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## JOSEPHUS' ANTICIPATION OF A DOMITIANIC PERSECUTION

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**D**OMITIAN has commonly been named along with Nero among the first persecutors of early Christianity, yet available data for a Domitianic persecution are scanty and obscure. In a recent essay Professor Merrill sets the entire tradition aside as practically worthless. He believes that Domitian's violence reached only the Roman aristocracy, and that, while suspicious of Jewish revolutionists, he did not concern himself with the Jewish religion in particular, much less with Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

It is somewhat surprising that Josephus has not been studied more carefully in this connection. True, his narrative does not come down to the time of Domitian<sup>2</sup>, yet he wrote his later works during this emperor's reign and it would be strange indeed if these compositions did not mirror to some extent the contemporary situation. If one should discover in these

<sup>1</sup> E. T. Merrill, *Essays in Early Christian History* (New York, 1924), pp. 148—173. A less skeptical but thoroughly critical estimate of the evidence may be found in the following representative discussions: S. Gsell, *Essai sur le règne de l'empereur Domitien* (Paris, 1894), pp. 287—316; A. Linsenmayer, *Die Bekämpfung des Christentums durch den römischen Staat* (München, 1905), pp. 65—84; L. H. Canfield, *The Early Persecutions of the Christians* (New York, 1913), pp. 70—85; A. Manaresi, *L'impero romano e il cristianesimo* (Torino, 1914), pp. 57—71; Donald McFayden, "The Occasion of the Domitianic Persecution", *American Journal of Theology*, XXIV (1920), 46—66.

<sup>2</sup> Probably he never carried out his plan to continue his history of the Jews down to a later period (*Antiq.* XX, 267).

documents the presence of a new anxiety for the future of Judaism, that fact of itself would have no little weight in confirming the opinion that under Domitian the Christians also suffered inconvenience because of the resistance which they, along with their Jewish contemporaries, offered to the demands of Caesar-worship.

Josephus lived comfortably at Rome for some thirty years after the close of the Jewish war. From this vantage point he reviewed the history of the Jewish people under Roman rule and felt keen regret that his brethren in Palestine had been unwilling to submit themselves peaceably to the dominion of the Romans. At the same time he unhesitatingly affirmed that the loyalty of the Jews to the religion of their fathers could never be surrendered. Although Josephus now owed house, lands and privileges at court directly to the imperial favor<sup>3</sup>, he was an outspoken apologist for the Jewish religion. He accepted with good grace the Roman destruction of the Jewish state, but he never admitted it proper for Rome to interfere with the religious freedom of his kinsmen. The burning of their temple and the complete subjugation of their land<sup>4</sup> meant the utter destruction of their nation, and logically this result might well have carried with it a determination on the part of the victor to abolish also their religious rites. But Vespasian and Titus did not push logic to its ultimate issue. In fact it never was the policy of the Romans to meddle with the religion of conquered peoples. But toward the surviving Jewish religion they were, under the circumstances, surprisingly lenient.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Life*, 422—430; cf. *War*, VII, 448 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Vespasian ordered the sale of all the land of the Jews, according to Josephus, *War*, VII, 216.

<sup>5</sup> Even Cassius Dio testifies that Vespasian permitted the Jews still to follow their customs (85 7) and this favor was granted in spite of much strong popular feeling against the recently defeated revolutionaries. For example, an attempt to force pagan religion upon the Jews at Antioch, and to deprive them of their former rights in the city, was frustrated by Titus (Josephus, *War*, VII, 46—62, 100—111). One feels, however, that Titus' piety is being overdrawn when Josephus makes him desire to save the temple and lament the fate of Jerusalem (*War*, Pref. 27 f.; VI, 236—243; VII, 112 f.).

To be sure, they destroyed the temple at Leontopolis<sup>6</sup>, in order that no focal point for the cultivation of national sentiment might remain, and they required the Jewish population of the Empire to pay to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome the half shekel tax that formerly had been paid yearly to the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> But so far as the separate worshipping congregations were concerned, their rights were not interfered with but were in reality reaffirmed by imperial authority.<sup>8</sup> When, late in the seventies, Josephus brought out his *Jewish War*, he seems to have thought that the Jews had no occasion to anticipate from the conqueror any interference with the free pursuit of their ancestral religion, if only they would abstain from revolutionary attempts at national rehabilitation.

