

Figure 7. Roman emperors

[Julius Caesar]	d. 44 BCE
Augustus	27 BCE–14 CE
Tiberius	14–37
Gaius Caligula	37–41
Claudius	41–54
Nero	54–68
Galba	68–69
Otho	69
Vitellius	69
Vespasian	69–79
Titus	79–81
Domitian	81–96
Nerva	96–98
Trajan	98–117

Yet it is precisely this interpretation which poses the problem for Irenaeus' dating. Only a great deal of mathematical juggling enables commentators to arrive at Domitian as the sixth king presently reigning, and one cannot but wonder whether this tortuous exegesis arises out of a desire to uphold Irenaeus' Domitianic dating at all costs. Among such approaches are the following: that a passage originally written in the 60s has been incorporated into Revelation written at a later date; that one should begin counting not with the first (Julius Caesar or Augustus) but with a later emperor, such as Caligula, or Nero as the first 'antichrist' figure, and that one should omit from the equation the short-lived figures of Galba, Otho and Vitellius (see Figure 7); that the seer actually wrote during Domitian's reign, but 'antedated' his prophecy in order to make it look as if it had been received at an earlier stage (just as older Jewish apocalypses claim to have been seen by figures of the distant past), or that the vision is merely symbolic, with no reference to historical figures, which seems to run counter to the clear import of v. 10 (Robinson, 1976, 244–5; Yarbro Collins, 1984, 58–64). There is, however, a much more straightforward solution: to begin with the first emperor and count each succeeding emperor in turn.

There may be some reasonable debate over whether to begin counting with Julius Caesar or Augustus, since Suetonius does include the former in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, although strictly speaking the empire began with Augustus (Octavian). However, there would appear to be little reason for disregarding the three emperors who reigned briefly in 69 (Galba, Otho and Vitellius). Suetonius writes lives of these three, even if he does speak rather disparagingly of the *rebellio trium principum* (Vespasian 1). Moreover, they are also included by Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.49), Josephus (*War* 4.491–6), *Cyrenaica* 17 and *Ag. 17* and *Ag. 17* 13. Reimnino with Julius Caesar: the

sixth emperor reigning at the time the Apocalypse was written would Nero (54–68), in line with one alternative early dating; beginning with Augustus, Galba, thus dating the Apocalypse to the turbulent years 68 or 69. In the face of this evidence, attempts to justify the position of Domitian the sixth king presently reigning seem like special pleading.

Nero redivivus

Given the early Syriac tradition, one might wish to prefer the former of the two alternative datings. But in fact, a second piece of evidence is generally considered as ruling out Nero as the king presently reigning, and thus favouring Galba: apparent allusions to the so-called *Nero redivivus* myth. Already in the vision of the beast from the sea, mention has been made of one of the seven heads as possessing a mortal wound which was healed (Rev. 13.3; a demonic parody of the slain Lamb. That a specific historical allusion implied, however, is confirmed by a precise statement of the manner of death, 'by the sword' (13.14), and by the complex interpretation of the beast in Revelation 17, which suggests that it represents not only Rome, but also one of its emperors. In 17.8 we are told that the beast 'was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction', a phrase which is further clarified in v. 11: 'As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.' Who is this eighth, who is also one of the seven (i.e. a new king considered the next manifestation of an old king)? The answer is provided by a variety of stories which gathered round the memory of Nero on his death in 68, and developed into a potent myth proclaiming that Nero would come again (for early Christians, the blasphemous echoes of the Second Coming of Christ would have been startling).

Already in 68, stories began circulating that Nero had not died:

Yet there were some who for a long time decorated his tomb with spring and summer flowers, and now produced his statues on the rostra in the fringed toga, and now his edicts, as if he were still alive and would shortly return and deal destruction to his enemies.

