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The alleged persecution of the Roman Christians by the emperor Domitian

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**The alleged persecution of the Roman
Christians by the emperor Domitian**

by

Ken Laffer

Dip. Min (Hons), B.A., Grad. Dip Ed., B.Th.

**Thesis to be submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Award of
Master of Arts (Religious Studies)**

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the traditional view of Domitian's reign, particularly as it relates to his alleged persecution of Roman Christians. In the light of recent revisionist studies, which offer alternative views, this alleged persecution needs to be reassessed. In order to reevaluate this topic, it will be necessary to examine the opinions of the traditionalists and the revisionists, argued from the pagan primary sources together with views expressed in Christian primary and secondary sources.

The study of the development of the Domitianic tradition, which involves accounts from a variety of primary and secondary sources, will involve a re-examination of literary texts that discuss Domitian's reign. The authenticity and applicability of some texts to the discussion about Domitian will also be considered.

Some attempt has also been made to include archeological aspects into this topic and recent studies will also be considered to determine if anything substantive may be found.

This thesis will argue that Domitian was not as bad as the biased primary pagan sources portray him and that it is unlikely that Domitian ever persecuted the Roman Christians. This examination of traditional and revisionist points of view will provide a more up to date assessment of Domitian's reign.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

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Date: 10th August 2005

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Note: Referencing conventions in this thesis follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, Fifth Edition, 2001.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	i
Declaration	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	iv - viii
<u>Chapter One</u>	
<u>Introduction</u>	
Introduction	1
Issues	3
Thesis structure	12
<u>Chapter Two</u>	
<u>Rome's relationship with the Roman Jews in the First Century before the reign of Domitian</u>	
Introduction	17
The origins of the Jews in Rome until the end of Julius Caesar's reign	18
The Julio-Claudian Emperors - Augustus and the Jews	21
Tiberius and the Jews	22
Gaius (Caligula) and the Jews	26
Claudius and the Jews	28
Nero and the Jews	31
The Flavian Emperors - Vespasian and Titus and the Jews	32
Overview	33

Chapter Three

Nero and the Christians

Introduction	38
The circumstances of Nero's actions against the Christians according to Tacitus	41
Were the Roman Jews involved?	42
Religion, Atheism, Superstition and perceived threat	44
Pagans and Christians	47
Who was responsible for the fire?	52
What was the basis for the conviction of the Roman Christians?	57
Was there a specific law against the Christians?	62
Nero and the Christians according to Suetonius	64
Nero and the Christians according to later Church historians	66
Uncertainties involving Nero's reign	69
The truth about Nero	71
Conclusion	73

Chapter Four

Early Christian literary traditions about persecution in the First Century AD

Introduction	76
The Gospels	78
The Acts of the Apostles	79

Other New Testament books	83
Pagan recognition of the Christians	88
Jewish opposition to Christian mission	93
The Apostolic Fathers	97
Conclusion	100

Chapter Five

Domitian's character in the Pagan Historiographical Sources

Introduction	103
Domitian's character according to Tacitus	105
Domitian's character according to Pliny the Younger	107
Domitian's character according to Suetonius	108
Domitian's character according to Dio Cassius	109
The end of the tyrant – was this a turning point?	109
The actions of a feared emperor	111
The issue of the Jewish Tax	113
Recent historical discussion – revising the picture of Domitian	118
A question of bias - relationships between the early writers	122
In defence of the emperor	127
Conclusion	129

Chapter Six

Domitian's alleged persecution

Introduction	131
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Suetonius and Dio and the alleged persecution	133
Domitian as Lord and god	136
The early Christian sources – The Apologists and Eusebius	140
Recent assessments of Eusebius' account of Domitian	148
Were the key individuals Jews or Christians?	151
Was Jewish proselytising an issue?	156
The Imperial Cult and the Christians	161
The correspondence between Pliny and Trajan	166
Was there a persecution by Domitian?	172
Conclusion	176

Chapter Seven

Archaeological findings related to the alleged persecution

Introduction	179
Early historical accounts about the catacombs	180
Attempts to identify and date the catacombs: 1879-1922	182
Modern attempts to date the catacombs: 1958-2003	184
Conclusion	193

Chapter Eight

Domitilla's Martyrdom and the development of the Domitianic tradition

Introduction	194
Domitilla as Martyr and Saint – an overview of the Domitianic persecution tradition	195

Definitions: martyr, martyrology and Roman martyrology	200
The growth of martrylogy and hagiography	201
Conclusion	209
<u>Chapter Nine</u>	
<u>Summary of Findings</u>	211
<u>Bibliography</u>	214

Chapter One

Introduction

Introduction

For many centuries, the traditional scholarly portrait of the Flavian emperor Domitian was one of an evil tyrant whose reign (A.D. 81-96) was marked by terror and fear. Towards the end of his rule, the emperor came to be regarded by many as a dangerous person until, finally, close associates assassinated him. In more recent decades the traditional assessment of Domitian has been re-examined a number of times and there have been many attempts to restore the emperor's tarnished image. A number of recent books and articles have challenged the traditional view, and much of this work on Domitian has attempted to substantially change or reverse the views expressed by the ancient Roman writers. The impact of these recent writings upon the alleged persecution of the Roman Christians by Domitian should now be considered and integrated into the discussion about the alleged persecution of Roman Christians. This is necessary because the last substantial article that focused specifically on the persecution was published in 1973.

The primary aim of this thesis is to evaluate the claims of traditional and revisionist views of the emperor's reign, particularly as it applies to the alleged persecution. To achieve this aim, the views of the traditionalists and the revisionists will be considered in relation to the Christian and non-Christian primary sources to determine if certain revisionist arguments offer a more persuasive account of the alleged persecution. This thesis will assert that recent revisionist arguments highlight how tenuous is the evidence for the alleged persecution.

In addition, this thesis will investigate the early Church literary tradition about the alleged persecution, and the development of the Domitianic tradition. Some aspects of these two subjects, such as whether or not there was a persecution and the growth of the persecution legend, have received little attention in earlier discussions about Domitian.

Finally, this thesis will examine the physical evidence that is believed by some archeologists and historians to involve the reign of Domitian. This subject has received less attention than it should have in most considerations about the emperor's rule.

To achieve these aims, a number of enquiries will be undertaken. Firstly, the non-Christian and Christian primary sources will be re-examined to determine how the early writers recorded the events of Domitian's reign. Details of the persecution are limited and this has led to an on-going debate about the religious status of the persecuted individuals. The dividing line between Christians and Jews appears to have been indistinct at the time of the alleged persecution and that aspect will need to be reviewed.