In the year 93, while still living at Rome under the fa or of Domitian and his wife Domitia<sup>9</sup>, Josephus published his much more extensive treatise on *Jewish Antiquities*. During the time that had elapsed since the writing of the *War*, the status of Judaism in the Roman Empire seems to have considerably deteriorated, especially under Domitian. In the first place, his need of money became so acute that, as Suetonius says<sup>10</sup>, the tax upon the Jews was levied with extreme rigor, even on those persons who had adopted Judaism without publicly professing themselves to be proselytes, and also on those who endeavored to conceal their Jewish ancestry in order to avoid paying the poll-tax. Suetonius adds from his own experience an incident, which must have occurred early in the reign of Domitian, where an old man was examined in public by the Emperor's steward to determine whether or not he belonged to the Jewish race. According to Cassius Dio<sup>11</sup>, by the year 91 the personal vanity of Domitian had reached so high a pitch

<sup>6</sup> *War*, VII, 420 f.

<sup>7</sup> *War*, VII, 218; Cassius Dio, 65, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Juster, *Les juifs dans l'empire romain* (Paris, 1914), I, 226, N. 3, and II, 282—284.

<sup>9</sup> *Antiq.* XX, 267; *Life*, 429.

<sup>10</sup> *Domit.* 12.

<sup>11</sup> 67, 8.

as to bring it about that all over his realm were to be seen images and statues of the Emperor in both silver and gold. When an accused individual would avert the imperial displeasure he had only to do obeisance before Domitian and address him as Lord and God.<sup>11</sup> In the immediate context Cassius Dio also mentions Domitian's hostile action against certain persons on account of "atheism", and their disposition to drift into "Jewish ways". Clearly the implication here is that the Emperor was displeased by those who, following Jewish custom, were unwilling to call him a god.<sup>12</sup>

For Josephus, living in Rome at this time under imperial patronage, yet retaining his attachment to Judaism and his interest in the perpetuation of that faith, the situation must have been growing delicate, if not indeed critical. Explicit evidence that this was the fact is easily discoverable. The change of tone and difference of emphasis in the discussion of certain topics in the *Antiquities*, as compared with the *War*, clearly indicate that the Jews were much less at ease in the time of Domitian than even in the early years immediately following their subjugation by Titus. Josephus' personal circumstances prevented an open protest, but he could assume the rôle of didactic historian. This he did, and with rather more boldness than might have been expected. As he told over again in the *Antiquities* the story of the relations between the Jews and the Romans, the items which he selected for emphasis and the supplementary materials introduced show how keenly he felt the need of reminding the Roman government that heretofore the Jews had never been deprived of their religious liberty and that it had always been utter folly for any government to assume that it could with impunity violate the rights of Jewish worship. While God might permit, or even approve, the overthrow of the Jewish nation, he would never forsake his chosen people when the purity of their religion was at stake. More specifically, it had been futile for even a

<sup>11</sup> Cassius Dio, 67, 13.

<sup>12</sup> ἀθεΐα, impietas, made one guilty of high treason because the attitude was a crime, not simply against the Emperor as a man, but against his divinity. See Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie*, VI, col. 2578.

Roman emperor to suppose that he could successfully require the Jews to worship his image. Josephus' new interest in these matters when writing his *Antiquities* strongly suggests that he feared an impending outbreak of imperial hostility toward Judaism on distinctively religious grounds.