(Suetonius, *Nero* 57)

That the myth developed in the following decades of the century, as Neronian pretenders could arise as late as 90, is undisputed (e.g. *S. Or.* 5.361–85; *Asc. Isa.* 4.1–13; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 21). However, it does not mean that the sinister form in which it seems to appear in Revelation must be dated to the end of the century, as is often claimed. Tacitus tells us that in 69, prior to the murder of Galba, both Achaia and John's own Asia were terrified by rumours of Nero's return, spawned by doubts about his death, and an initially successful pretender seized the opportunity (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.6). The myth of Nero's return, it is

while ruling out a dating in Nero's reign, are not a difficulty for the alternative dating during the relatively brief and turbulent reign of Galba.

That the deceased Nero is on the mind of the seer of Revelation is confirmed by the allusion to the number of the beast (666 in most manuscripts), which is described as 'the number of a person' (13.18). Despite the protestations of Irenaeus, the text encourages its audience to identify this figure, and we seem here to have a good example of the ancient practice of *gematria*, popular among Jews. Given that letters of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets had their equivalent numbers, the 'number' of a word, or of somebody's name, could be calculated by adding together the numbers of the individual letters (e.g. the number of the name Παύλος, Paul, is $80 + 1 + 400 + 30 + 70 + 200 = 781$). The consensus view (recognizing that the author of Revelation comes from a bilingual milieu) is that 666 is the number of the Greek for 'Emperor Nero', Νέρων Καίσαρ, written in and calculated from Hebrew letters. Though this bilingual explanation might appear rather too sophisticated, it seems to be confirmed by the variant reading 616, known as early as the late second century, which is the number of the Latin form *Nero Caesar*, again written in Hebrew characters.

Rome as Babylon

We now turn to a piece of internal evidence which is often regarded as conclusive evidence for a post-70 dating for Revelation, and thus regularly cited in support of a dating in Domitian's reign: the identification of Babylon in Revelation 17 with the city and empire of Rome. The claim is frequently made that Rome was only known as Babylon *after* the fall of Jerusalem (once Rome was remembered as the destroyer of Jerusalem and its Temple, like Babylon of old). For those concerned to explore the potential of an earlier dating, implied by the most obvious reading of the 'seven heads' vision and not undermined by the *Nero redivivus* myth, two responses are possible.

One is to question the identification of Babylon with Rome in Revelation. A small but significant minority of scholars has argued that John's 'Babylon' is a designation not for pagan Rome, but for unfaithful Jerusalem (Barker, 2000, 279–301). They point, for example, to the prophetic charge of harlotry laid against the holy city (e.g. Isa. 1.21ff.; Ezek. 16; 23) and the land of Judah (Jer. 3.6–10). They are sensitive to the fact that the vision differentiates between the woman and the beast upon which she sits, claiming that, even if the beast is to be identified as Rome, the same does not necessarily hold true for Babylon herself. Some, indeed, point to visions such as *1 Enoch* 24 as evidence that Jerusalem could be viewed as a city built on seven mountains.⁶ They also highlight the literary parallels between present Babylon and the heavenly Jerusalem, arguing that the latter vision is the key to interpreting the former. This, however, is not a view which has

Figure 8. The number of the beast

Alphabetic numbers in Greek			
α	1	ι	10
β	2	κ	20
γ	3	λ	30
δ	4	μ	40
ε	5	ν	50
ζ	7	ξ	60
η	8	ο	70
θ	9	π	80
ρ	100		
σ	200		
τ	300		
υ	400		
φ	500		
χ	600		
ψ	700		
ω	800		

Alphabetic numbers in Hebrew			
א	1	י	10
ב	2	כ	20
ג	3	ל	30
ד	4	מ	40
ה	5	נ	50
ו	6	ס	60
ז	7	ש	70
ח	8	צ	80
ט	9	ק	90
פ	100		
ק	200		
ש	300		
ת	400		
י	500		
כ	600		
ל	700		
מ	800		
נ	900		

Irenaeus' reckoning:

ΤΕΙΤΑΝ ('Tetan', 'Titan') = $300 + 5 + 10 + 300 + 1 + 50 = 666$

ΛΑΤΕΙΝΟΣ ('Lateinos', 'Latin') = $30 + 1 + 300 + 5 + 10 + 50 + 70 + 200 = 666$

Alphabetic numbers in Hebrew

The number of 'Nero Caesar':

נרנ (NRWN QSR – Greek form) = $50 + 200 + 6 + 50 + 100 + 60 + 200 = 666$
 נרן (NRW QSR – Latin form) = $50 + 200 + 6 + 100 + 60 + 200 = 616$

commended itself to many. Better parallels can be found with the city an empire of Rome. Indeed, if Jerusalem were envisaged, it is surprising that it left no mark on the earliest interpretation of this passage, which seems to have been unanimous in viewing Babylon as Rome.