Secondly, a reconsideration of the interpretation of events by modern scholars will be included. This is necessary because a number of recent books and articles about the emperor have added substantially to the discussion. This thesis will evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

Also among ancient and modern church historians there is no uniformity of opinions. Some followed the leads offered by Tertullian and later Christian historians like Eusebius, and accepted that the named individuals were definitely Christians. Others were more skeptical and were not fully convinced. Apart from the argument

about matters of law, modern church historians have been reluctant to offer criticism of other points of view and that has meant that although much of the current scholarship is comprehensive, it does not offer much debate about various points of view. This thesis will highlight current disagreements and will seek to find possible solutions. By doing so, a more complete account of the topic will be possible.

Thirdly, this thesis will seek to determine how the Christian tradition about these incidents developed and whether that tradition can be sustained from reliable sources. Early Christian historiography has portrayed Domitian as a persecutor although there is only a very small amount of non-Christian source material that relates to this subject. Included in this task will be a re-examination and reconsideration of the role and function of *1 Clement* and *Revelation* to determine how and if these sources relate to the alleged Domitianic persecution.

Fourthly, the usefulness of physical evidence will be re-examined. In most of the historical discussion, modern historians have examined the literary sources, but there is usually little mention of the importance or significance of funerary inscriptions and the Roman catacombs. Considerable work has been done to examine the inscriptions, the catacombs and the circumstances of the early Christians martyrs and this thesis will seek to integrate the literary and archeological evidence, particularly as it relates to individuals named in the alleged persecution.

Issues

When considering the reign of Domitian, a number of issues in current scholarship need to be noted. These issues include assessments of the primary Roman sources, early Christian comments about Domitian, and the growing modern literature about the emperor's reign. Included in the current scholarship are aspects

involving epigraphic and archaeological material discovered since Gsell wrote the last major work in 1894. Although a substantial amount of work has been done in recent years on the reign of Domitian, very little has been done to consider the written and physical evidence together. Most of the discussion has focused primarily on the written texts with little or no acknowledgment of the importance of the physical evidence. In addition, how the early texts led to a Christian historiography about the emperor and his alleged persecution of the Roman Christians has not been the subject of much discussion.

Many modern scholars do not agree about the alleged persecution of the Roman Christians by Domitian. In addition to the more substantial works, there have also been a number of specific articles on the life of Domitian that have sought to investigate the emperor's character and these are helpful for our purposes.

After briefly commenting on Roman Judaism, this thesis will consider the troubled reign of the emperor Nero and will focus on his actions against the early Christians as a result of the fire in Rome in A.D.64. The accuracy and the attitude of the early Roman texts regarding Nero will need to be examined because the emperor has been soundly condemned by history and some assessment is necessary to determine if these accounts are wholly justifiable.

Nero is also recorded as having been the first persecutor of the Christians so his reign has provided a starting point for Rome's official opposition against the Christians. The meanings of key words and phrases in the fire account by Tacitus, which is the only one that links the fire to the Christians, will be examined and this is necessary because this incident has been interpreted in a number of ways. For example, some historians accept that the charge against the Christians was arson,

whereas others believe that the arson charge was unfounded and that they were attacked for their attitude to society. The alleged 'confession' has been interpreted as identification as Christians and also as a confirmation of the arson charge.

In this context, the accuracy and attitude of the early Roman writers towards Christianity will also need to be considered. It is obvious that these early writers knew very little about the Christians except for negative aspects. Christianity was regarded as a 'superstition'; its participants allegedly nurtured a 'hatred of the human race', and this was evidenced by the fact that the Christians had no regard for the Roman gods and refused to worship according to the Roman tradition. That attitude was clearly in opposition to the Roman way of life.

The relationship between the Romans and the Christians will also involve some assessment of how the Romans viewed the Jews, as there is some doubt about the dividing line between ancient, long established and recognised Judaism and the emerging Christianity. Although the Christians were named and identified there is no way of knowing for certain how much the early historians knew about this relatively new group. The language used to describe the Jews was also used against the Christians, and given its Jewish roots Christianity may have been seen as just a troublesome sect that arose from within Judaism.

The relationship between the Jews and Christians will also require comment. Although the New Testament indicated friction between the two groups, it also established that Roman authorities treated the Christians fairly whenever they were brought before city or town officials by the Jews or other groups to face charges of causing a disturbance.

The subject of alleged legislation against the Christians has also stimulated considerable discussion and debate. Early church historians alluded to laws that made Christianity illegal, but again, the New Testament supports no such claim. While it is true that some Christians (probably some key figures and leaders) perished during the reign of Nero, it is also true that the Church in Rome was not destroyed and its organisation was not dismantled. However, while there appears to be no specific laws made against the Christians, lives were nevertheless lost as a result of Rome's opposition to Christianity.

The problem of separating fact from fiction in the early accounts remains and the situation is made even more difficult by the fact that both Nero and Domitian were subjected to *damnatio memoriae*, or condemnation of their memory. Many official acts and records which could have explained actions and events were destroyed. The discussion of these key issues will provide some indication of the situation and status of the Christians prior to the reign of Domitian.

Before considering the alleged persecution of the Roman Christians by Domitian it will be necessary to investigate how the early Roman historians assessed the life and reign of the emperor. Several ancient historians wrote in detail about the emperor and the portrait of Domitian is far from flattering, in fact, the emperor has been portrayed as an evil ruler who caused extreme pain and suffering for many victims. Accounts of the emperor's reign by Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius and Dio Cassius are uniformly negative; Domitian was portrayed as a murderous tyrant.

The negative picture of Domitian that has endured over the centuries has been challenged and those views need to be explained. In more recent times, a number of studies have reassessed the traditional view and have suggested some very different

alternatives. For example, the existence of bias amongst the historians against the emperor has been noted, and that issue is obviously very important. A reasonable case has been made to establish the view that the early historians provided a completely one-sided picture of Domitian's reign.

In addition, the emperor was often in conflict with the Senate and it would appear that his involvement in the management of the provinces led to strained relationships. In defence of the emperor, it can be shown that, although he was undoubtedly harsh, he was also astute in many ways especially in his dealings with the provinces. Even Suetonius, one of his critics, noted that fact.