To present the evidence in detail, in the first place one may note the additional citations of ancient imperial decrees, as a new feature in the *Antiquities*.<sup>14</sup> These documents confirmed the right of the Jews to economic justice and were precedents especially in point at a time when Domitian's vigor in collecting the poll-tax seemed likely to exceed the bounds of propriety. But the economic problem was only incidental to the larger question of the Jews' traditional right to religious freedom in general. The reason given for introducing this type of document in the *Antiquities* is to show from history that the Jews had always been protected by Rome in the undisturbed performance of their own distinctive religious customs. In this way Josephus hoped to avert the "hatred of irrational men".<sup>15</sup> Doubtless he found it both gratifying and significant to note that the edict of Augustus in favor of the Jews at Ancyra had been inscribed on a pillar in the very temple of the Emperor.<sup>16</sup> With similar satisfaction he cited the sharp letter of Petronius, governor of Syria under Claudius, to the magistrates of Dora demanding the apprehension of those offenders who had insolently set up an image of Caesar in the Jewish synagogue, a proceeding directly contrary to a recent edict of the Emperor giving the Jews full permission to pursue their own religious practices unhindered.<sup>17</sup> This citation of legislative precedents in favor of Judaism is a device distinctive of the *Antiquities*.

<sup>14</sup> See XVI, 160—178; XIX, 281—285; 287—291; 303—311.

<sup>15</sup> *Antiq.* XVI, 176.

<sup>16</sup> *Antiq.* XVI, 165.

<sup>17</sup> *Antiq.* XIX, 303—311. That Josephus correctly represents Claudius' attitude toward the Jews is attested in a recently published papyrus, No. 1912, where the Emperor confirms the right of the Jews to their traditional worship and the observance of their customs "as also under the God Augustus" (*ὡς καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ Σεβαστοῦ*), l. 87. See H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (London, 1924).

Still another striking contrast between the *War* and the *Antiquities* appears in their respective portraits of Herod the Great. In the former treatise evidently Josephus would have his readers admire the Jewish prince for his favorable disposition toward the Romans and his generosity in dealing with foreigners. Josephus manifests no little satisfaction in describing Herod's magnanimity in rebuilding cities and rearing temples dedicated to Caesar. There seems to be neither hesitation nor disapproval in the remark that Herod had been so zealous for the honor of Caesar that after filling his own country with temples he showed his favor for other territories under his rule by adorning them with many cities called Caesarea<sup>18</sup>. Also Herod's gifts to foreign countries, such as his endowment of the Olympian games, and even the rebuilding of a temple of Apollo, are cited without hesitation and apparently with no little pride at these evidences of magnanimity and cosmopolitanism on the part of the King of the Jews.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, in the *Antiquities* Herod's liberal policy is presented in a much less favorable light. Not only is the tone of approval more restrained; open censure is also more frequent. Now Josephus flatly accuses Herod of transgressing the laws of the Jews by constructing heathen temples and introducing other forms of heathen adornment and entertainment within the territory under his rule. While his political policy of friendliness toward Rome is still commended, his transgression of the religious scruples of the Jews is shown to have been a grave mistake which contributed more or less directly to Herod's own unhappy end.<sup>20</sup> Even the extent to which he had been able to impose foreign customs on the Jews had its limits. Readers of the *War* might naturally have assumed that temples in Caesar's honor had been reared in all parts of Herod's kingdom, even in Judea.<sup>21</sup> But now Josephus hastens to remark that as a matter of course such buildings

<sup>18</sup> *War*, I, 407.

<sup>19</sup> *War*, I, 422—428.

<sup>20</sup> *Antiq.* XV, 828—880.

<sup>21</sup> ἐπει δὲ τὴν βίαν χώραν ἐπλήρωσεν ναῶν, εἰς τὴν ἑπαρχίαν αὐτοῦ τὰς τιμὰς ὑπερέειχεν. *War*, I, 407.

could not have been introduced into Judea proper, since paying "honor to statues and images" is a thing intolerable to the Jews.<sup>22</sup>

The interest of Josephus in toning down Herod's patronage of the imperial cult, and condemning his practice of liberality, appears at various points. According to *War* I, 403, when Samaria was rebuilt and called Sebaste, a large temple to Caesar was erected in the middle of the city, but the description in *Antiquities* XV, 296—298, while much longer, refers merely to a temple, without specifying that it was dedicated to Caesar. Again to the account of the erection of Caesar's temple at Paneion (Caesarea Philippi) the *Antiquities* add that even Herod recognized the impropriety of his conduct and tried to atone for it by remitting half of the Jews' taxes for the year.<sup>23</sup> In the *War*<sup>24</sup> attention is called in striking fashion to the magnificence of the statues of Caesar and Roma in the imperial temple at Caesarea, but in the parallel account in the *Antiquities*<sup>25</sup>, while the images are mentioned, they are passed over without description and that of Roma comes before that of Caesar.