The second is to challenge the widespread claim that a Roman identification necessitates a post-70 dating. Eugene Boring is typical of many proponents of the Domitianic dating when he asserts: 'This practice [of describing Rome as 'Babylon'] did not become common until after the destruction of the city and would not have been appropriate before' (Boring, 1989, 10). Yet one wonders whether a certain amount of circular reasoning is not going on here for Rome is identified as Babylon only because it is the only city that could be

Babylon as a symbol for Rome after the Jewish war. However, commentators on this latter text often point to Revelation's use of Babylon, no less than that of *2 Baruch* and *4 Ezra*, as evidence for a post-70 dating of 1 Peter! This is all the more surprising a claim, given that a significant number of scholars are quite happy to attribute 1 Peter to a pre-70 situation.

A general point is pertinent here. The name of Babylon was not simply associated with the destruction of the First Temple in the Old Testament, such that it could only become an appropriate designation for Rome in light of the destruction of the Second Temple. Babylon's historical role as a place of exile for the Judeans (cf. Ps. 137.1) may well underlie the use of that term for the author of 1 Peter. Deutero-Isaiah's image of Babylon as arrogant oppressor (Isa. 47; cf. Rev. 18) could have provided the raw materials for a pre-70 Judeo-Christian description of Rome, particularly in the aftermath of the Neronian persecution in that city and in the light of events in Palestine from 66. Already in the second century BCE Babylon and its kings had become a symbol for Jews of other foreign oppressors (Dan. 5), not least Antiochus Epiphanes, even though he did not destroy the Temple or lead the people into exile (though he did set up a pagan altar and defile the sanctuary). At Qumran, the Chaldeans (i.e. the Babylonians) of Habakkuk 1.6 were already identified as the 'Kittim', i.e. the Romans, by the turn of the Christian era (1QP^aHab 2.10–14). Similarly, the *Psalms of Solomon*, dating from the first century BCE, seem to have made a connection between the arrival of Pompey 'from the end of the earth' and the coming of the Babylonians centuries before (ἀπ' ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς: Jer. 6.22 LXX; Ps. Sol. 8.15).

But more specifically, the insistence upon a post-70 provenance for Rome's identification with Babylon also ignores the prophetic claims for this book. While it is the case that prophecy is misunderstood if equated with telling the future (as in popular perception), prophets in the Israelite and Christian traditions have frequently been gifted with a particular sensibility for reading the signs of the times and warning their contemporaries of the likely outcome of contemporary events. Is it so impossible that a Jewish-Christian prophet, particularly one who had witnessed some of the events in Palestine in the first years of the Jewish revolt again Rome, would have been able to see the 'writing on the wall' (as did the author of Daniel in relation to the downfall of Antiochus Epiphanes)? Is it not conceivable that a work such as John's Apocalypse, which seeks to shape people's perceptions, rather than simply respond to what has already taken place, could have taken the bold step of portraying Rome in the colours of another great and idolatrous empire, long remembered as a dangerous enemy of God's people?