It would seem that most of the early historians focused primarily on the negative aspects of the emperor's personality and rule and deliberately omitted or downplayed any supporting proof that he may have done anything constructive or beneficial for Rome. If that is the case, and it would certainly seem so, then a reassessment is clearly necessary and well overdue. Such a reassessment is obviously hampered by the fact that much of the recorded history of Domitian's reign has not survived.

Of prime concern to this thesis is the issue of the alleged persecution of Domitian, and written details about this alleged occurrence are regrettably brief. Only two ancient writers mentioned the events that led to the downfall of the emperor and the brevity of these accounts has permitted a variety of interpretations.

Identifying the victims and the charges levelled against them is an obvious starting point, and even this most basic aspect has caused considerable debate and discussion. For example, although the impression is that 'many' were killed in A.D. 95/96, only a few individuals were named and the charge of 'atheism' was not

explained in detail. The year of the alleged persecution as reported by historians varies and will be recorded in this thesis as A.D.95/96.

Because religion was mentioned in the early accounts, some attention will need to be directed towards early attitudes to religion. Two prominent writers, Cicero and Plutarch, will be consulted to determine how the Roman authorities may have regarded these charges. These writers certainly suggested that the issue of religion was serious but how those attitudes were actually administered may have been regarded quite differently. This will lead to further discussion about how the pagans, Jews and Christians viewed each other, and again, although there is some suggestion that friction existed, uncertainty exists as to how uniformly religious conflicts were resolved at that time. In this thesis, the word 'pagan' is not used in a pejorative sense; it does not imply godlessness; it refers to those Romans who were polytheistic and therefore quite separate from the monotheistic Jews and Christians. Some comment about the religious identity of the key individuals will be necessary and this aspect continues to be widely discussed and disagreement is ongoing. While Judaism is named in one ancient account, later Christian writers claimed the key individuals as Christians. The accuracy of that claim will need to be reconsidered.

The word 'persecution' will also be discussed because the word suggests a 'reign of terror', and at present there is no real agreement that any kind of genuine persecution ever took place. Individuals certainly perished but available numbers perhaps do not warrant the use of the term 'persecution'.

A number of additional issues will require comment as they relate to the events of the time of the alleged persecution. For example, the issue of the Jewish tax appears to have been a likely factor and that issue will be considered. There has been

some discussion about tax evasion by certain named individuals and that needs to be addressed. Jewish proselytising will also require comment, as there is evidence in the early Roman sources that historians also noted this issue with concern. It is possible that named individuals may have aligned themselves with religious practices that were seen by Roman officials as unauthorised for Roman citizens.

Recently, modern scholars have also looked into the subject of the alleged divinity of the emperor. This point is of obvious concern as it impacts upon any discussion about Rome's attitude to religion, and also the emperor's response to groups or individuals who did not acknowledge his purported divine status. Detailed written sources about Roman attitudes to Christianity are scarce; however, correspondence between Pliny and Trajan has provided valuable information on this subject. Of all the ancient Roman writers of this period, Pliny appears to be the only one to indicate that he had undertaken some kind of real investigation into the habits, practices and beliefs of the Christians.

Early Christian literary traditions about the early persecutions have added a whole new dimension to the thesis subject. These writings contain a variety of genres, which vary in approach and style, and they are important because they obviously provide points of view quite different to the pagan Roman writings. Difficulties arise in this area, however, because determining authorship and dating the canonical scriptural texts is elusive, and later Christian writings base much of what they contain on the canonical material. Various texts from several New Testament books and other early Christian works will be considered to find out how persecution was regarded by the infant church.

The issue of Jewish proselytism is again important because there was obvious friction between the early church, and the pagan and Jewish communities. The New Testament provides ample evidence of how these groups related to each other in the Roman Empire, and how the local authorities dealt with disturbances.

The apostolic fathers and the apologists had a great deal to say about persecution, however much of it failed to identify either the social context or the legal situation. Persecution of Christians was certainly real but determining the circumstances in any detail is difficult, so this material must be treated with some suspicion.

The early church historian Eusebius wrote about the emperor and his persecution, and his accounts are valuable in considering this subject. However Eusebius' accounts are not without problems. His identification of a key individual is clearly wrong so his accuracy must obviously be suspect. Historians have generally agreed that there was a persecution of the early Christians and many commentators have accepted the fact that the Christians must have been of some importance to the early Roman authorities. However, that point of view has also been challenged recently. It would appear that by and large the Romans were not particularly interested in the Christians at all. After all, they had disposed of their leader and the remaining disciples and missionaries were open and obvious in their endeavours to spread the faith. These early Christians were not secretive or hard to find.

The tradition that has been established around the emperor Domitian has developed over the centuries and grown considerably. The first significant fact about this growth is that the tradition has been based on very little primary source material. The legend about the emperor obviously requires reconsideration.

This process will involve comment about how the whole issue of persecutions and martyrdoms grew as the centuries progressed. As Christianity developed, the importance of writing about its origins, including the obstacles it faced, became very important. In many ways early church writers saw the growth of the church as a 'spiritual war', and the enemy (the devil) was seen as using Rome as a tool of destruction. Although martyrdom was obviously not an exclusive Christian concept, Christian martyrs quickly assumed important status in the Christian story and accounts of their lives and suffering provided an integral part of that story. Allied to these aspects is the growth of hagiography as this impacted significantly on the story of the early church and how 'bad' emperors persecuted this group. It can be shown conclusively that a considerable amount of this material was fabricated; it was designed to encourage and inspire with little focus on the truth.

As noted above, archaeology has had only a limited inclusion in the story of the persecutions. In past decades, many historians accepted and relied upon the literary evidence almost without question. And, when they did acknowledge the existence of archaeological evidence, they did so based on the early work of a few individuals. However, in recent times some historians have included modern archaeological findings in their discussions, although usually comments have been brief. As Roman archaeology has developed in recent decades so historians have taken greater note of new points of view about the physical remains. In addition, early assessments have come under closer scrutiny and a variety of alternative points of view have now emerged to assist in completing the portrait of First Century Rome.

From the brief summary above, it is clear that although many historians view the last years of Domitian's reign as troubled and controversial, many are not convinced by the Christian tradition that Domitian was a persecutor of the early Roman church. This view should be challenged because some of the evidence certainly suggests that the emperor was capable of harsh action and also had a deep respect for Roman religion. If one accepts the reported treatment of the Christians by Nero as historical fact, then it could be said that an important precedent had been set. Could it be that the persecuted individuals were deliberately and falsely declared to be Christians in order to secure their downfall? That possibility is an option.

