God on the model of Antiochus Epiphanes."²⁵ With the little evidence Collins has left, one wonders on what basis she reaches her conclusion.

The implications of our discussion are more directly related to questions concerning the date of Revelation than they are to 1 Peter. Hemer sets forth a number of references in Revelation where he supposes he can find evidence for events datable from other historical records. On the basis of these parallels he dates Revelation to the decade of the 90s.²⁶ Any one of the parallels he draws may be challenged, as he himself points out. But when Hemer speaks of the emperor cult in Asia as if a new situation arose in the 90s that required all citizens of the province on specific occasions to present themselves to do obeisance before the god Domitian, he is clearly misreading the evidence. Temples and sanctuaries had been built in the province to other emperors. Priests served the cult of the emperors just as they had served the cults of hellenistic kings before them. Inscriptions proclaimed the emperor divine, and honored cities were allowed to boast of being temple wardens, or in time even thrice temple wardens or four-times temple wardens of Asia. But there is no indication that residents of the province, at least at any time in the first century, were under periodic obligation to publicly affirm their loyalty by worshiping before Caesar's image. Hemer's suggestion that Christians, after being disowned by the synagogue, were rendered "liable to the emperor-cult" carries with it implications that do not fit the historical picture.²⁷

It is true that a great temple was dedicated to Domitian in Ephesus during his reign. Price sees significance for the date of Revelation in the construction of the temple. It is in principle quite likely, he says, "that the establishment of the cult of Domitian at Ephesus, which involved the participation of the whole province, as attested by the series of dedications

²⁵ A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 73.

²⁶ Hemer, *Letters* 4-5.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

by numerous cities, led to unusually great pressure on the Christians for conformity.”²⁸ Price’s reasoning has merit. He begins with the evidence from Asia in contrast to looking to the descriptions of Rome by Suetonius or Dio for evidence of Christian persecution in Asia Minor. Nevertheless Price’s interpretation of the data may be challenged. The number of dedicatory inscriptions to Domitian in Asia may be explained in other ways than by supposing that they give evidence for a ground swell of emperor worship resulting in residents being forced to attend shrines of Domitian.

It might be remembered that Pergamum and then Smyrna had been chosen as cities for provincial emperor worship before Ephesus and the province of Asia had built great temples there. The time for Ephesus, the great city of the province, finally came under the Flavian emperors. The city was understandably elated and demanded her place in the sun. This together with the fact that Domitian had indeed brought benefits to the province may account for the inscriptions. It is true that Christians may have perceived all of this as threatening, but that is not the same as saying that a new situation had arisen in the province requiring the spilling of Christian blood. The following comment by Magie we judge to be accurate and well balanced:

There is little evidence of cruelty on the part of Domitian or even of exaggerated pretensions to grandeur. In the East, to be sure, the appellation of “God” which grated on the ears of the Romans had long since been accepted as normal. Even the fulsome title of “God invincible, Founder of the city” which was inscribed on the pedestal of the Emperor at Priene, was no more extravagant than those given to many of his predecessors.²⁹

It is possible of course that Christian reluctance to participate in public festivals came to the attention of their peers, who in turn became judgmental and prejudiced toward them because of their standoffish ways.³⁰ One expects that tales were spread, troubles brewed, and the attention of city magistrates called to the fledgling sect. Christians may have suffered from the hands of those who wielded the force of arms. But the occurrence of these things could have happened during the reign of any emperor from the mid-first through second centuries. To associate Christian persecution as reflected in Revelation with Domitian’s reign, much less with the fifteenth year of his reign, is haphazard at best. We have not considered the complex issues that would be added to our case by a consideration of Pliny’s famous letter to Trajan. The issues are beyond the scope of this paper, but we may say that it is far from certain that the letter suggests that all residents were forced on some periodic basis to publicly acknowledge Caesar as God.³¹

²⁸ Price, *Ritual* 198.

²⁹ Magie, *Roman Rule*, 1. 577.

³⁰ See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?”, *Past and Present* 26 (1963) 6–38.

³¹ See R. M. Grant, “Sacrifices and Oaths as Required of Early Christians,” in *Kyriakon* (ed. P. Grandfield and J. Jungmann; Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), 1. 18–35.

V. CONCLUSION

The evidence argues that the date of Revelation in particular, and that of 1 Peter to a lesser degree, are more uncertain than they are often represented as being. It is not unthinkable that Revelation was written somewhat earlier than is normally supposed. We have promised to speculate on no date for its composition but only to argue that its connection with a Domitianic persecution based on literary evidence from the milieu of the imperial capital is essentially irrelevant. We believe that point has been established and are content to leave the matter there.