Temple

Up to this point, the evidence has been shown to be equally susceptible to a pre- and post-70 dating for the book with the exception of the identification

of the seven heads, which seems to point most obviously to a period soon after Nero's demise in 68. This general ambiguity seems particularly pronounced in our final piece of evidence, the description of the measuring of the Temple in Revelation 11. Having swallowed the little scroll given him by the angel, John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple's altar and its worshippers, but to omit the outer court, which is to be given to the Gentiles, who will trample the holy city for forty-two months. He further told by the heavenly voice of the fate of the 'two witnesses'. For some this provides clear evidence for a pre-70 date, assuming as it appears to that the Temple is still standing. For others, it provides equally clear evidence for a post-70 dating. Either they detect a close correspondence between the details of the vision and what is known of the last stages of the fall of Jerusalem, when the Jewish rebels sheltered in the inner Temple court (Josephus, War 6.3.12), or traces of an earlier prophetic oracle, reworked symbolically, so that the Temple now refers not to an architectural structure in Jerusalem but to the new Temple which is the Christian community (e.g. 1 Cor. 3.16–17; Eph. 2.21).

A number of scholars view 11.1–2 as a fragment of a zealot oracle, spoke in Jerusalem during the last days of the war against Rome, before the Romans had entered the temple itself, and now incorporated, somewhat awkwardly, into John's description of the two witnesses. In its present context, the measuring is understood to be for the protection, not of Herod's temple pre-70, but of the Church post-70, sent to witness before a hostile world, even to the point of laying down her life. But is this interpretation so clearly the case?

As George Caird has written of this thesis, which goes back to Wellhausen it is based on the underlying assumption that 'John could not have intended these words to be taken figuratively unless someone else had previously used them in their literal sense' (Caird, 1984, 131). Yet the opening verses, no less than the rest of the chapter, make good symbolic sense, and do not require a hypothetical prophetic oracle as their source. The expectation that the Gentiles would oppress God's people, as they had done again and again throughout history, including recently in Rome during the reign of Nero would have been quite possible for a Christian apocalyptic seer, even before Rome's destruction of the physical Temple in Jerusalem. Indeed, the language echoes that of Daniel 8.10–14, which speaks of the trampling of God's sanctuary for 'two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings' (i.e. about three and a half years or forty-two months; cf. Isa. 63.18; Ps. 79.1). Daniel is a book which, as we have seen, played a crucial role in John's visionary awareness. It may well be that events in Jerusalem in the late 60s had some impact upon what John (rather than a hypothetical zealot prophet) saw; but this need not require us to date his finished symboli-

after the destruction of Jerusalem, why is the reader told in John's visionary account, contrary to historical fact, that only 'a tenth of the city fell' (11.13)?

All in all, then, the evidence for dating, leaving aside the external testimony of Irenaeus, is relatively ambiguous, not allowing us to pronounce clearly one way or the other. Nevertheless, the most obvious interpretation of the complex 'seven heads' vision would appear to tip the balance somewhat in the direction of the earlier dating, in the late 60s, certainly after Nero's death in 68, and possibly in the reign of Galba between June 68 and January 69. Yet there remains an apparent problem: Revelation has seemed to many to have a particular focus on Roman persecution of Christians. Can an earlier dating, in the turbulent years of the late 60s for which there is no evidence for Roman persecution of Christians, make adequate sense of this book?

An Alternative Setting

The whole question of Revelation and persecution is currently facing re-examination. It is true that the dating of the book to the reign of Domitian has often (though not always) been tied to the belief that Revelation is a response to persecution. The reasoning has often seemed to be as follows: (1) Revelation presupposes state persecution; (2) only Nero and Domitian were remembered as persecutors of the Church during the first century; (3) therefore, given that the *Nero redivivus* myth rules out the former, Irenaeus' dating to Domitian's reign is well established. Remove the equation of persecution, however, and one has removed one of the main planks of the Domitianic dating theory. But in fact, the tradition that Domitian was a fanatical tyrant and fierce persecutor of Christians has been challenged by recent classical historians (Bell, 1978–9; Thompson, 1990, 95–115), while the claim that Revelation presupposes actual state persecution has been revisited by New Testament scholars.