As noted above, any examination of Domitian's rule should begin with a brief investigation of Nero's reign, and also a discussion of the Christian faith. These aspects are necessary because Eusebius likened Domitian to Nero, and the accuracy of that assertion should be tested, especially in the light of the more recent studies about Domitian. Also the beginnings of Christianity, from within Judaism, will provide details that impacted on the many reigns that were a part of the turbulent First Century. Before considering Nero's involvement in an early persecution against the Roman Christians, a brief overview of Jewish history as it related to the capital city of Rome is necessary because the Jews and the Christians were inextricably joined.

Thesis structure

It is proposed to consider the topic within a framework of nine chapters. Chapter One will be an "Introduction" to the subject and will provide an outline of the thesis and a comment about issues in current scholarship.

The second chapter, entitled “Rome’s relationship with the Roman Jews in the First Century before the reign of Domitian”, will briefly note how the Jews were regarded and treated by the Roman authorities as a belief system and an ethnic group. This chapter is necessary because early in this century Christianity originated from within Judaism; the early followers were Jews; and the emergence of the Christians as a separate group caused difficulties for the Roman authorities and some of the leaders within Orthodox Judaism.

The third chapter, “Nero and the Christians”, will provide a background to the early persecution of Nero and will attempt to define how these early Christians were regarded and why they were persecuted. Questions and problems related to the incident of the fire in Rome will be considered and that will involve looking at the motives, intentions and desires of key groups and individuals. This chapter is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, it is significant because the early church historian Eusebius likened Domitian to Nero. Secondly, it is the first recorded account of action taken against the Christians in Rome and presents some comments about how the Christians were regarded in society. Thirdly, Nero’s actions against the Christians provided some indication about how the early Christians were initially recorded in pagan society.

The fourth chapter will consider “Early Christian literary traditions about persecution in the First Century AD” and will discuss the important traditions that have arisen about Domitian and the alleged persecution. This chapter is essential for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of the works about Domitian have neglected to comment in detail about the Christian context of the alleged persecution. Secondly,

discussion continues, particularly of post-apostolic writings, and that examination should be reconsidered in the light of current revisionist writings.

The fifth chapter will consider what is known about Domitian's character. Significant Roman writers, for example Suetonius, Dio, Tacitus and Pliny have provided details of the emperor's life and rule and these sources will be examined to determine what can be established with any certainty about the emperor's character. Determining how Domitian was regarded as a person and as a ruler is important for three reasons. Firstly, because the sources often show a close link between character and actions; secondly, because some primary sources have sought to compare and name emperors who were later held in poor regard; and thirdly, there is no uniform assessment of the reign of Domitian. This chapter will be entitled "Domitian in the Pagan Historiographical Sources".

The sixth chapter entitled "Domitian's alleged persecution" will look at the evidence for persecution and will focus on the non-Christian primary literary evidence from Suetonius and Dio, the Christian Apologists, and the Church historian Eusebius. These sources have provided limited details of the persecution and their accounts have led to an on-going debate about a number of issues. This chapter will also consider the aspects of the Jewish proselytizing, Domitian as Lord and god, the imperial cult and the Christians, and will include some discussion of an important post-Domitianic event involving the Christians outside Rome. This chapter is required for two reasons. Firstly, these issues continue to be actively discussed, and, secondly, the framework of the revised portrayal of the emperor requires that the traditional view of the alleged persecution be revisited.

The seventh chapter, entitled "Archeological findings related to the alleged persecution" will focus on archeological aspects assessed by some scholars to relate to the time of the alleged persecution. Funerary inscriptions and the Christian catacombs in Rome, especially those of Domitilla and Priscilla, will offer material which may relate to the time and rule of Domitian. This chapter is important for two reasons. Firstly, although archeologists have provided various points of view and observations, some historians have considered this material of negligible importance and have not included these findings in their historical works. Secondly, some aspects of recent scholarship, such as identifying and dating the catacombs of Domitilla and Priscilla and the importance of certain funerary inscriptions, need to be integrated into the discussion.

The eighth chapter will focus on how the Domitianic tradition developed over the centuries. This chapter will determine how and why this tradition grew given the limited amount of non-Christian primary source material. This chapter is needed for two reasons. Firstly, although a considerable tradition has developed over the centuries about the early Christian persecutions, this subject has not been included in any of the recent works about Domitian. Examination of this subject is necessary because many current, general popular historical accounts have accepted without a great deal of detailed debate that certain events took place. The difference between historical fact and tradition will need to be investigated. Secondly, because Domitilla has been referred to as a Christian, a martyr, and a saint, centuries after her death, it is relevant to examine the development of martyrology and hagiography where fact often gave way to fiction and led to ongoing negativity within the Domitianic

tradition. This chapter is entitled “Domitilla’s Martyrdom and the development of the Domitianic tradition”.

The ninth and final chapter will provide a “Summary of Findings” that have come from the thesis investigation.

Chapter Two

Rome's relationship with the Roman Jews in the First Century before the reign of Domitian

Introduction

This chapter will consider how the Roman authorities regarded and treated the Roman Jews as an ethnic group and Judaism as a belief system during the First Century. Roman historians often portrayed the Jews as isolationist in their dealings with non-Jews and their monotheism led some of these writers to regard the Jews as atheists and therefore a threat to the stability and wellbeing of Roman society. This discussion is also necessary because early in this century Christianity originated from within Judaism, and its founder, Jesus, described in the Christian gospels as the Christ and Messiah, was born a Jew (c. A.D. 6-9; *Matt 1:1; Mark 1:1; Luke 2:11; John 1:17,41; 4:25,26*). The earliest followers or disciples of Jesus were also Jewish, including the apostle Paul (previously known as Saul), who established many Christian communities within the Roman Empire via three missionary journeys (c.A.D. 45-58) (*Philippians 3:5; Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5*).

The emergence of the Christians as a distinct group from the Jews caused problems for the Roman authorities. Rome's concern mainly related to issues of law and order and maintenance of the Roman way of life, and their historians regarded this new movement as a 'superstition'. Also Orthodox Jewish leaders were not prepared to accept Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah and agitated to prevent the spread of this new movement. This early antagonism was to have widespread repercussions in Rome and throughout the Empire during the First Century and in

particular during the reign of Domitian. Van Voorst (2000, pp. 75-134) has summarized "Jesus in Jewish Writings" and his comments will be noted on pp. 96-97 below which discusses the uneasy relationship between Judaism and Christianity during the first two centuries A.D.

