

Domitian (Part ii)

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Imperial Cult

Most scholars whatever their methods of interpretation acknowledge that the second beast of Rev13v11-18 represents the Imperial Cult¹, or that it is strongly alluded to². In determining the historical setting of Revelation it is important to consider the type of persecution implied by John. Guthrie is correct when he states that 'even a casual reading of the Apocalypse is sufficient to impress the reader that the background is one of conflict between the ruling powers and the Christian Church'³. Guthrie then continues to observe that when the beast is mentioned there is the demand for universal worship (cf. 13v4, 15f; 14v9-11; 15v2; 16v2; 19v20; 20v4) and the insistence that all should wear his mark⁴. The question of whether the Beast of 13v1-18 was the imperial cult, as

¹ As an example see, M Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1940) p252; GB Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Massachusetts, Hendriksen, 1966) p171; M Ashcraft, 'Revelation', in *The Boardman Bible Commentary Vol. 12*, ed. J Allen (Nashville, Boardman) p315; W Barclay, *The Revelation of John 2 Vol.* (Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, 1976) 1.95; RH Charles, *The Revelation of St John 2 Vol.* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1920) 2.357-365.

² For example see, D Guthrie, 'Revelation', in *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester, IVP, 1970) p949; L Morris, *Revelation* (Leicester, IVP, 1987) p166; RH Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998) p254; GE Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans) p183. This is not to suggest that these scholars are as definite in their identification of this beast with the imperial cult. What they recognise is the historical background and the image this would have created in the minds of John's readers.

³ Guthrie, *op.cit.*, (1970) p949.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p949 .

the preterist maintains, or whether it was only a suitable symbol of something greater yet to be manifested, as the futurist maintains, is one that can be set aside for the moment. What is clear from the internal evidence within Revelation is that the conflict being experienced by the Church was religiously motivated. An important issue that confronts the student of Revelation is to determine which period of the early Church provides a suitable background to the persecution referred to in Revelation. Therefore, the whole issue of Emperor worship becomes central in this investigation, because of its links with the second beast of ch13v11-18.

The origins of the ruler cult can be traced to the Greek world. In his study of the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor⁵, SRF Price devotes an entire chapter to Hellenistic cities and their rulers. The ruler cults found in these cities according to Price have been traditionally seen as the forerunner to the Roman ruler cult⁶. In the Hellenistic cults, cities honoured their rulers by bestowing upon them all manner of praise. These cults were modelled on divine rather than the ruler cult⁷. Although divine language was used of the ruler of a particular city, the function of the cult was primarily social and political. There was a recognition that the king was their donor and their saviour from danger⁸. Often when the political power of a ruler was ended, the cult of that ruler was also ended, sometimes violently⁹.

As the power and influence of Rome spread, particularly after the peace of Apamea in 188BC, cults to the power of Rome began to

⁵ SRF Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁶ Price, *op.cit.*, p24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p40.

appear¹⁰. As Rome's power increased so to did the number of cults to the goddess Roma, until they became quite common. In contrast, as the number of cults to Roma spread, the number of Hellenistic royal cults decreased. This evolution of the cult to Roma, in its various forms, should be understood as an attempt by the Greeks to respond to the changing political situation in the district. As with the Hellenistic royal ruler cults, the divine language used of the cult of Roma was recognition by the people of the power and influence exerted over them by Rome.

As the nature of Roman government changed, from Republic to Principate a corresponding change took place in cultic practice, seen in the movement from Roma to Roman imperial ruler cult¹¹. Although the Senate still played a part in the system of Roman government, the Princeps - or Emperor - became the focus of Roman power. Quite naturally Greek city states sought political advantage by seeking to establish cults to the genius of the Emperor - a practice observed by Price, 'initiative from Rome was not required, only modification and adjustment'¹².

It can be maintained that, the 'ruler cult shows a decisive change with Augustus'¹³. In 9BC the assembly of the province of Asia awarded a crown 'for the person who devised the greatest honours for the god'- namely Augustus. Price records their reasons:

Whereas the providence which divinely ordered our lives created with zeal and munificence most perfect good for our lives by producing Augustus and filling him with virtue for the benefaction of mankind, sending us and those after us

¹⁰ Although as Price notes, the earliest known cult to Roma in this area dates from 195BC (*Ibid.*, p41).

¹¹ This does not mean that the cults to Roma were abandoned. While they decreased, cults to Roma continued to exist.

¹² Price, *op.cit.*, p53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p54.

with a saviour who put an end to war and established all things; and whereas Caesar [*sc.* Augustus] when he appeared exceeded the hopes of all who had anticipated good tidings, not only by surpassing the benefactors born before him, but not even leaving those to come any hope of surpassing him; and whereas the birthday of a god marked for the world the beginning of good tidings through his coming¹⁴.