Let us begin with the traditional portrayal of Domitian as a mad megalomaniac eager to condemn those who did not worship him. As Thompson and others have shown, this is a portrait derived largely from authors writing after the emperor's death, with a vested interest in denigrating the Flavian dynasty in favour of the new emperor Trajan, and needs to be balanced by sources contemporary with his reign. The later sources consistently attribute malicious motives to him, even to his good deeds, and compare him unfavourably with his imperial successor. Whereas Dio Cassius claims that Domitian regarded praise of his predecessors as reviling himself, contrary evidence shows that the emperor dedicated a temple to the cult of his immediate predecessors Vespasian and Titus, and contemporary poets Statius and Martial wrote in praise of these two emperors, quite unhindered by Domitian himself (Thompson, 1990, 101–3).

With regard to the emperor cult, Suetonius' claim that Domitian demanded the title *dominus et deus noster* finds no echo in writings of his reign, not even those of Statius and Quintilian, commissioned by Domitian himself. This is surprising, if such a title reflected the emperor's own wish. But in fact, such a self-designation is not to be found on inscriptions, coins or medallions from the Domitianic era. Indeed, according to Statius, who Domitian was acclaimed as 'Lord' at one of his Saturnalia, the emperor forbade such a designation (Statius, *Silv.* 1.6.81–4). On the other hand another contemporary poet, Martial, does use *dominus* and *deus* of Domitian and the 'crowd' are described as calling the emperor *dominus desique*, which reveals something of the popular mood (Martial, *Epigrams* 7.34). But there is no contemporary evidence that Domitian himself claimed that title nor that he demanded it of others. This is not to deny that Domitian became increasingly ruthless and paranoid towards the end of his reign, in the light of conspiracies against him: one recent judicious assessment of his reign can still speak of his later years as a 'reign of terror' (Goodman, 1997, 65). Nevertheless, there are good grounds for questioning the frequently repeated claim that Domitian's reign witnessed a marked development in the imperial cult, spurred on by the arrogant pretensions of the emperor himself.

Turning to the tradition of an official persecution of Christians during Domitian's reign, this has also been shown to rest upon slender and highly ambiguous evidence (Bell, 1978–9, 94). A substantial plank of this thesis is the identification of Flavius Clemens (whom Domitian had executed) as his wife Domitilla (who was exiled) as Christians; an identification certainly made, in the case of Domitilla, by Eusebius (*HE*. 3.18.4), who seems to be echoing an earlier tradition.⁷ Yet this may be little more than a conclusion drawn from the statement of Cassius Dio that Clemens was put to death and his wife exiled on a charge of 'atheism', which Dio equates with the customs of the Jews (Dio 67.14.2).

Bell posits two difficulties with this: first, Dio lived late enough (c. 150–235) for the split between church and synagogue to have become universal; knowledge, even among pagans, being, as he was, contemporary with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. If this were an issue of targeting Christians, then Dio would certainly have been able to make the distinction. Second, the alternative account of Clemens' death found in Suetonius suggests a more religious motive for the execution. Even allowing for Suetonius' partiality, one must admit some truth in his claim that Domitian became paranoid about his death towards the end of his reign (a trait not unique to him among Roman emperors). Clemens would then have been killed under suspicion of complicity in a plot to kill the emperor (Bell, 95); Suetonius, indeed, claims that the execution was sudden and based on very slight suspicion (*Domitian* 15.1). A further problem with the 'Christian persecution' hypothesis should also be mentioned here: Suetonius explicitly notices Nero

for his persecution of Christians; if those executed under Domitian had also been Christians, surely Suetonius would have mentioned the fact.

Other evidence cited in favour of a persecution under Domitian remains ambiguous. Eusebius, dependent here upon the second-century church historian Hegesippus, describes action taken by Domitian against members of the Davidic family, including blood relatives of Christ (*H.E.* 3.19–20). Eusebius' interpretation is that the emperor ordered their execution. Yet the actual episode is rather more tame, for, as Eusebius is forced to admit, on learning that they were simple workers who expected an otherworldly kingdom and thus posed no political threat, Domitian released them unharmed, and took no more action against Christians. This is echoed by some words of Tertullian, also cited by Eusebius: 'Domitian also once tried to do the same as he, for he was a Nero in cruelty, but, I believe, inasmuch as he had some sense, he stopped at once and recalled those whom he had banished' (*H.E.* 3.20.7). At most this evidence allows that Domitian took short-lived action against the Church (and presumably only in the city of Rome), but quickly relented. Yet it is difficult to know the historical worth of these distinctly Christian traditions, and how far their perception of Domitian of a second Nero is dependent upon the negative portrayal of this emperor as a cruel megalomaniac derived from historians of the Trajanic era and beyond.

Equally ambiguous is the statement at the beginning of the First Epistle of Clement, translated in the Loeb version as 'Owing to the sudden and repeated misfortunes and calamities which have befallen us' (1 *Clem.* 1.1).⁸ Often interpreted as a reference to persecution under Domitian, this has been used to date 1 *Clement* to the end of the first century. Yet 'misfortunes and calamities' may well be an overly negative translation of Clement's Greek, which could simply mean 'events and experiences'. It is true that the author, in reminding his addressees of the examples of the martyr-apostles Peter and Paul, states: 'for we are in the same arena, and the same struggle is before us' (1 *Clem.* 7.1). But the reference here is too vague to be defined more closely, and moreover would appear to describe the localized situation of Clement in Rome; it can hardly be cited as evidence for imperial hostility towards Christians in Asia during the reign of Domitian. All in all, the evidence for a persecution of Christians under Domitian would appear decidedly shaky, even though one cannot rule out more localized social antagonism towards Christians from time to time. Yet we have already suggested grounds for challenging the dating of the Apocalypse to Domitian's reign. We shall now turn to evidence from the book itself, which suggests that a background of official state persecution may not in fact be required by internal evidence.

The so-called 'Letters to the Seven Churches', which form chapters 2–3 of Revelation, are widely recognized as an important internal source for

gleaning evidence about the social setting of the Christian communities whom the Apocalypse was first addressed. Sir William Ramsay early in twentieth century, and subsequently Colin Hemer, have shown through their detailed study of the history, geography and archaeology of first century provincial Asia how intimate was the seer's knowledge of the seven communities and the cities to which they belonged (Ramsay, 191 Hemer, 1986). An analysis of these 'seven letters' confirms the paucity of evidence for actual hostility towards Christians within these cities. Only actual martyrs are mentioned by name in the seven letters, namely, Antioch of Pergamum, whose death seems to have been at some time in the past (2.13), and Jesus Christ, the 'faithful and true witness' (3.14). The only martyrs mentioned in the later part of the book, whether their souls crying out under the altar (6.9–11), the great multitude who have passed through the Great Tribulation (7.14), or those on whose blood Babylon the Great is drunk (17.6) are not further specified, and the nature of apocalyptic vision makes it unclear whether we are given an insight into the past (including the Neronian persecution), the present (actual persecution), or the future (that which John expects to happen). Indeed, the language used of the souls under the altar suggests strongly that John has been influenced by Jewish traditions about the blood of Abel (cf. *Targum Neofiti* on Gen. 4.10; 1 *Enoch* 47; Matt. 23.35). This may therefore be a vision of all God's righteous ones slain from the beginning of time to the present, or even into the visionary future, and not simply of Christian martyrs of John's generation. That some of the visions describe a future rather than past or present aspect may be implied by the letter to Philadelphia, which speaks of 'the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world' (Rev. 3.10; cf. Matt. 6.13). Either way, the allusions to actual hostility are surprisingly small.

From the perspective of many within these churches, on the contrary, the situation appears rather to be one of prosperity. The Laodiceans, for example, are boasting of their riches (3.17), suggesting that their own understanding of Christianity involves playing a full part within contemporary society, not least its economic aspect. Later in the Apocalypse, imperial commerce will be explicitly linked to the mark of the beast, and the Laodiceans are therefore implicated in it (13.17). The author also makes fierce criticism of Christians who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Pergamum, 2.15, where it may correspond to the 'teaching of Balaam'; cf. the fringes in Ephesus, 2.6) and those at Thyatira who follow the prophet whom John rather cuttingly names 'Jezebel' (2.20). Both of these groups are encouraging other Christians to 'practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols': again, the issue concerns the extent to which Christians can participate in the life of their respective cities, in which aspects of pagan cults would influence every aspect of urban life.

commercial. John's revelation comes down firmly on the side of uncompromising Judeo-Christian tradition, and, if Theissen is correct (Theissen, 1982, 121ff.), of the poor, criticizing those who have accommodated themselves too readily to pagan society, with at least implicit acceptance of its cultic (idolatrous) aspects. Other Christians, including 'Jezebel' and those who held to the teaching of 'Balaam' and the Nicolaitans, would obviously not agree with this assessment (Boxall, 1998).

Thus from one Christian perspective there is a situation of relative prosperity within the churches of the province of Asia: from this viewpoint, talk of 'crisis' or persecution would appear largely inappropriate. On the other hand, Revelation, through its use of apocalyptic imagery to shed light on the social situation, offers a challenge to many Christians to reconsider their own position as regards Graeco-Roman society and its perception of 'the way the world is'. The prophetess 'Jezebel' shares some of the traits of the great harlot (e.g. compare 2.20 with 17.2), and 'beguiles' or 'leads astray', as does the false prophet at 13.14. The dividing line between the harlot and the bride of the Lamb is a fine one, as a heavenly voice warns (18.4). The real danger for many of John's first hearers is not so much persecution as complacency and accommodation. Only two churches of the seven, those at Smyrna and Philadelphia, are found worthy. Viewed from this perspective, then, the Apocalypse would appear to be written not so much to console the persecuted, as has so often been thought, as to challenge the complacent. It is a call to martyrdom, a challenge to (perhaps unwittingly) complacent Christians to put themselves in a position where they might find themselves facing martyrdom, a position of challenge to the prevailing *Pax Romana*, revealed in this apocalyptic as Satanic.

Nevertheless, the older view cannot be ruled out entirely. The very mention of the two 'worthy' churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, does indicate that, while we cannot speak of widespread persecution, some limited hostility towards and action against certain Christians has already taken place. Smyrna, for example, has had 'affliction' (2.9), and is poor, perhaps reflecting its refusal to accommodate itself to pagan society, in contrast to Laodicea which boasts of its riches. Philadelphia has 'little power', but has not 'denied my name' (3.8). But in both these cities there are indications that hostility may have been provoked, not by Roman officials or even by pagan neighbours, but by the synagogue, or a rival synagogue. At Smyrna, they have endured blasphemy from 'those who say that they are Jews' but are a 'synagogue of Satan' (2.9), words which reveal the painful and bitter relationship between the diverging sibling communities in this period. John hears that they are about to suffer, and that some will be thrown into prison, albeit for a limited period; some, indeed, may be called upon to be faithful unto death (2.10), raising the possibility (though not the certainty) of actual martyrdom in the near future.

The New Testament writings provide ample testimony to the often bitter 'family feuds' within the first-century Jewish community over allegiance Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles preserves traditions in which Paul and his companions frequently provoke the ire of the leaders of diaspora synagogues (e.g. Acts 14.1-7, 19), who sometimes bring them before the city authorities (e.g. Acts 17.1-9; 18.12-17). While this is something of a Lucan motif, it should not dismiss these stories as without any historical basis. The Gospel of Matthew testifies to persecution of Jewish-Christian missionaries, probably by the leaders of Pharisaic synagogues (e.g. Matt. 10.17-23), while the Fourth Gospel is written at a time when some Jewish disciples of Jesus have been forced out of the synagogue community (John 9.22). John of Patmos likewise knows of antagonism in some of the cities of Asia from other Jewish groups. Judging by the phrase he uses for them ('those who say that they are Jews and are not'), he continues to claim for himself and other Christians Jewish origin membership of the covenant people, true Jews as opposed to 'false Jews'. This is confirmed by his rather conservative Jewish attitude to 'food sacrificed to idols', and his describing Christian opponents as 'Balaam' and 'Jezebel', pagan outsiders who compromised the purity of the holy people of Israel. Given his further description of them as 'a synagogue of Satan', he may well regard his Jewish opponents as too closely associated with the satanic empire of Rome.

The situation in Philadelphia is less clear, but again there may be hostility from the 'synagogue of Satan' (3.9): the church has already had to endure and is praised by Christ for not denying his name (3.8). We know from the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp that there was virulent bitterness towards Christians on the part of the Jews in second-century Smyrna. Polycarp's contemporary Melito of Sardis reveals tensions between Jews and Christians in his city. Revelation suggests a similar situation, in Smyrna and Philadelphia, already in the first century. Whatever reason we posit for such hostility, it seems clear that it is local and not initiated by Roman officialdom. There is also the possibility that limited action has been taken with regard to Christian refusal to participate in the emperor cult (perhaps linked to Jewish disowning of Christians). The imperial cult had been firmly established in Asia as early as the first century BCE, apparently with popular local support and there is no need to link it specifically with Domitian's reign. Some have suggested, for example, that the death of Antipas in Pergamum was connected with this issue, interpreting the phrase 'the throne of Satan' as reference to the emperor cult in which Pergamum played an important role. It is equally likely, however, that reference is made here to one of the city's other great shrines, perhaps the throne-altar to Zeus or the shrine of Asclepius Soter, both associated with the serpent. Revelation's image of Satan (Rev. 12), or possibly to the whole acropolis which rises up from the lower city to a height of nearly 1200 feet, is a powerful symbol of the city's power and its association with the emperor cult.

death. Although, for John the prophet, the real time of testing is yet to come, there is a precedent, however small,⁹ and however long ago, for Christian martyrdom in Asia. The possibility is there, for those who can see the heavenly realities which John sees, and who have the faith and the endurance to keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

Concluding Thoughts

The attempt to locate this book, and its author, on the plane of human history, is, as we have seen, both a fascinating and a frustrating task. There are good grounds both for challenging the traditional setting of the work in the reign of Domitian (as a number of nineteenth-century scholars already did), and for reassessing the relationship between this text and Roman persecution of Christians. The possibility that the seer wrote during the turbulent period in the life of the empire as a whole, and of Jews and Jewish Christians in particular, which followed the death of Nero in 68, is an attractive one. The likelihood that he understood the visions he described as challenging Christians who had compromised too readily with the great empire of Rome, rather than comforting those in the throes of bitter persecution from that empire, adds a particular edge to the historical understanding of this book. Not least, it forces us to take much more seriously than commentators have sometimes done that this is an apocalypse, a work of 'unveiling' or 'revelation', which forces the reader, and the hearer, to view reality in a new and often shocking light, and change their allegiance accordingly. The shocking nature of this 'unveiling' is a stark reminder that this text is not simply, or even primarily, a source for historical reconstruction, however. Indeed, for much of its history, no less than today, it has been read not for what it can tell us about the past, but rather for what it is believed to reveal about the future. It is to this future aspect of interpretation that we shall turn in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. This would account for the omission of other known first-century Christian communities in this area: Colossae and Hierapolis, for example, near Laodicea in the Lycus valley (cf. Col. 1.2; 4.13). At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch can write to two others, Magnesias-on-the-Meander and Tralles.
2. Translation from A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Hendrickson, Peabody, MA, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 559–60.
3. Translation from K. Lake, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library (William Heinemann, London, 1953), vol. 1, p. 235.
4. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, p. 22.
5. Translation from J. C. Rolfe, *Suetonius*, Loeb Classical Library (William Heinemann, London, 1950), vol. 2, pp. 365f.

6. Though in fact in Enoch's vision Jerusalem is built on one mountain, surrounded by the other six.
7. One of the Christian catacombs in Rome is named after a certain 'Domitilla', traditionally identified with Flavia Domitilla. But this could be an erroneous conclusion, given the popularity of the name in the Roman world.
8. Translation by K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library (William Heinemann, London and New York, 1925), vol. 1, p. 9.
9. Ignatius, fixated on martyrdom, is apparently unaware of martyrs in the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna and Philadelphia; Polycarp, martyred about the year 155, is only the twelfth Christian to be martyred in Smyrna and Philadelphia together (*Mart. Pol.* 19.1).

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