Even the less glaring deviations of Herod from Jewish customs are listed in the *Antiquities* among the causes that brought him into trouble. In the *War* his introduction of the games into Judea seems to be considered only a commendable mark of the king's friendship for Rome and a fitting display of his good fortune before astonished strangers. But in the *Antiquities* these same performances take on a much more sinister character. In the end they bring down upon his own head not only the violence of his subjects but also the displeasure of Providence. Josephus will still allow that the Herodian theater at Jerusalem and the amphitheater in the plain near Jericho were admirable and costly constructions, and might fittingly create awe among foreign visitors, but it is now emphasized that to Jews the shows were impious per-

<sup>22</sup> *Antiq.* XV, 329.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *War*, I, 404, with *Antiq.* XV, 363—365.

<sup>24</sup> I, 414.

<sup>25</sup> XV, 339.



formances that violated their venerated customs and inspired a plot against the king's life. Although the conspirators were captured, they died martyrs to their "common customs which all Jews must keep or die in loyalty to them."<sup>26</sup> The cruel punishment inflicted by Herod did not lessen "the firmness of the people's disposition and their undaunted fidelity to their laws."<sup>27</sup>

Herod was shown to have been wholly dominated by a passion for honor. His numerous benefactions were no longer signs of magnanimity and disinterested generosity, as in the *War*, but were the rash expenditures of one obsessed by a morbid desire to receive from his subjects obsequious reverence such as he himself rendered Caesar. Herein he made a grave blunder, for the law of the Jews prohibited them from satisfying the king's love of honor with "images or any other such practices."<sup>28</sup> This is a strange rôle for Herod to play. Certainly he had his weaknesses, but to represent him as demanding from his subjects worship, after the manner of the imperial cult, probably is not true to history, and one may well doubt whether he would ever have been so pictured had not Josephus desired to warn Domitian of the impiety and futility of demanding that Jews worship the emperor.<sup>29</sup>

The Gaius-Domitian parallelism in the *Antiquities* is even more apparent. In the *War*<sup>30</sup> a brief account was given of Gaius' futile attempt to have his statue set up in the temple at Jerusalem. While it was, of course, a heinous undertaking and awakened the concern of God<sup>31</sup>, the story was told without drawing therefrom any notable lessons to warn rulers against

<sup>26</sup> *Antiq.* XV, 288.

<sup>27</sup> *Antiq.* XV, 291.

<sup>28</sup> *Antiq.* XVI, 158.

<sup>29</sup> When commenting on the hopelessness of Herod's trust in many descendants as a substitute for true piety toward God (*Antiq.* XVIII, 127), possibly Josephus is forecasting the futility of Domitian's effort to secure a successor by adopting the two sons of his niece and endeavoring to insure the prestige of his family by applying to it the epithets *divus* and *diva*.

<sup>30</sup> II, 184-203.

<sup>31</sup> *War*, II, 186.

a similar procedure, except that the violent death of Gaius would teach sobriety to his successor.<sup>32</sup> A quite different picture appears in the *Antiquities*.<sup>33</sup> Here the story is spun out at great length and adorned with new features to emphasize the activity of God against Gaius and to enhance the value of the lessons which people in authority may derive from his unhappy end. Now we learn that Gaius' doom had been sealed from the start. His refusal to receive the Jewish embassy from Alexandria is in itself an encouragement to Philo, the chief of the ambassadors, who sees in this discourtesy a clear indication that the emperor has in fact "already started a war with God."<sup>34</sup> A new evidence that in this crisis God is on the side of the Jews is furnished Petronius, whom Gaius sends to Palestine to carry out his wishes. A heavy shower of rain out of a clear sky in a season of drought seems even to the Roman general an indubitable demonstration of God's care for his people and of his presidency over their destiny.<sup>35</sup> Further, Agrippa is introduced in the rôle of missionary to his old friend Gaius to teach him that the correct way of securing divine assistance for the imperial government is to refrain from demanding emperor-worship of the Jews.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the good fortune of Petronius in receiving news of Gaius' death before the imperial letter ordering Petronius' own destruction arrived, is now explicitly credited to God's care for one who had protected the Jews. Indeed it is their God who is responsible for the removal of this impious emperor.<sup>37</sup>

When introducing his long description of events attending the assassination of Gaius, Josephus almost drops his mask. Openly he declares that his purpose in recounting the incident is (1) to furnish persons in affliction great comfort and assurances of the power of God, and (2) to hold up Gaius as an example of misfortune to those who suppose their happiness to

<sup>32</sup> *War*, II, 208.

<sup>33</sup> XVIII, 257—308; XIX, 1—211.

<sup>34</sup> XVIII, 260.

<sup>35</sup> XVIII, 285—286.

<sup>36</sup> XVIII, 297.

<sup>37</sup> XVIII, 305—308; XIX, 15.

be unending and who imagine that they will be able permanently to escape miseries even though they do not order their lives according to the principles of virtue.<sup>38</sup> Considering the circumstances under which Josephus was living at Rome, his words of assurance to his fellow-Jews in their new anxieties under the growing assertiveness of the imperial cult could hardly be more explicit, nor could he well venture to express more pointedly his warning to Domitian against treading in the footsteps of Gaius whose fatal blunder had been the violation of Jewish religious liberty.

It is clear from Josephus that the attitude of the Roman government toward the Jews became more hostile after the reigns of Vespasian and Titus. Under the fostering care of Domitian the imperial cult grew increasingly menacing. Apparently as early as the year 93 A. D. Josephus was fully awake to the impending troubles that threatened the Jews because of Domitian's interest in his own deification. Already there was need of strengthening "faith in the power of God" and providing great "consolation for those who are the victims of misfortunes," a state of affairs evidently due to someone who thought like Gaius in former times, that his own good fortune would never come to an end.<sup>39</sup> Even present difficulties are but a prelude to others more serious, unless the oppressor takes a timely warning from the examples of history. Legislation favorable to the Jews under great emperors of the past is held up for emulation. The calamities that overtook Herod the Great are read as a warning to anyone in authority who would transgress Jewish religious scruples, and when a situation

<sup>38</sup> XIX, 16. Josephus, *Antiq.*, XIX, 209, remarks that Gaius took his predecessor Tiberius as his model and inspiration in learning, which constitutes another point of resemblance to Domitian who, according to Suetonius, *Domit.* 20, restricted his reading to the commentaries and deeds of Tiberius. Perhaps half apologetically, Josephus then comments on the difficulty of practicing the virtue of moderation, which should be the characteristic of a cultured man, when one possesses absolute power to do what one pleases without restraint (XIX, 210). Possibly this is as direct an admonition as it was safe for one in Josephus' position to utter during the days of the Terror under Domitian.

<sup>39</sup> *Antiq.* XIX, 16.

has become especially acute, as in the case of Gaius, God can be counted upon for drastic action to prevent fatal disaster to Judaism.<sup>40</sup>

Josephus presents a situation into which the Apocalypse of John readily fits. Owing to the stimulus given to emperor-worship by Domitian, John of Patmos entertained a lively anticipation of trouble for Christians on account of their antagonism toward the worship of any earthly potentate. But the author of the New Testament Apocalypse cannot claim for his faith those precedents of toleration and those historical displays of providential protection by means of which Josephus hopes to avert impending danger to Judaism. Consequently Josephus is less desperate than the Christian seer, yet he clearly betrays a similar anticipation of increasing hostility on the part of the authorities under Domitian.

<sup>40</sup> *Antiq.* XIX, 15.