Rather than being a unique piece of flattery, the sentiments of gratitude in this document echo a general expression of appreciation towards Augustus and his reign. This in turn is hardly surprising given that Augustus established the *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace; a peace that was to grace the Mediterranean area for almost two centuries, virtually without interruption. Augustus' reorganisation and rehabilitation of the empire had a profound effect upon everyone, from the humblest to the noblest. Not unnaturally he was deeply revered by his people and respected by a wider populace in the empire. The desire for political advantage and a genuine respect for Augustus provided the soil in which a cult to genius could grow in the provinces.

It is unlikely that Augustus ever thought of himself as a god. However, even though he did not encourage this practice he did permit it and allowed temples to be built for his worship in the provinces. The contrast between the actions of the Greeks and the Romans on the divine status of Augustus must be carefully noted. It was one thing that Augustus should be venerated as a god by the Greeks, the Romans however, at least officially, did not confer deification until the death of the Emperor. With an Emperor like Augustus, the Senate - encouraged by Tiberius - moved quickly to confer the honour of deification shortly after his death. This was not the case with every emperor, as Price remarks, 'in consequence

¹⁴ Cited in Price, *op.cit.*, p54.

there was considerable mismatch between the official Roman list of *divi* and the recipients of cults in the Greek East¹⁵.

A similar attitude to the worship of his genius was shared by Augustus stepson Tiberius. Evidence of his attitude towards his worship can be seen in one of his speeches recorded - and probably reworked¹⁶ - by Tacitus:

‘I, senators [says Tiberius (ibid.38.1)] testify before you and wish those who come after to remember, that I am a mortal and that I perform the functions of a mortal and that it is enough that I fulfil the duties of a Prince. Posterity will render homage enough [*satis superque*] to my memory if it believes me to have been worthy of my forebear's, careful of your interests, resolute in danger, not fearful of giving rise to rancour against myself when it is for the public good. These sentiments in your hearts will be my temples, the most beautiful and longest images of me. Indeed, monuments of marble become despised as sepulchres when the judgement of posterity turns to hatred. I therefore beseech the provincials, the citizens and the gods themselves, the last to grant me, to the end of my life : peace of mind and the ability to distinguish between the rights due to man and those due to the deity [*quietam et intelligentem humani divinique iuris mentem dunt*], the first when I die, they honour my name and my actions with the glory of a good remembrance’¹⁷.

Whether it was as a result of his personal wish, or that the Senate could not remember him with ‘a good remembrance’, or that he

¹⁵ Ibid., p75.

¹⁶ M Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London, Croom Hill, 1983) p174.

¹⁷ Cited in Sordi, *op.cit.*, p174.

could not be set beside the great Augustus, Tiberius was never defied by the Senate.

Gaius (Caligula) had a completely different approach to the whole notion of the imperial cult than either Augustus or Tiberius. Suetonius, who referred to him as Caligula the monster (*Gaius* 22.1), records how Gaius established a shrine to himself as god and had a life-sized golden image of himself dressed in his own everyday clothes. He also records that 'he was once overheard threatening the god [capitoline Jupiter]: "If you do not raise me up to Heaven I will cast you down to Hell"' (*Gaius* 22). This self-belief in his deity not only contributed to his eventual downfall, it also caused serious problems for the Jewish community in Alexandria and later Judea.

In AD38 large-scale violent fighting broke out in Alexandria between the Greeks, who were the majority population, and the Jews. At this time the Jewish community was a minority group whose right to full citizenship was constantly rejected. In the ensuing frenzy the Greeks devastated the Jewish quarter and persuaded the Prefect, Flaccus, to order that statues of the Emperor should be placed in the synagogues. Naturally the Jews objected. Their strict adherence to the prohibition of idolatry in the Mosaic Law and their concept of monotheism left them with no other option. In AD40 both sides sent representatives to Rome to plead their case before Gaius. Philo, who represented the Jewish community of Alexandria before the Emperor, found himself confronted by a man who accused the Jews of being god-haters because of their refusal to acknowledge his divinity¹⁸. The opposing representative then accused the Jews of not offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to Gaius. Realising the seriousness of the situation the Jews sought to explain that although their religion prohibited them from offering sacrifices to the Emperor, they were glad to offer

¹⁸ Price, op.cit., p209. For a fuller account see, JPVD Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1934) p157-173; AA Barrett, *Caligula - The Corruption of Power* (London, BT Batsford, 1989) ch9 p140-153.

sacrifices for him. The response of the Emperor was typical of his inconsistencies. On the one hand he recalled Flaccus and had him put to death. However, on the other hand, when he heard of the unrest in Judea, again between the Jews and the Greeks, he ordered that a statue of himself in the guise of Zeus be placed in the Temple in Jerusalem. The prospect of a national rebellion by the whole of the Jewish people coupled with mass martyrdom became very real possibilities. The crisis was avoided, either because of his assassination and thereby his orders were ignored¹⁹; or he was persuaded by his friend Julius Agrippa not to go through with this course of action²⁰.

What is highly significant in this incident is Gaius's attitude to his personal deity and the effect this could have outside Rome. It must be conceded that the trouble between the Jews and the Greeks in Alexandria was deep seated and complex, having a long history. Despite this, the use of the Greeks of the Jewish failure to sacrifice to the divinity of the Roman Emperor as justification of violence is extremely relevant to the situation found in the book of the Revelation. The riots in Alexandria may have had complex social and ethnic dimensions to them²¹, but they were justified to the Roman authorities on religious grounds. Although Gaius did not personally sponsor the trouble in Alexandria, his personal belief in his own divinity created the opportunity for violence to be justified by one group upon another. This personal self-belief of Gaius enabled the Greeks to justify themselves to the Emperor for their persecution of the Jewish minority.

When Claudius was hailed as Emperor by the Praetorian Guard, a move quickly ratified by the Senate, the whole notion of the

¹⁹ Massie, *op.cit.*, p136. A version of events which Barrett, *op.cit.*, suggests was circulated to suit Jewish tradition and Petronius' later reputation (p90).

²⁰ Grant, *op.cit.*, p28. A version of events favoured by both Balsdon and Barrett.

²¹ For a detailed account of the historical and ethnic background to the trouble in Alexandria see Barrett *op.cit.*, ch12 p82-191.

imperial cult in the East had undergone change. Price notes that 'by the time of Claudius (the imperial cult) was an outward sign of loyalty which involved little sentiment'²². The rich and expressive descriptions used of Augustus had given way to a more modest use of language. The political nature of the imperial cult in the East was now manifesting itself as being the main factor in its continuation. Such a change would not have bothered Claudius. As B Levick comments, 'his moderation in respect of the imperial cult, classified as another aspect of his "religious" policy, was essentially political, part of a prudent conception of the Princeps' role in the Empire and a reaction to the autocracy of Gaius'²³. An extremely intelligent and able man, Claudius like Augustus and Tiberius before him did not take his cultus seriously. His deification by the Senate is a good illustration that in the Roman mind this was an honour to be bestowed rather than recognition of divinity.

According to MT Griffith 'there is little evidence for the notion that Nero introduced important innovations in the ruler cult'²⁴. Like Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius, Nero appears to have begun, and continued throughout his reign, to have refused to claim divine worship. Evidence from the early stages of his reign can be seen in his rejection of one such approach by Egypt. Even 'as late as 65 Nero refused a temple to Divus Nero in Rome, respecting the Augustan convention whereby the living Emperor was not worshipped officially in Rome or Italy'²⁵. Numismatic evidence does exist however, which portrays Nero as the New Sun (*Neos Helios*). This identification was not unique as it had already appeared on Roman Republican coins²⁶. Griffith attributes this

²² Price, *op.cit.*, p57.

²³ B Levick, *Claudius* (London, BT Batsford, 1990) p88.

²⁴ MT Griffith, *Nero - The End of a Dynasty* (London, BT Batsford, 1984) p215.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p216.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p127.

imagery to the credit given to Sol - the Sun god - for the detection of the Pisonian conspiracy²⁷.

Nero loved all things Greek and it is the Hellenistic version of monarchy that probably provides the best basis for understanding the imperial cult under Nero. After an initial period of playing the part of the Princeps - first among equals - Nero found Oriental despotism a more suitable paradigm for his reign. As Griffith observes, 'the attractions of the Greek world thus became overwhelming for a Princeps who needs applause'²⁸. Unlike Gaius, however, Nero did not demand *proskunesis* or claim to be a god. Rather, having absolute power, Nero not only lived as an immensely wealthy playboy but loved, if not craved for, flattery and praise²⁹. Although not claiming to be a god - unlike Gaius - Nero deliberately lived in a style that raised him far above ordinary men. His was a life that not only removed him from the world of ordinary people but eventually also from reality. Massie cites the building of Nero's Golden House as evidence of 'Nero's withdrawal into a dream world, his preference for fancy and make believe to facts'³⁰. Nero therefore, did not consider himself divine but he did deliberately elevate himself above his subjects, and lived in his own fantasy world.

The period of civil war, commonly referred to as the year of the four emperors, was one of instability and uncertainty concerning the

²⁷ Ibid., p128. This was a conspiracy to make Gaius Calpurnius Piso emperor in AD65. It was foiled by the slaves of the conspirators informing Nero of their masters plans.

²⁸ Ibid., p215.

²⁹ For details and examples see the standard sources and almost any work on Nero. His love of praise and outrageous lifestyle are so well documented, that any further comment is unnecessary.

³⁰ Massie, op.cit., p174.

future of the empire³¹. It is therefore possible to ignore this period when considering the imperial cult. The brevity of each of the three reigns makes any investigation unnecessary. With the political uncertainty in Rome, it is improbable that any attempt was made to promote a ruler cult of any of the three Emperors - Galba, Otho and Vitellius.

Once, however, order was restored and a period of political stability ensued, it is not surprising that the imperial cult in the East, and later in the West, reappears. Vespasian, unlike any of his predecessors was not in a position to claim divine honours for himself, however unlikely it may have been. Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors. Although his actions distanced him from the people, Nero could claim descent from gods and kings. In complete contrast, Vespasian was from humbler and less nobler origins. His ascent to the position of princeps was due to his military strength and abilities and not his noble lineage. Ironically, Nero gave Vespasian command because of his family obscurity, believing that he was not a threat to him³². It is therefore not surprising to discover that Vespasian adopted a pragmatic approach to the imperial cult and government.

This is not to suggest that Vespasian did not have a religious policy or did not employ religious language to suit his own political objectives. Scott carefully notes Vespasian's use of religious stories, dreams, prophecies and signs to authenticate his claim to the throne³³. Vespasian was more than a good soldier who had the power base of several Roman legions behind him. He was also aware of the value and lasting effect of religious propaganda. For all his many faults, Nero had a long royal family lineage. By contrast,

³¹ See Tacitus who said of 69 that it was 'almost the last' (*Hist.*1.2,11) thinking that the Empire had come to its end, such was the unrest in this year.

³² See Scott, *op.cit.*, p2.

³³ *Ibid.*, ch1.

who was Vespasian? Was he just the most powerful general who had prudently manoeuvred himself into an unassailable position? Or was he a man of destiny, whose rise to power was accompanied by divinely inspired phenomena? Whether it was a series of fortunate occurrences³⁴ or carefully engineered happenings, his rise to the throne appeared to have a divine seal upon it³⁵. However, as Scott notes, 'when Vespasian obtained firm control of the empire, the necessity for further miracles to serve the purposes of propaganda ceased, and it is significant that only three other omens concerning Vespasian are recorded'³⁶.

Having established his position, Vespasian made no secret of his dynastic plans. In this regard Scott notes his active policy - rivalling Augustus - of restoring and building temples to the gods³⁷. Vespasian was aware that such a policy would endear him to the people. Although a soldier, Vespasian was also religious and conscious of the importance of religion in any community or state. So when the Senate flattered him by issuing coins with his image and a radiate crown, a symbol of divinity, Vespasian did not hinder them³⁸. Vespasian was not Nero and did not crave flattery. However, he was pragmatic enough to use this to further his political and dynastic plans. Therefore while it is likely that the imperial cult in the East was re-established in the reign of Vespasian, his response to it marked a return to the traditional Roman attitude that '*apotheosis*' takes place after death. It was bestowed as a mark of respect and was not recognition of divinity.

³⁴ Like the Nile rising above its normal level upon his entry into Alexandria.

³⁵ Scott, *op.cit.*, p9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p33.

'As Vespasian had foreseen, he was duly deified by Titus, because, according to the Younger Pliny, Tacitus desired to seem the son of a god'³⁹ This is understandable given the relatively humble background of his family. The deification of Vespasian served as a mark of respect to his father from the nation⁴⁰ and used by Titus a means of furthering his own political ends. Some coins struck during his reign shows his deified father handing on the *regimen orbis* - signifying the transition of power and the fulfilment of Vespasian's desire for a Flavian dynasty. It was a useful means of consolidating his position in the eyes of the empire.

Like his father, Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius, Titus refused to look upon himself as divine⁴¹. However, as with Augustus, this did not hinder others from addressing him in flattering language. If we accept the evidence of Tacitus and Suetonius, the reign of Titus, though brief was worthy of 'apotheosis' and the accompanying terms of address.⁴²

Two further questions arise from this investigation that can be addressed now. The first is a consideration of whether the imperial cult was merely a formality, separated from any true religious significance. In this case, was the deification of an emperor - or other worthy - simply the bestowal of an honour? Central to this and its significance for Revelation are the terms *divi* and *deus* used when speaking of a divine Caesar. The second question and one of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p40.

⁴⁰ As with Augustus, the people were grateful to Vespasian for restoring peace and order during his reign, particularly after the period of civil war.

⁴¹ Scott, *op.cit.*, p54.

⁴² Consideration of the imperial cult at this point surveying the reigns of Nerva or Trajan. After the spectacle of Domitian's delusion, Nerva would not have considered presenting himself as divine. Such a notion would have been unthinkable. Although Pliny attempted to force Christians to offer worship to the Emperor, this was more a test of loyalty than any deep-seated belief on Trajan's part of his own personal deity.

great importance to understanding the social and historical setting of Revelation is the extent to which this issue could have been significant in the persecution experienced by the Church. While perhaps not sufficient in itself, any answer to this question will enable a better understanding of when John was writing and against what social background the work must be set.

1. The Imperial Cult, a Religious Formality? In his treatment of the question of the public formality of the imperial cult, Price has observed two related though distinct dangers that must be taken into account when considering this issue. The first is the 'danger of analysing religious activities with categories drawn from Christianity'⁴³. The second is our modern distinction between the public and private sphere of the individual. Price is correct to warn of these dangers, precisely because of their subtlety.