The origins of the Jews in Rome until the end of Julius Caesar's reign

Literature written about and by the Jews in ancient society, in primary and secondary sources, is understandably extensive as the Bibliography indicates. Schürer (1973, 1986, 1987); Smallwood (1976); Rabello (1980); Stern (1980-1984); Gager (1985); Feldman (1993); Horsley (1993); Leon (1995); Westenholz (1995); Feldman and Reinhold (1996) provide summaries and details regarding primary source materials; Goodman (1999, pp. 7-16) provides an overview of Judaism, the Roman Empire and Jesus.

This chapter will briefly note the key primary sources that relate principally to difficulties and disputes between the Roman authorities and the Roman Jews during the First Century. Explanatory comments by modern scholars will be added where necessary. Donfried and Richardson (1998) consider various aspects relating to Judaism and Christianity in Rome in the First Century. The origins of the Jewish community in Rome during the First Century B.C. are obscure; however it is believed that early visitors were traders. The number of Jewish immigrants grew considerably, and their numbers were added to as a result of Roman conquests, which brought Jewish slaves to the capital (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 128-138; Schürer, Vol. III., I, 1986, pp. 73-79¹; Wiefel, 1991, pp. 86-88; Rajak, 1992, pp. 10-11; Feldman, 1993, pp. 92-93; Clarke, 1994, pp. 464-471; Leon, 1995, p. 4; Westenholz,

¹ The *Preface*, p.v, indicates that Fergus Millar took responsibility for this section.

1995, pp. 14, 17-22, 28-98; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 81-92, 131-135, 316-346 discuss the Jews in Rome in the First Century; Rutgers, 1998, pp. 93-116 considers Rome's policy towards the Jews during the First Century; Brandle and Stegemann, 1998, discuss the early formation of Christian congregations in the context of Jewish congregations; Novak, 2001, pp. 243-254, examines Rome's accommodation with Judaism and includes selected primary source quotes about the Jews; and Lampe, 2003, pp. 7-10 discusses geographical entry points for Jews and Christians, and pp. 19-47 focus on locations in Rome where Jews and Christians concentrated).

Rome's involvement with the Jewish people took a significant turn when Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C. and brought the Jews under indirect Roman rule as a client kingdom (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.66-7, 70-3, 77-8). Schürer, 1986, noted:

Roman Jewry grew to greater importance after Pompey. When he conquered Jerusalem in 63, he brought back with him to Rome great numbers of Jewish prisoners of war who were sold there as slaves, but many of whom were manumitted soon afterwards, perhaps because they proved troublesome to their masters on account of their strict adherence to Jewish observances (p. 75; note 1; see also Hengel, 1992, p. 32; Westenholz, 1995, p. 18; Lampe, 2003, pp. 83-84).

In 48 B.C. Pompey was killed, and in 40 B.C., Herod was crowned as King after Octavian gave his consent (Josephus, *War* 1.393-7). By 37 B.C., Herod had complete control over the land and he ruled from 37-4 B.C. As a ruler, Herod knew that nothing could be achieved without the help of Rome, so he maintained good relationships with his superiors. Smallwood (1976) noted:

Herod was at last externally secure: the threat from Cleopatra had been removed, the problem of a choice of loyalty between rival Roman warlords had been removed, and his position had been confirmed by the undisputed master of the Roman world. The two things now required of him by Rome were efficiency in

his internal administration and loyalty to Octavian, who trusted him politically and liked him personally. The next two decades were years of material prosperity and imperial favour for the king who styled himself "Friend of Rome" and "Friend of Caesar". But the prosperity was a veneer over an uneasy situation, as external security was not balanced by internal security, contentment and goodwill (p. 71; see also Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, pp. 287-329²).

Josephus recorded that eight thousand Roman Jews supported the embassy which came to Rome from Judaea in 4.B.C. (Schürer, 1986, Vol. III, I, p. 75, note 1; Josephus, *B.J.ii, 6, 1* (80 - 3); *Ant. xvii II, I, 299 - 302*; Schürer, 1986, Vol. I, pp. 330-335, as per note 1).

After the death of Herod in 4 B.C. his kingdom was divided. His son Archelaus received the greater part of the kingdom, consisting of Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea; another son, Herod Antipas received Galilee and Peraea; a third son, Philip, received a small region to the north and east (Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, pp. 330-357, as per note 2; see also Smallwood, 1976, pp. 109-110).

When Archelaus was removed in A.D. 6, Augustus placed his kingdom under direct Roman rule through procurators A.D. 6-41 (Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, pp. 357-398, as per note 2). Gaius gave Herod's grandson, Agrippa I, the old territories of Herod Antipas, and when Gaius died Claudius made him king over Judaea in A.D. 41. "From then until his death in 44 Agrippa ruled a kingdom larger than his grandfather's as 'Great King, Friend of Caesar and Friend of Rome' (Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, pp. 442-454, note 2; see also Smallwood, 1976, p. 192). Agrippa I died in A.D. 44, and Judaea once again became a Roman province and subject to Roman governors (Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, pp. 455-470, as per note 2; see also Smallwood, 1976, p. 200). During the period A.D. 44-66, Judea experienced progressive breakdown of law and order throughout the province (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 256-

² The *Preface*, p. v indicates that Vermes and Millar were responsible for changes in this volume.

292) and this disruption led to the inevitable conflict with Rome (Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, pp. 484-513, note 2; see also Smallwood, 1976, pp. 293-330).

In response to their support in the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Caesar rewarded the Jews with special privileges. These laws gave Judaism the status of a *religio licita*, which they continued to enjoy until the rule of the Christian emperors (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 134-137, 539; see also Feldman, 1993, pp. 93-94; Leon, 1995, pp. 9-10; Westenholz, 1995, pp. 58-62, 67, 68; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 81-82).

Schürer (1986) stated:

It was Caesar and Augustus in particular whom the Jews had to thank for their formal recognition in the Roman empire. Josephus has preserved for us a considerable number of official documents, *Ant.* xiv 10 (185-267); xvi 6 (160-79) – some *senatus consulta*, some exemptions by Caesar and Augustus, some similar documents from Roman magistrates or governors of the late Republic or early Empire – all of which have the purpose of assuring to the Jews the right to practice their religion and to retain their privileges (p. 116, note 1; see also Smallwood, 1976, pp. 136-143).

Suetonius recorded that at the death of Caesar, Jews wept at the site of his funeral pyre (*Jul.*84.5; Smallwood, 1976, p. 136; see also Schürer, 1986, p. 75, note 1; Wiefel, 1991, p. 87; Leon, 1995, p. 10).

The Julio-Claudian Emperors - Augustus and the Jews

The First Century was a period of mixed fortunes for the Jews. After the death of Caesar, his edicts regarding the Jews were renewed, and Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son, Octavian (Augustus) was no less favorable to the Jews (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 138-143; see also Wiefel, 1991, p. 88; Feldman, 1993, p. 70 regarding various Jewish aspects; Leon, 1995, pp. 10, 11, 257; Westenholz, 1995, p. 68; Harland, 2003, p. 219ff; Lampe, 2003, pp. 38, 83).

During the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D.14), the Jews in Rome enjoyed a period of peace (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 124, 136-143, 147, 201, 210; see also Williams, 1989, pp. 773-774; Wiefel, 1991, p. 88; Leon, 1960, pp. 11-16; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 83-87). In his *Embassy to Gaius (Caligula)*, written c. A.D. 41, Philo Judaeus wrote that Augustus was generous to the Jews. For example, he was benefactor to the Jews; he did not expel them from Rome or deprive them of their Roman citizenship; he introduced no changes to their synagogues; he did not prevent them from meeting for the exposition of their Law; he raised no objections to their raising of first fruits; if the distribution of money and corn occurred on the Sabbath, it was to be held for the Jews and distributed to them on the day after the Sabbath; he did not violate or attack any laws or customs of the Jews (148, 154-159; Josephus, *Ant. 18. 25 7-260*; cf. Josephus, *Ant. 16. 162 - 164*).

Tiberius and the Jews

In his account of the reign of Tiberius (A.D. 14 - 37), Suetonius recorded:

He abolished foreign cults, especially Egyptian and the Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia. Those of the Jews who were of military age he assigned to provinces of less healthy climate, ostensibly to serve in the army; the others of that same race or of similar beliefs he banished from the city, on pain of slavery for life if they did not obey (*Tib.36.1*. Lindsay, 1995, pp. 128-129 provides the Suetonius *Tiberius* text, comments and a select bibliography).

In his *Annals*, Tacitus wrote:

Another debate dealt with the proscription of the Egyptian and Jewish rites, and a senatorial edict directed that four thousand descendants of enfranchised slaves, tainted with that superstition and suitable in point of age, were to be shipped to Sardinia and there employed in suppressing brigandage: "if they succumbed to the pestilential climate, it was a cheap loss". The rest had orders to leave Italy, unless they had renounced their impious ceremonial by a given date (2.85.4-5). Stern, 1980, Vol. II, pp. 68-73, 112-113 provides text and comments.

This expulsion, which occurred in A.D. 19, was also recorded by Josephus (*Ant. 18.*

83f which specifically mentions Rome); Cassius Dio (57.18.5a names Rome); and Philo, (*Embassy 159-161; 160* also identifies Rome). Feldman and Reinhold (1996, pp. 316-318) provide additional texts and comments; see also Westenholz (1995, pp. 79-83).

The statements in the primary sources appear to be contradictory, and scholars have provided differing accounts of what happened. As Rutgers (1998, p. 99) notes, “some argue that Jews and devotees of Isis were expelled for religious reasons, while others contend that Rome acted merely to maintain law and order”. The two issues need not be unrelated; in any event, law and order was important to the Romans.

Josephus (*Ant.18.82*) added that some Roman Jews deceived an aristocratic female proselyte named Fulvia by stealing items that she intended as gifts to the temple in Jerusalem (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 203-204, 206; see also Williams, 1989, pp. 766, 775-777; Feldman, 1993, pp. 47, 303; Leon, 1995, pp. 17-18). It seems unlikely, however, that the Roman authorities would have blamed the entire Roman Jewish community for the crimes of a small number of criminals (Rutgers, 1998, p. 100; see also Williams, 1989, p. 778).

Cassius Dio reported, “as the Jews had flocked to Rome in great numbers and were converting many of the natives to their ways, he [Tiberius] banished most of them” (*Roman History 57.18.5a*; see also Smallwood, 1976, pp. 205-210; Feldman, 1993, p. 47, 302; Goodman, 1994, p. 83; Leon, 1995, p. 19; Schäfer, 1997, pp. 109-111). Smallwood (1976, p. 210) concluded, “the measures taken against the Jews in Rome in 19 were merely police measures aimed at curtailing the local nuisance of excessive proselytizing” (also Lindsay, 1995, p. 128; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, p. 316)

Stern (1980-84, Vol. II, p. 71) believes that the *senatus consultum* of 19 C.E. was important because it provided “evidence for the wide diffusion of Judaism among the various strata of the Roman population at the beginning of the first century”. Earlier, Hamack (1908, Vol.1, pp. 391-392) reported that: “the Jewish synagogue had already drawn up a catechism for proselytes and made morality the condition of religion; it had already *instituted a training for religion*” [author’s emphasis]. Barrett (1989, p. 179) states that Hillel (a contemporary of Herod the Great), advocated the making of proselytes, and notes (p. 208) that “non-Jewish authors and Roman laws against circumcision ... attest to the practice of proselytization”. (Chapter Six, pp. 156-161 examines Jewish proselytism during the reign of Domitian). Here one can note that Williams (1989, p. 774; also pp. 765-773, 779) disagrees with the view that proselytizing was the main concern noting, “the days were still far off when proselytes would be regarded as unpatriotic, impious or worse. At this stage, they were regarded as little more than quirky abstentionists”. Concluding that the problem was an economic one, Williams (1989, pp. 780-784) states that it was a time of hardship for the poor of Rome due to the deficiency of the corn supply, including the price of corn which led to civil unrest amongst the Jews . Williams (1989, p. 782) admits however that this view couldn’t be proven. Rutgers (1998, p. 104) agrees, but adds that the suggestion does have some merit. Poverty amongst the Roman Jews, based on comments from Roman writers, is also noted by Smallwood (1976, p. 133); Leon (1995, pp. 234-238) and Lampe (2003, pp. 19-66).

In his *Histories*, Tacitus recorded a lengthy description of Jewish history and religion and his comments are helpful when considering Rome’s attitude including the subject of proselytes. He wrote:

Moses introduced new religious practices, *quite opposed to those of all other religions*. . . whatever their origin, these rites are maintained by their antiquity: the other *customs of the Jews are base and abominable*, and owe their persistence to their depravity. *For the worst rascals among other peoples, renouncing their ancestral religions, always sending tribute and contributions to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews*; again, the Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, *but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity*. . . *those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.* [italics added] (5.4, 5.5; see also Juvenal, *Satire 3*)

On the subject of Tacitus' attitude to the Jews, Wardy (1979) states that he:

evaluated the Jews from his political, extremely conservative viewpoint, hating them as an enemy which had to be repeatedly overcome and which even when politically destroyed, was still undermining, in the old or newer form. Roman tradition – *and this in the city of Rome itself* [italics added] (p. 633).

Further, Wardy (1979) notes some additional concerns in the writings of Tacitus:

A Roman who forsook the cult of these gods completely [i.e. the gods of Rome], as Roman citizens converted to Judaism and Christianity had to do, betrayed his country. This view was the main reason for the 'holy wrath' in Tacitus' attack against Jewish or Christian proselytes (p. 634).

In a supporting footnote, Wardy (1979) adds:

This preponderance of moral values in Tacitus also explains, why he never mentioned the legal status of the Jews, that the Jewish religion was a *religio permissa* in Rome, or their original books of law. This reason was not simply an "arrogant lack of knowledge", but rather the omission of material irrelevant from Tacitus' viewpoint (p. 634, note 62).

Wardy (1979, p. 635) observes two other key points worthy of mention. Firstly, on the subject of the irreconcilable differences between the East and the West, "Tacitus expresses this opinion in showing the deep gulf between the *humanitas* of the Romans and the *odium generis humani* of the Jews". Secondly, Wardy states:

it is interesting, that each of these two peoples regarded itself as chosen to accomplish a mission for humanity. In the language of the Romans it was expressed as *numine deum electa* (Pliny, *Nat.Hist.3, 39, 309*), in that of the Jews ... "you [i.e. God] have chosen us" (p. 635).

Stern (1980, Vol. II, pp. 1-63) provides a detailed commentary on the writings of Tacitus and his assessment of the Jews; Sherwin-White (1967, pp. 86-92, 96-100) discusses Rome's attitude to the Jews including the aspect of anti-Semitism; Gager (1985, pp. 63-66) considers Tacitus and the Jews; Leon (1995, pp. 38-42) summarizes the post-Augustan literature of Rome that commented negatively about the Jews and also commented on proselytes (pp. 250-256); Feldman and Reinhold (1996, pp. 131-135) have listed negative reactions to Jewish conversions; and Schäfer (1997, pp. 180-192) has commented briefly on the writings of Cicero, Juvenal and Tacitus.

Suetonius also wrote that Tiberius was "somewhat neglectful of the gods and of religious matters, being addicted to astrology and firmly convinced that everything was in the hands of fate" (*Tib. 69*; Lindsay, 1995, pp. 178-179). These facts are interesting because Eusebius recorded an account by Tertullian which alleged that Tiberius (on information received from Pilate) had attempted to have Jesus recognized by the Senate as a god. The senate refused the request by Tiberius (*H.E.II, 2*; Tertullian, *Defence, 5*). This account by these Christian writers remains unproven.

Gaius (Caligula) and the Jews

Gaius (A.D.37 - 41) was clearly not concerned about the Jews when they appealed to him (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, as noted above). This embassy was led by Philo in A.D. 40 (and recorded by him), and was also recorded by Josephus (*Antiq. 18.8.1-9*). The emperor's disinterest is shown in his manner and attitude towards the Jews, and also by the fact that the issues raised in the embassy were not resolved during his reign (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 242-245; see also Feldman, 1993, p. 96;

Leon, 1995, pp. 20- 21). The later attack on the Jews, which was engineered by the Alexandrian mob in A.D. 38 with the agreement of the Roman governor Flaccus, does not appear to have affected the situation of the Roman Jews (Philo, *In Flaccum*; Smallwood, 1976, pp. 236-242; see also Feldman, 1993, pp. 95, 96, 114-116). Similarly, Gaius' insistence that his statue be set up in the Jerusalem Temple appears to have had no significant effect in Rome (Josephus, *A.J.18. 8.2*; Philo, *Embassy*, 202, 263, 333; Leon, 1995, p. 21; see also Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 321-331).

On the subject of emperor worship and sacrifices, Price (1984, p. 209) notes that there was "a crucial distinction between sacrifices 'to' and sacrifices 'on behalf of the emperor'. Commenting on the *Embassy to Gaius*, Price (1984) added that the emperor:

accused the Jews of being god-haters who refused to acknowledge his divinity. The opposing embassy of Alexandrian Greeks then accused the Jews of not having offered sacrifices of thanksgiving for Gaius. The Jews denied this vehemently, pointing out that they had done so three times (p. 209).

Clearly, the Jewish delegation did not wish to appear to be unsupportive of the emperor. Given Gaius's reputation, that would have been unwise both for the delegation and for their cause. Price (1984) also noted:

Literary sources sometimes make it clear that to sacrifice to a man was to treat him as a god. This distinction is also crucially presupposed by imperial pronouncements on sacrifices, for, according to one historian, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius all prohibited sacrifices to themselves though Gaius of course later reversed his policy (p. 210; the historian noted was Dio; see 58.8.4).

Price (1984) further commented:

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 A.D.66 was symbolized by the cessation of such sacrifices (pp. 220, 221; see also Schürer, 1973, Vol.1, p. 486, note 2).

The Christians, like the Jews, could not and would not violate their monotheism by regarding any emperor as a god, and that attitude certainly marked them out in Roman society as citizens who did not support Roman religious practices. The Christians had no interest in accommodating any emperor as far as religious matters were concerned but they did pray for the emperor. Pp.136-140 below will further examine this topic as it related to Domitian.

Claudius and the Jews

At the beginning of his reign (A.D. 41), Claudius also issued an edict that supported Jewish rights. However, in his account of the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54), Suetonius recorded that “since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome” (*Claud. 25*).

Two additional texts have been used to support the brief statement by Suetonius (Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 331-332). Firstly, in the New Testament book of *Acts*, it states that a certain Aquila and Priscilla had recently come to Corinth “because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome” (*18:2*). No explanation for this action is given in the book of *Acts*. (Lampe, 2003, pp. 11-14, 69, 75, 153, 157-159, 187-195, and 359 provides extensive details about Aquila and Priscilla). Secondly, in his Roman *History*, Cassius Dio noted:

as for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without raising a tumult to bar them from the city, he did not drive them out, but ordered them, while continuing their traditional mode of life, not to hold meetings (*60.6.6*).

Van Voorst (2000, pp. 31-32) noted that the brief sentence from Suetonius (*Claudius 25*) has generated much discussion concerning “whether Claudius’ action was a complete expulsion, a partial expulsion, or a repression; the date of his action;

and its relation to Acts 18:2” (see also Rutgers, 1998, pp. 105-110). Feldman (1993) concluded:

the most likely explanation of our passage is either that the expulsion involved only the Christians or that Claudius at first intended to expel all the Jews but ... reversed the order and restricted it to limiting their right of public assembly by the Jews (p. 304).

More recently, Lampe (2003) investigated the events that took place during the reign of Claudius and he introduced his discussion by stating:

We can derive from the sources four perceptions and propose them as theses: (a) Christianity got its foothold in one or in several synagogues of Rome; the first pre-Pauline Christians of Rome were Jews or *sebomenoi* (devout people, Godfearers) who were attached to the synagogue. (b). Their witness to Christ led to unrest in one or several synagogues. (c). The authorities expelled the key figures of the conflict. (d) The events are to be dated at the end of the 40s. (p. 11; further details about the *sebomenoi* are provided by Lampe on pp. 69-79).

On the matter of dating, Van Voorst (2000, p. 32, note 33) notes that “most historians hold to an expulsion in 49”; Lampe (2003, p. 15) agreed with Van Voorst.

Similarly, the debate about the identification of ‘Chrestus’ is considerable and ongoing. Van Voorst (2000, pp. 30-39) provides a summary and an assessment of a number of studies regarding ‘Chrestus’ and concludes:

First, ... the better explanation of this difficulty is that *Chrestus* is a mistake for *Christus*. We have shown this to be probable, but to claim certainty is to go beyond the sparse and somewhat equivocal evidence. Second, Suetonius’ statement indicates how vague and incorrect knowledge of the origins of Christianity could be, both in the first and second century (p. 38).

On the subject of *Chrestus*, Lampe (2003) agreed with Van Voorst (2000), by adding that:

The more probable interpretation of the Suetonius passage is that the proclamation of Christ had caused unrest in one or in several urban Roman synagogues – which is no different from what is attested for the synagogues in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9-15), Antioch in Pisidia (13:45, 50), Iconia (14:2, 5), Lystra (14:9), and Corinth (18:12-17). Followers of the Christ-message were therefore involved in synagogal conflict. They – as members of synagogues – were the first

urban Roman Christians (p. 12).

It is significant to note that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had approved of efforts to take action against the Christians (*Acts 9:1,2*) and it is possible, even likely, that this attitude was known and understood in Rome.

Earlier, Smallwood concluded that the measures taken against the Jews by Claudius were the same as those taken by Tiberius, that is, they were police measures aimed at restricting excessive Jewish proselytizing. Smallwood (1976, p. 210, see also p. 539) believed that “neither action was incompatible with the overall Roman policy towards the Jews and their religion laid down by Julius Caesar and Augustus”. Feldman (1993, p. 304) adds, “the very fact that the Jews dared to carry on proselyting activity in the capital itself is an indication of their confidence and boldness”. Contrary views as they related to the reign of Domitian will be evaluated in Chapter Six below.

The New Testament book of *Acts* also indicates that in some cities the Jews were confident in their opposition to Christianity and were prepared to bring Christians before the local authorities. This subject will be taken up later in Chapter Four.

Roman authorities must have been aware of any disruptive Jewish or Christian proselytizing that occurred and they would have regarded it as an assault on traditional Roman religious values, and as a law and order issue. These authorities would have been prepared to act against disorderly practice and this has obvious implications for the Christianity, which began as a missionary movement (*Matt 28:18-20*).

A number of issues have been raised: there were disturbances within the Roman Jewish congregations; expulsions (to some degree) were ordered; and the cause may

have been disputes between Jews and Christians. Alternatively, Jewish proselytism may have been the issue. Or was it a matter of a Christian mission to the Roman Jews which caused such uproar that the authorities were forced to take action? Such a suggestion is not out of the question given the missionary nature of early Christianity.

Nero and the Jews

Although the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68) brought dissatisfaction to many sections of Rome's population, his reign seems to have been uneventful for the Jews. His second wife, Poppaea, was allegedly sympathetic to the Jews and may have used her influence on her husband to treat these people kindly. Smallwood (1976, pp. 278 - 279, note 79) stated, however, that the comment by Josephus about Poppaea (*A.J.* 20. 193-195) meant that she "was a religious (superstitious?) woman who persuaded Nero that other peoples' religious prejudices deserved respect, and perhaps reminded him that Jewish religious liberty was protected by Roman law" (see also Feldman, 1993, pp. 98, 351, 352, and 491, note 39; Westenholz, 1995, pp. 68- 69). The next chapter will provide additional details: however the available facts seem inconclusive.

Nero's persecution of the Roman Christians indicated that this was the first time in the literature that this group was differentiated from the Jews (Smallwood, 1976, p. 217; see also Brandle and Stegemann, 1998, pp. 117-127; Lane, 1998, pp. 196-244. This subject will be considered in detail in the next chapter). Leon (1995, p. 28) notes, "the outbreak in 66 of the great Jewish insurrection in Palestine seems in no way to have affected the status of the Jews in Rome". The historical record indicates no formal action against the Roman Jews and they appear to have survived

unharmful. (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 201-219 focuses on the Jews in Rome under the Julio-Claudians).

Flavian Emperors - Vespasian and Titus and the Jews

In his account of the reign of Vespasian (A.D. 69-79), Suetonius recorded that the emperor and his son Titus (emperor A.D. 79-81) conquered the Judaean Jews (A.D. 66-74) (*Ves.4.5, 6; 5.6, 8.1; Tit.4.3; 5.2*). Commenting on the origins of the war, Novak (2001) notes:

Religious opposition to the Roman gods would cause the Romans to suspect political opposition to Roman rule that might lead to open revolt, if the opportunity arose. This is precisely the situation reflected at the start of the First Jewish War, when the decision of the Jewish temple officials in 66 C.E. to stop offering sacrifices to god on behalf of the Roman emperors was understood by both Romans and the Jews to be the functional equivalent of a Jewish declaration of war against Rome (p. 52. Novak quoted Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.7-77 and Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.409- 410 as evidence of Jewish obstinacy against the Romans, p. 247).

In 1976, Smallwood noted:

Rome's quarrel had been primarily with Jewish political nationalism, not with the religion which she had tolerated for a century. With nationalism now, it was hoped, held firmly in check, the Jews could safely be allowed to retain their religious privileges – all except one, the right to collect the Temple-tax, now rendered obsolete. