

REVELATION: VISION AND INSIGHT

An Introduction to the Apocalypse

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Contents

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Looking across the Aegean

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

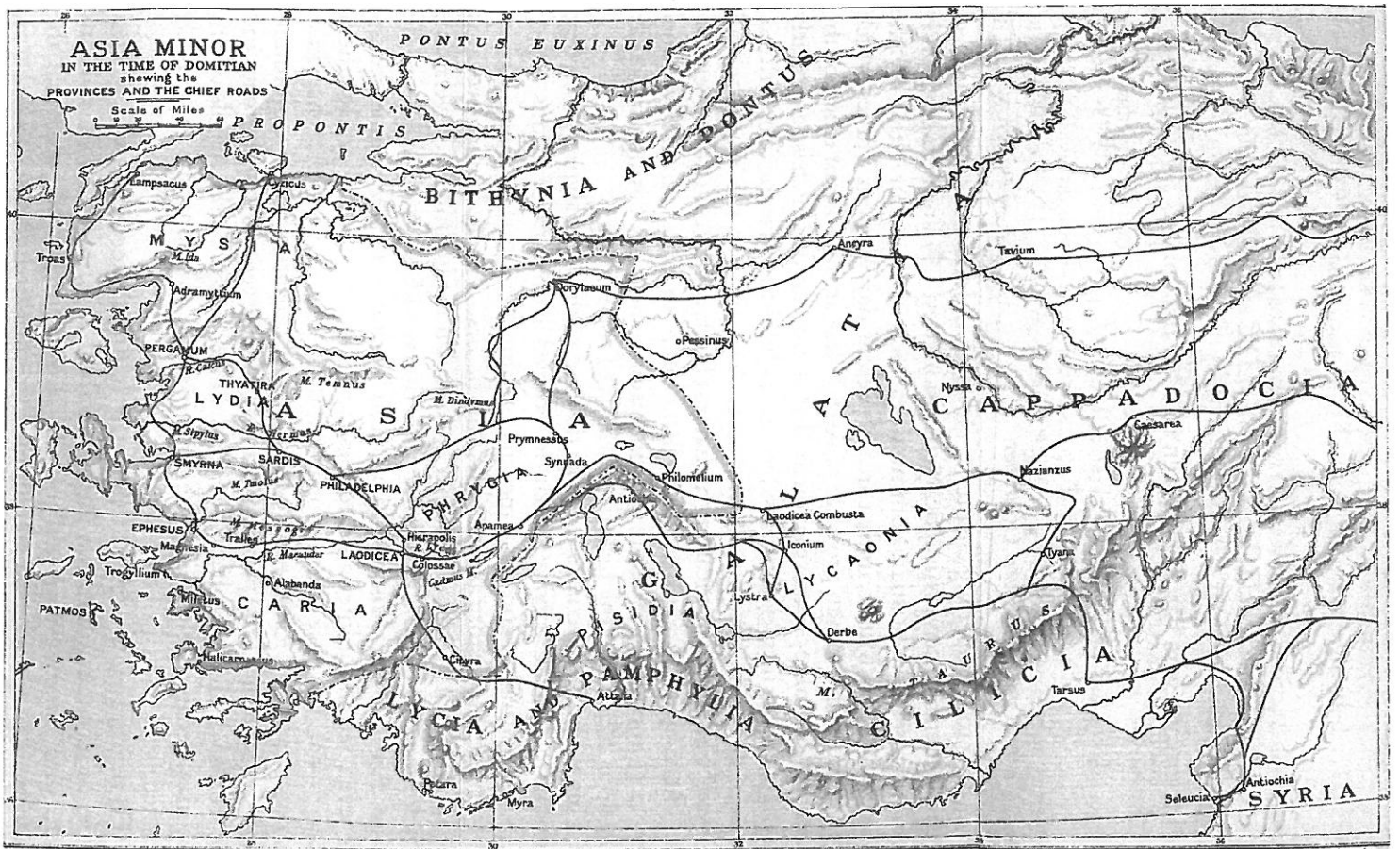
(Rev. 2.7)

John, Patmos and the Seven Churches

According to the opening chapter of Revelation, John was on the island of Patmos when he received his apocalyptic vision (Rev. 1.9), and he subsequently sent it to seven Christian communities located in major cities on the mainland of Asia Minor, in that area of present-day Western Turkey which then formed the Roman province of Asia. These are important clues for the historical-critical approach, that method of interpretation which is particularly interested in the historical process by which a biblical text came to be written. A major concern of the historical critic is to reconstruct the 'world behind the text', and hence the meaning of that text for its author, or to discover how it might have been understood by its first hearers, to set the text in its original historical context, and come to conclusions about its dating and other questions relating to the historical origins of the writing.