It is natural to consider the nature of the imperial cult from the standpoint of westernised Christianity. The terms of reference, the language and the practice we engage in become the paradigms by which we evaluate other religious systems. An example of this can be seen by considering the way JI Packer introduces his book *Knowing God*⁴⁴. While many Christians will be challenged by this presentation of religious experience, it does not necessarily follow that this must be superimposed upon ancient religious or religious experience. Therefore, what might appear as formality to us in the modern west, may have been a genuine religious experience or expression to an ancient Greek or Roman. Coupled with this, is the distinction we draw between the public and private aspects of the individual's life. If as it seems likely, the imperial cult was mostly a public ceremony, this does not necessarily imply that it was a formal ritual to be observed. To make this assumption, as Price rightly observes, imposes our distinctions on the ancient world.

⁴³ Price, *op.cit.*, p117. See also Barrett, *op.cit.*, p140.

⁴⁴ JI Packer, *Knowing God* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

The imperial cult has been regarded by scholars as something in which only the upper class of society participated in⁴⁵, because of the value in showing loyalty to the ruler in this way⁴⁶. This said, Price also notes a common assumption that, the same elite class adopted or displayed a scepticism towards the notion that the emperor was divine. Indeed, he goes further to note that it became a common subject matter for jokes and satire⁴⁷. In contrast the lower class of Roman and Greek society, the elite participated mainly in the formal public ceremonies where a whole community would participate. While Price seeks to argue 'that the imperial cult was not just a game to be played in public'⁴⁸ the consensus in scholarship - as he concedes - is that only a few took the cult into their homes. The imperial cult was unlike other religious activity, such as the worship of Zeus. Rather it was a public ritual performed by a community at appointed times for non-religious ends. It provided a sociological function within the community.

2. *Divus or Deus?* This can be observed in the use of the two words *divus* and *deus*. Jones states concerning this that 'the best that an emperor could expect after death was to be declared a *divus*, never a *deus*: a living one had to make do with even less'⁴⁹. In the Greek world, on the other hand, a reigning Emperor would be called θεός. However, as Price points out 'there was no readily available translation of *divus* into Greek and the basis to employ the term *theos*'⁵⁰. He does maintain, that in 'Greece, as also Rome, where no clear relationship was established between the categories of *deus*

⁴⁵ Price, op.cit., p120, who cites Pliny the Younger as an example.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p107.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p115.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p120.

⁴⁹ Jones, op.cit., (1993) p108.

⁵⁰ Price, op.cit., p75.

and *divus*, the institution of the imperial cult produced a system whose relationship to both gods and men was ambiguous⁵¹.

This observation by Price that there was no clear distinction between *divus* and *deus* must be seriously questioned. If there was no significant difference between the two words, why was Domitian's desire to be called or addressed as *dominus et deus noster* such a shock to Suetonius, who was undoubtedly reflecting a common Roman reaction? Such a reaction of shock can only be understood if there was an important and significant difference between the two terms. The word *divus* did not convey deity to the Roman mind. Rather, it conveyed that the individual displayed divine qualities⁵², normally associated with a god⁵³. This distinction between actually being divine and having godlike characteristics was appropriate to the Romans. What was inappropriate and highly distasteful was that a living mortal would claim deity for himself, and expected to be regarded as such - e.g. Gaius and Domitian. Domitian's desire to be addressed or referred to as *deus*, was regarded as completely improper; as is reflected by Suetonius' comments (*Dom* 13).

Regarding the second question, to what extent can the practice of the imperial cult was significant in the persecution experienced by the Church, Price is very specific. In his section 'Conflict and Dissent' he addresses what he calls, 'the old picture of a clash between Christ and the Caesars'⁵⁴. While he notes that Christian non-participation in many areas of community life was troubling to the population of Asia⁵⁵, he is virtually dismissive of this issue as a serious ingredient in any conflict between Church and State.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p120.

⁵² See Barrett, *op.cit.*, p140.

⁵³ These might be something like strength or wisdom etc.

⁵⁴ Price, *op.cit.*, p123.

⁵⁵ He notes the petition to Haddrian accusing Christians of illegal acts.

After commenting on a little known martyr act of the fourth century he states that, 'there is no parallel, so far as I know for such an expression of conflict between the imperial cult and Christianity in any pre-Constantinian document'⁵⁶. Price returns to this subject again in chapter 8 'Sacrifices', where he seeks to demonstrate that those who persecuted Christians - i.e. Pliny - were careful to distinguish between sacrifice to the gods and to the emperor⁵⁷. His argument is that while someone like Pliny could distinguish between sacrifices to the gods and sacrifices to the emperor 'it took the Christians whose understanding had been sharpened by their transvaluation of sacrifice to insist on some degree of logical systematisation'⁵⁸. In other words, it was their theological understanding of sacrifice that caused their problems, not any religious persecution of them for their belief in Christ. If they could only have adopted a more pragmatic attitude towards sacrifice - like Pliny - they might not have faced these particular problems. However, with regard to the Jews he maintains that, 'the Jewish system of sacrifice easily accommodated the emperor, so long as he was not Gaius, until that is the start of the great revolt from Rome in AD66 was symbolised by the cessation of such sacrifices'⁵⁹. These comments reveal that Price has not given enough credence to the basic nature of the problem reflected in the book of the Revelation.

Both the Jews and the Christians were willing to honour and respect the emperor. The Jewish practice was it seems, acceptable to the Romans, except that is when it was known to Gaius personally. Because he thought of himself as a god, he regarded the Jews as god-haters. Their refusal to sacrifice to him as a god, led to his order to have a statue of his image placed in their synagogues. The difficulty between the Jews and Gaius was not simply based on the

⁵⁶ Price, *op.cit.*, p126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p221.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p222.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p220.

Jews dislike of Gaius, but on their inability to treat Gaius as a god. Their religious beliefs made this impossible. Christians faced a similar dilemma. Their basic problem with the imperial cult lay in the exclusivist claims at the heart of their religious belief. It did not matter if a governor such as Pliny made a distinction between the gods and the emperor. In the minds of the Christians, any recognition that the emperor had divine qualities, somewhat less than deity, would have been unacceptable. Also, the religious connotations in the word sacrifice would have been problematic for Christians.

Fortunately, the issue does not appear to have arisen often in the first few centuries; the reason for this is due to at least these two factors. Firstly, from the reign of Claudius the imperial cult underwent a change becoming more and more a sign of political loyalty, until it virtually disappeared in the third century. Therefore we would expect to see less of a problem as the generations passed, rather than the reverse. Secondly, and closely related to this, is the attitude and response of the individual emperor. With Emperors such as Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Titus, Nerva and Trajan, the potential for a clash was reduced, because of their personal attitude to their cults. This is still valid despite Pliny's executions of Christians during the reign of Trajan. Trajan expressly forbids the deliberate seeking out of Christians. This action would have discouraged any large scale hunting down of Christians for political advantage. The question of what would happen under the reign of an emperor who regarded himself as a *deus* is one that Price does not either ask or address. Given the character of Domitian and his desire for divine titles, it is worth considering if a similar situation arose during his reign regarding Christians as arose under Gaius with the Jews.

It would be incorrect to say that the persecution of the Jews in Alexandria in AD38 was simply caused by social tensions rather than deeply held theological beliefs. In the ancient world, especially in the Greek and Roman world, religion and politics were inseparable. It is a modern development to separate the two. The background to the trouble in Alexandria between the Jews and the Greeks may be viewed as political and social. However, that wholesale murder and terror were justified by appealing to the

religious beliefs of the city, e.g. the failure of the Jews to recognise Gaius' divinity, must be carefully considered and not minimised. This connection between the political life of a city and its religious practices can be traced back to the Greek city states where politics and religion were two sides of the one coin. If it was in the interests of a city, or indeed region, to recognise the deity of the emperor, it is a logical assumption that anything or any group that would undermine that interest would place itself in grave danger of a backlash or mob violence. When considering this it is important that these two points be carefully noted. Firstly, The importance of the religious life of a city to that city's economy must be considered. If one takes a city like Ephesus, with its numerous temples and shrines it is not unreasonable to assume that those temples were inextricably linked with the city's economy; i.e. with its priestly orders, sacrifices and traders in religious artefacts etc. In the Acts of the Apostles (19v23-41), Paul is accused of causing a loss in trade in Ephesus because of the content of his message. This, coupled with the perceived threat to the honour of Artemis resulted in mass city-wide civil unrest. This incident in Acts enables us to add economics to politics and religion, because they are inter-linked. This suggestion that there is a link between economics and religion and that this is a possible cause, or contributing factor, for persecution against Christians is strengthened by the imagery of Rev 13v15-17.

'He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the beast to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no-one could buy or sell unless he had the mark which is the name of the beast or the number of his name'⁶⁰.

A second and closely connected point that must be given greater weight than has often been the case, is the vast number of temples and shrines to the imperial cult in Asia Minor. Price in his list of

⁶⁰ See the commentaries for the many and varied suggestions as to the precise meaning of this passage. In particular see EA Judge, 'The Mark of the Beast, Revelation 13:16', in *TynBul* 42.1 (1991), p159-161.

temples and shrines has provided a careful study of the extent of its practice and thereby its importance to everyday life⁶¹. Right across Asia there were temples and shrines to individual emperors or imperial temples to the living divine emperors⁶². Although emperor worship is nearly always referred to in the major commentaries on Revelation, its widespread existence and thereby its influence has not been emphasised enough considering its obvious relevance to the Book.

If one takes these two points and combines them with what I have already established about the character of Domitian and his personal attitude to his divinity, it is not a quantum leap to place the problems being experienced by the early church in Revelation within the reign of Domitian. If Paul faced mob violence because of the message he preached, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Christians in Asia faced similar violence, justified, as with the Jews in AD39, by their refusal to acknowledge, worship or take part in the imperial cult. Flaccus refused to stop the violence against the Jews in Alexandria in AD39, and showed his complicity by ordering images of Gaius placed in Jewish synagogues. No doubt he hoped that this would please his deluded emperor. Would Roman officials therefore, have protected an esoteric and misunderstood group who outwardly appeared to oppose the public worship of Domitian, and who were also possibly undermining the economy of a town or city through their message (cf Acts 19v23-41)? It is easier to suggest a scenario in which officials wanting to please another deluded emperor would adopt an attitude similar to Flaccus. In a very real sense, Christians in Asia during the later years of Domitian's reign would most certainly have been in a very vulnerable and isolated position. They would have been open to the whims of mob violence against them, without perhaps the protection of the Roman authorities.

Christian Persecution under Nero

⁶¹ Price, op.cit., p249-274.

⁶² Ibid.,p259.

In his article on 'The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation'⁶³ Wilson laments what he terms as the clearly observable shift in scholarship from a pre AD 70 date to a Domitianic date. After working through a number of arguments in which he takes issue with many major commentaries, he draws the following conclusions. 'First, Revelation was written in a historical background of recent persecution. The persecution of 95 and 96 was the creation of Eusebius and Lightfoot, not of Domitian. The persecution under Nero in 64 and 65 is a documented historical fact'⁶⁴. The 'fact' of the Neroian persecution, while not the only plank in Wilson's argument, is nevertheless an important one. He is not alone in seeing the Neroian persecution as being important to the historical background to the text of Revelation. JAT Robinson⁶⁵ after briefly considering the historical evidence of a Domitian persecution comments, 'when this limited and selective purge, in which no Christian was for certain put to death, is compared with the massacre of Christians under Nero in what two early and entirely independent witnesses speak of as "immense multitudes"', it is astonishing that commentators should be led by Irenaeus, who himself does not even mention a persecution, to prefer a Domitianic context for the book of Revelation'⁶⁶. In contrast to Wilson, Robinson then acknowledges that the preference for a Domitianic date among the majority of scholars⁶⁷ is interrelated to the subject of the relationship of the Christians to the imperial cult. Robinson readily admits that the book of Revelation 'would fit into what we know of his [Domitian] reign'⁶⁸. What he objects to, is the

⁶³ Wilson, op.cit., p587-605.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p605.

⁶⁵ JAT Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London, SCM, 1976) ch8.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p231.

⁶⁷ In fact he states that he only found two scholars at the time of writing who supported an early date

⁶⁸ Robinson, op.cit., p236.

dogmatism of commentators who say ‘that such developments *could* not have occurred till then is misplaced (and unargued),⁶⁹. On imperial worship and Domitian, Robinson concludes ‘all one can say is that while the evidence from the imperial cultus does not rule out a Domitianic dating, it does not establish it either’⁷⁰. Robinson also contends, that the language of compulsory emperor-worship throughout the world on pain of death is in any case not meant to be taken literally. The role of the seer is to decry, not to describe. ‘What he sees in his vision no more happened in the time of Domitian than in the time of Nero: he is protecting upon the end - the era of Nero *redivivus* - the inevitable outcome of a totalitarian tyranny’⁷¹.

Robinson’s comments about the non-literal account of compulsory emperor-worship on pain of death, suffers from the same problems that have been identified with regard to suffering being described as anything other than literal⁷². On a more fundamental note, both Wilson and Robinson fail to examine the Neroian persecution in the light of the text of Revelation. Both these scholars cite the reference of persecution in Tacitus and the motif of persecution in Revelation, without considering if the persecution in AD64 accords with the description in Revelation. If, as they suggest, the historical background of Revelation fits the Neroian persecution in AD 64, then one would expect to see major points of contact or similarities between the causes of the persecution in Rome and the cause identified by John in Revelation.

Nero’s persecution of Christians at Rome, according to Tacitus was as a direct result of the rumours that he was personally responsible

⁶⁹ Ibid., p237.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p237.

⁷¹ Ibid.,p237-8.

⁷² See p .

for the great fire of Rome on the 19 July 64⁷³. Although Suetonius openly blames Nero for starting the fire (*Nero* 38), he does not connect the persecution of Christians (*Nero* 16) with Nero's attempt to deflect the rumours that he was responsible for starting the fire. Tacitus is the only ancient author to connect the two⁷⁴:

'Therefore, to put an end to the rumour [that he was the incendiary], Nero supplied [for the sake of diversion] people to be prosecuted, and visited them with extraordinary punishments, people whom the mob loathed for their abominations and called Christians. Christ, the origin of the name, had been punished with the death penalty by the procurator Pontius Pilate under the rule of Tiberius, and the deadly superstition, checked for the moment, broke forth again, not only throughout Judaea, the birthplace of that evil, but even throughout the city of Rome, where all things hideous and abominable came together and find many followers. Therefore, first, those who confessed and, then, on the information supplied by them, a vast number of them were arrested and convicted [or joined together] not so much on the grounds of the crime of arson as for hatred of the human race. In addition, when they were put to death, they were made objects of mockery in that they were covered with skins of wild animals and torn to death by dogs; or they were crucified or burnt, and when daylight failed, they were burned to served as torches in the dark. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle and gave a circus exhibition, mixing with the people like a charioteer or standing in a chariot. Then, although they were criminals and deserved the most exemplary punishments, there arose pity for them as if they were being removed not for the benefit of the state, but to satisfy the savagery of one man' (Tac. *Ann* 15,44).

⁷³ The truth of this, will not be discussed, because it of itself does not focus upon the central issue here, that is, why Nero persecuted the Christians. For a detailed discussion and an interesting argument, see, G Walter, *Nero* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1957) ch9 p144-174.

⁷⁴ See, Sordi, *op.cit.*, p30.

In this famous passage, Tacitus cites the grounds of the persecution of the Christian church at Rome. Nero, who was popular with the ordinary people⁷⁵ had become the centre of a rumour that he not only started the fire but sang his song 'The Sack of Troy' as Rome burned.

Nero's first attempt to reverse the rumours was to hold religious ceremonies to appease the supposedly angry gods⁷⁶. When this failed, Nero turned to the Christian community and implicated them to deflect the rumours surrounding him. Why this group was chosen is not certain. However, from Tacitus' account it would seem as though they were the perfect scapegoats. Tacitus describes them as being loathed by the people, accused of abominations and guilty of deadly superstitions. What is interesting in Tacitus comments about Christianity being at Rome, is his assertion that 'the city of Rome, where all things hideous and abominable come together and find many followers'. It is possible that the Christian community was only one of a number of communities that might have been singled out by Nero. That the Christians were religious may be nothing more than fortuitous for Nero.

Comparing the record of persecution in Rev 13v15-17 and that of Tacitus, there appears to be little correlation between the two. There is no doubt that the Christian community in Rome suffered as a result of Nero's attempt to extricate himself out of trouble; trouble caused by the rumours concerning his part in the Great Fire of Rome in AD64. What is in doubt is the attempt to view this persecution as a backdrop to the Book of the Revelation. Such a position suffers from two difficulties. Firstly, the problem being experienced by believers in Revelation is in direct relation to their refusal to worship the beast. If this worship, either by direct reference or indication of what will be, is linked with the imperial cult, then Nero's own recorded attitude to his divinity is an insurmountable difficulty. As we have noted earlier, Nero rejected

⁷⁵ Griffin, *op.cit.*, p133.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*,p132.

as late as AD65 a temple to his divinity in Rome or Italy. Rather, he chose instead to deliberately follow the Augustan convention. Nero did not persecute the Christian community because of its refusal to worship his genius but because they were a convenient group to put blame upon. The imagery of a clash between imperial worship and Christianity is completely without credit during the reign of Nero.

Secondly, it is likely that the persecution of AD 64 was confined to Rome itself⁷⁷. While the cult to Nero can be traced outside Italy, the problem facing the Christians in Rome was unique to Rome. Nero had a problem in Rome and Rome was where it needed to be addressed. It is likely that the Christian community in Asia was regarded in much the same manner as in Rome, with great suspicion. However, given Nero's attitude towards his divinity, it is unlikely that there was political gain for other cities in Asia Minor to join in this persecution.

Conclusions

The rise of the imperial cult is directly related to the desire on the part of Greek City states and provinces to gain political favour and advantage. This was a pragmatic approach which became more evident following the deification of Augustus. Also a clear distinction should be made between the attitude of the Greeks and the Romans. To Roman society, it was an acceptable practice to recognise that a worthy emperor had divine qualities, following his death. What was totally inappropriate was to grant divine status to a living emperor. Deification was an honour to be bestowed by a grateful nation, not recognition that an emperor was actually a god.

Apart from Gaius and Domitian, none of the Roman emperors thought of themselves as gods. This specific point is particularly important in considering when the book of the Revelation was written. Gaius' self-delusion about his own deity was used as an excuse by the Greeks in Alexandria to justify their persecution of

⁷⁷ So V Rudich, *Political Dissidence Under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation* (London, Routledge, 1993) p86.

the Jewish minority. It is not a quantum leap to see how a similar situation could arise under another emperor who equally thought of himself as divine.

Domitian was both delusional and extremely capable. With his personal interest in promotion within the Roman Army, it does not require a great leap of imagination to envisage how a situation could arise in which ambitious men would want to impress the emperor. This coupled with the fear that Tacitus and Suetonius record gripped the Roman aristocracy can easily account for the conditions in which the Church could be persecuted. When this is further combined with the reality that religion, politics and economics were interrelated in the ancient world, it is not difficult to see how and why the early Church was persecuted during the later part of Domitian's reign.

It can therefore be maintained, that Revelation should be placed during the reign of Nero. Except that Nero persecuted the Christian community in AD64 and that the Christian community in Revelation is undergoing and facing persecution, the two do not appear to be connected. The persecution in Rome in AD64 was not religiously based. Secondly, the Book of Revelation was written primarily for the

Church in Asia Minor. Therefore the persecution alluded to in it would have little direct bearing with Rome AD64, which seems to have been an isolated and brief, however violent it indeed was. As Tacitus documents the persecution in Rome, it is not a suitable backdrop against which the book of Revelation must be understood.