This is somewhat complicated in the case of the Apocalypse, given that it claims to mediate a divine revelation received in the form of visions, rather than articulating the conscious message of John. Nevertheless, most scholars accept that this historical rootedness in the first-century Roman world is important for understanding what is going on in the bulk of Revelation, which seems to be concerned not with this world but with the heavenly realm. For its esoteric visions are prefaced by, and intricately connected to, the seven 'letters' or 'messages' to these seven churches which preface them (Rev. 2–3). We have already suggested in the previous chapters that these visions, far from presenting a 'pie in the sky' salvation, offer a profound analysis of the social and political situation of these very earthly churches and the world which they inhabit. As we shall see, however, the details of this historical setting are rather more controversial, and continue to be hotly debated.

To begin with, we are not explicitly told that Revelation was written down in its present form on Patmos, only that John received his visions there, and some have argued (on the basis of early traditions) that the Apocalypse proper was written on John's return from Patmos to Ephesus.



Against this is the fact that, in its present epistolary form, Revelation is sent to the seven churches of Asia, Ephesus included (Rev. 1.11). The implication of the text is that it was written from outside provincial Asia, and the location of Patmos fits the order of the seven churches perfectly: the deliverer of the Apocalypse would have sailed from the island to the port-city of Ephesus, from where a circular course on the main postal routes would have passed through Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, and thence back to Ephesus for the return sailing to Patmos. From these seven centres, copies of the Apocalypse could then have been delivered to other Christian communities in the locale.¹ Such an implication is reflected in the (albeit idealized) Eastern tradition, which portrays John dictating his visions to his disciple Prochoros, one of the seven 'deacons' of Acts 6, in the cave on Patmos.

Second, the precise reason for John's sojourn on Patmos remains somewhat unclear. The most widespread, and very early, explanation is that he was there as an exile, sent by the authorities as a result of his evangelistic activities, an explanation based on a particular interpretation of John's rather more ambiguous statement that he was there 'because of' or 'on account of' (Greek *διὰ*) the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 1.9). Such a view is reflected in the unambiguous New American Bible translation: 'I... found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus.' There is, however, no explicit evidence that Patmos was used by the Romans as a place of exile, and it is just possible to understand John's words as expressing his purpose in going to the island, a possibility offered by the rather more open King James translation: 'I... was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.' On grammatical grounds, however, the traditional interpretation would appear to be more likely. Elsewhere in his book, the preposition *διὰ* is used to describe the cause of an action rather than its purpose. The church in Ephesus has suffered 'on account of my name' (2.3); the twenty-four elders cry out that it was 'because of' the will of the One upon the throne that all things were created (4.11); the souls under the altar were slain 'on account of the word of God, and on account of the testimony which they bore' (6.9, my translations; cf. also 7.15; 12.11, 12; 13.14; 17.7; 18.8, 10, 15; 20.4).

This is further supported by John's self-designation at the beginning of his work, which implies that he himself has encountered some hostility for his Christian confession: 'I, John, your brother and sharer with you in the tribulation and the kingdom and endurance in Jesus' (Rev. 1.9, my translation). The evidence is pretty conclusive that it was as a result of God's word and the 'testimony of Jesus', rather than for the purpose of spreading it, that John found himself on Patmos (or at least, that is how John perceives it).

If such is the correct interpretation, it is more likely that John was exiled to Patmos by the local authorities in Asia Minor than that he was sent there at the direct command of the emperor, despite the traditions enshrined in the apocryphal *Acts of John* by Pseudo-Prochorus. Patmos, along with its

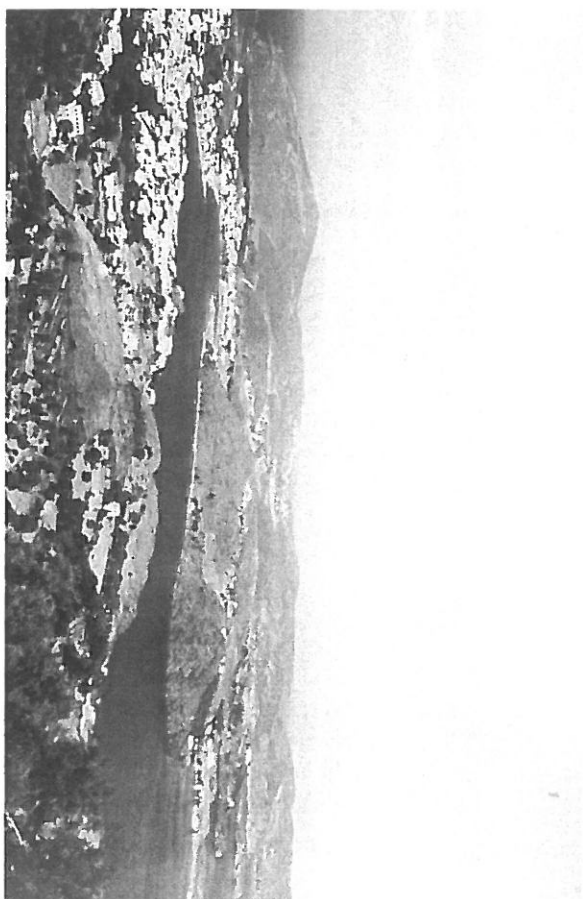
neighbouring islands of Lipso (present-day Lipsi) and Leros, belonged in the first century to the mainland city of Miletus, acting as a kind of 'fortress' island (Greek *φορτεσιον*) to guard the security of the Milesians (Saffrey, 1975). Far from being a deserted island, it would have been populated by citizens of Miletus; archaeological remains on Patmos today in the 'Castelli' area testify to the long-standing occupation of this part of the island. Moreover, inscriptional evidence points to a temple and priesthood of Artemis (a tradition passed down by the monks of Patmos claims that the Monastery of St John the Theologian is built on the very site of the pagan temple), as well as a temple to Apollo. It is probable, therefore, that John, having preached the gospel in Miletus, provoked the ire of the local authorities, such that they banished him to one of their island fortresses. Although Luke tells us (Acts 20) of a farewell meeting between Paul and the elders of the Ephesian church at Miletus, at some point in the late 50s, he makes no mention of Christians from Miletus itself at this stage. Subsequent preaching activity by John in Miletus could have led to his removal to Patmos, in his words, 'on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus'.

Whatever the reasons for John's stay on Patmos, the plight of those seven Christian communities (which, as the seven letters of Rev. 2—3 indicate, he knew so well and over which he claimed a certain prophetic authority) could never have been far from his thoughts, even as, though separated by sea, they were not far geographically from his physical presence. From the Cave of the Apocalypse on Patmos, according to Orthodox tradition the location of John's revelation, the view stretches eastwards down to the port of Skala, across the Aegean to the islands of Arki and Lipsi, and from there to the western coast of Asia Minor some thirty or so miles away. From the north of the island, one can see the mountains of Samos; beyond, in mind if not in sight, lie the great city of Ephesus and her sister churches.

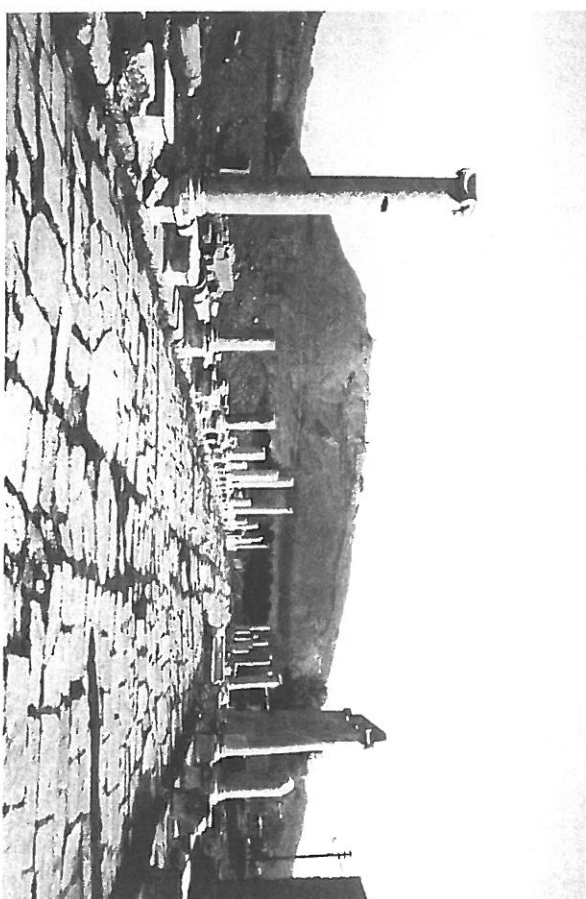
But why precisely was John writing to these seven churches, and transmitting to them, in literary form, the content of his visionary experience? What dangers did he see for them, from his island retreat? The answer to this question used to be considered relatively straightforward: they, like John himself, were the victims of hostility and even persecution, and this book was written to comfort them in their trials and assure them of ultimate victory through the Lamb. Recent scholarship, however, has suggested that the answer is rather less straightforward, and we have already intimated in previous chapters some of the rather different challenges which John foresees. What follows is an attempt to describe the breakdown in the scholarly consensus, and a possible way forward.

Revelation as a Response to Domitian's Persecution of Christians

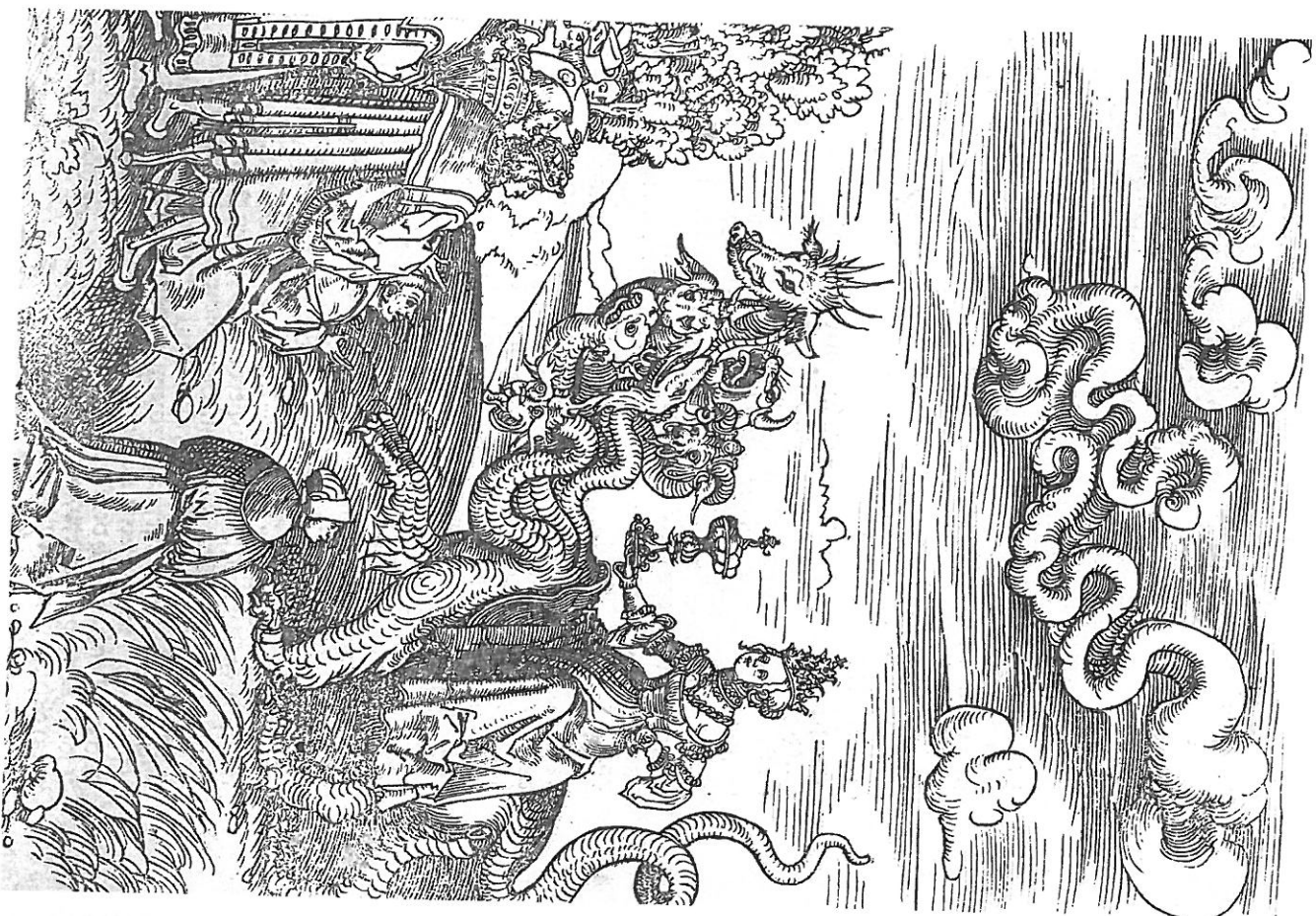
Perhaps the most widely held scholarly approach to the dating and background of the book of Revelation claims that it was originally written during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, and as a response to the persecution



View of Patmos from the Monastery of St John the Theologian
(by the author)



The acropolis of Pergamum, 'where Satan's throne is', from the Asclepeion
(by the author)



Lucas Cranach, *Babylon Seated on the Beast*

(from Martin Luther's 1522 September Testament. Fol. Theta 346 Sig. D.1v r.
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of Christians during his reign. John, in other words, rather like the author of the book of Daniel during the crisis provoked by Antiochus Epiphanes more than two hundred years earlier, writes his Apocalypse to comfort those currently undergoing persecution for their faith. The almost universal position of antiquity, and indeed of the majority of commentators up to the present, follows the second-century bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus, in locating the composition of this text in the latter years of the reign of the Emperor Domitian, that is, the early to mid 90s of the first century. Moreover, at least from the time of Eusebius, the dating of the Apocalypse under Domitian has been connected with a violent persecution by that emperor of the Christian Church, so that the text has often been read as a work of consolation for those facing martyrdom.

Irenaeus is regarded by many as particularly authoritative because of his claim to have known Polycarp, himself an acquaintance of John 'the disciple of the Lord'. In commenting upon the name of the beast in Revelation 13.18, Irenaeus writes:

We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign.

(*Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3²)

Irenaeus, it should be noted, does not himself link the Apocalypse with persecutions under Domitian. Nevertheless, from Eusebius onwards, the issues of dating and persecution have become inextricably linked, with the tradition of a large-scale persecution of Christians under Domitian. Eusebius puts it thus, in his *Ecclesiastical History*:

When Domitian had given many proofs of his great cruelty and had put to death without any reasonable trial no small number of men distinguished at Rome by family and career, and had punished without a cause myriads of other notable men by banishment and confiscation of their property, he finally showed himself the successor of Nero's campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us, though his father, Vespasian, had planned no evil against us.

At this time, the story goes, the Apostle and Evangelist John was still alive, and was condemned to live in the island of Patmos for his witness to the divine word.

Eusebius then goes on to cite the above-mentioned passage of Irenaeus about the dating of the Apocalypse, thus linking the writing of this book to the period of Domitian's persecution of Christians, though not even he explicitly states that it was Domitian who banished John to Patmos. In doing so, Eusebius alludes to an existing Christian tradition that Domitian was the first persecutor of the Church after Nero. Tertullian (*Apology* 5), speaks of Domitian as a man equalling Nero in cruelty, and attempting persecution of Christians; though, Tertullian hastily adds, 'as he had something of the human in him, he soon put an end to what he had begun, even restoring again those whom he had banished'.⁴ Melito of Sardis, too, as cited by Eusebius, links together Nero and Domitian, claiming that both these emperors, 'persuaded by certain calumniators, have wished to slander our doctrine' (*H.E.* 4.26.9).

Many have found a correlation between this Domitianic scenario and evidence from Revelation itself. Revelation warns its Christian audience, for example, not to worship the beast and its image nor to accept its mark (*Rev.* 13.4, 12ff.; 14.9, 11; 16.2; 19.20; 20.4), which may well point to conflict over participation in the emperor cult. The seer foresees that a great trial is about to come upon the whole world, which will affect the church also (3.10). Indeed, some Christian blood has apparently already flowed (Antipas in Pergamum: 2.13), Christians in Smyrna may face impending imprisonment (2.10), and the souls of the martyrs cry out for vengeance from beneath the heavenly altar (6.9). Meanwhile the harlot Babylon, seated on the seven-headed beast, who for most commentators represents the indulgence and oppression of the city of Rome, built on seven hills, is revealed as 'drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus' (17.6). All this, it could plausibly be argued, fits what Melito and Eusebius tell us about the Domitianic era. Indeed, many see in the designation of Rome as Babylon (*Rev.* 17.1–6), the first destroyer of Jerusalem and its Temple, conclusive evidence that Revelation was written after 70, i.e. after the destruction of the Second Temple by the forces of Rome.

Moreover, until relatively recently, New Testament scholars have generally appealed to Roman historical sources, some of which portray Domitian in a highly negative light, as confirmatory evidence for this Christian perception of Domitian as a 'second Nero'. According to Suetonius, for example, Domitian allowed himself to be called *Dominus et Deus noster*, 'our Lord and God' (*Domitian* 13), an expression used in Revelation of 'the one who sits upon the throne' (*Rev.* 4.11; 19.6 etc.; cf. 19.5). In line with this desire for worship, it has been claimed that Domitian particularly encouraged the development of the emperor cult, which was especially popular in the eastern provinces, not least Asia, and served a useful purpose in promoting provincial loyalty to the centre. Much is made, for example, of the fact that Ephesus received a new imperial temple during his reign. Finally, Roman sources

relating the 'cruelty' of his later years have also been appealed to in support of the later Christian claim that Domitian, like Nero, was a persecutor of the Church.

Two episodes have been given particular attention. The first concerns the *fiscus iudaicus*, the replacement for the Jewish Temple tax, traditionally paid by Jews throughout the world to the Jerusalem Temple. With the destruction of the Temple under Domitian's father Vespasian, this tax was replaced by a 'Jewish head tax' paid into the coffers of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. According to Suetonius, Domitian extended this to include those who 'without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people' (*Domitian* 12).⁵ Such could have included Jewish Christians, and the *fiscus iudaicus* is thus often seen as a potential opportunity for state action against Christians. The second is an incident occurring in 96 CE, when members of the imperial household, including Domitian's own cousin Flavius Clemens and his wife Domitilla, were charged with 'atheism' or violation of the state religion, which Cassius Dio connected with Judaism (67.14.2). As a result, Clemens was executed and Domitilla exiled to the island of Pontia. Eusebius later explicitly claims that Domitilla, whom he believes to be Clemens' niece rather than his wife, was a Christian (*H.E.* 3.18.4).

However, a significant number of recent scholars, working in both classical and New Testament fields, have expressed dissatisfaction with the received view, both in terms of its dating and its setting at a time of persecution. While the Domitianic dating retains many staunch adherents, others have revived a view often espoused in the nineteenth century, which proposes a much earlier date for Revelation, namely the late 60s (Robinson, 1976, 221–53; Rowland, 1982, 403–13). This was a politically turbulent period for the empire at large (the year 69 saw no fewer than four emperors), and for Jews and Judaeo-Christians in particular (66 saw the beginnings of the Jewish revolt against Rome in Palestine). Moreover, even those who continue to hold to the traditional Domitianic dating have suggested other possible settings besides one of persecution.

An Alternative Dating

Let us turn, first, to the evidence for dating the book. The tradition that connects the writing of Revelation to the latter years of Domitian's reign is very early and very strong, but is largely based on external evidence (such as the testimony of Irenaeus), and is not unassailable. Even in the ancient world, alternative datings were espoused, even if none of these have gained much support in the subsequent history of interpretation. Two early Syriac versions date John's banishment, and therefore his visions, to the reign of Nero (54–68), while Epiphanius, fourth-century Bishop of Salamis, attributes

the writing of the Apocalypse even earlier, to the time of the Emperor Claudius (41–54), a dating also found in a late medieval Ethiopian commentary on the book. Theophylact, writing in the eleventh century, testifies to a tradition which dates Revelation to the even later reign of Trajan (98–117), a dating which is not impossible given Irenaeus' claim that John was still alive at this time. It is likely that one or other of these suggestions (probably that of Epiphanius) is mistaken, given that both Claudius and Nero were known, rather confusingly, as Claudius Nero. Yet the widespread patristic preference for Domitian's reign should not necessarily be taken as more trustworthy because of its numerical strength, for it may simply reflect the repetition of Irenaeus' view rather than a number of independent witnesses for this late dating.

Before turning to the internal evidence of Revelation itself, a closer look at Irenaeus' words, and the context in which he wrote them, is called for. First of all, it should be noted that Irenaeus does not claim that the Apocalypse was *written* during the latter years of Domitian's reign. In the usual translation of the passage (preserved in Greek by Eusebius), Irenaeus claims only that John *saw* his apocalyptic vision then: Irenaeus is therefore no stronger a supporter for a Domitianic dating of the book than for one of the alternative proposals, namely that John wrote in the later reign of Trajan. But in fact, the Greek verb used (ἐώρακέν) is ambiguous: it could either mean 'i.e. the Apocalypse was seen' at the end of Domitian's reign, or alternatively 'he was seen'. If the latter, then Irenaeus is not speaking about the book at all, but rather making a point about the longevity of John. In the Latin version of Irenaeus, things are even more obscure, given that the phrase is clearly neuter: 'it was seen' (*visum est*). A reference to John would have required the masculine, to the Apocalypse the feminine (*apocalypsis*). The neuter *visum est* may rather refer to the 'name', *nomen*, of Antichrist.

Second, even if one concludes, with the majority of commentators since Irenaeus' day, that Irenaeus does indeed date John's visions to the end of Domitian's reign, and the writing of the book to the same period, one might still question his motives for doing so. On a more general point, scholars who feel quite at liberty to disregard Irenaeus' testimony on a host of other issues (e.g. the apostolic authorship of Matthew's Gospel) suddenly suffer pangs of conscience when it comes to his testimony about John's Apocalypse. This is all the more surprising given the ambiguity of Irenaeus' words here, and his chronological distance from the event he describes (he was not born until c. 130 CE). More specifically, in Book 5 of *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus is concerned to discourage speculation about the identity of the Antichrist, and has a vested interest in dating John's non-announcement of Antichrist's name as late as possible, so that it may still apply to Irenaeus' own day. Indeed,

Alan Garrow has suggested a further reason why this Domitianic dating supports Irenaeus' concerns: namely, his dependence upon Polycarp, his direct link with John. Elsewhere, Irenaeus speaks of John being present with his disciples such as Polycarp into the reign of Trajan (indeed, Polycarp would have been little more than a lad in the reign of Domitian). Closing the gap between Polycarp and the Apocalypse would have strengthened Irenaeus' claim that the name of Antichrist had never been announced publicly (Garrow, 1997, 67–9).

None of this, of course, disproves Irenaeus' dating. What it does do, however, is to raise questions as to how solid Irenaeus' testimony here is, not least because of the ambiguity of what he actually says. This is all the more significant if the consensus view of the patristic period (and indeed the modern scholarly consensus) is simply the result of the repetition of Irenaeus' words, not always read particularly carefully. Moreover, when one turns to the internal evidence of Revelation, the case for an alternative dating becomes even stronger. It is to the various pieces of this internal evidence that we shall now turn.

The Seven Heads of the Beast

A crucial piece of internal evidence for dating Revelation is the explanation provided for the seven heads of the beast in Revelation 17. But it is precisely this passage which causes most embarrassment for the traditional dating, and raises the distinct possibility that this book should be dated much earlier, to the late 60s. Whatever further allusions and identifications have been found in the history of Christian commentary on and iconography of this vision, the primary referent for its original first-century hearers is clarified by a rare interpretation offered in verses 9–10:

This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while.

(Rev. 17.9–10)

The reference to Rome (the city built on seven hills), and to seven of its emperors (seven kings) could not be clearer, particularly in the light of v. 18, which states that the woman is 'the great city that rules over the kings of the earth' (this seems to rule out the alternative interpretation which views Babylon as Jerusalem). According to the interpretation offered in 17.9–10, the reader, and the hearers, are led to expect that the seer is writing in the reign of the sixth king, five having already reigned, and with the expectation (due perhaps to turmoil in the world) that the seventh yet to come would have only a short reign.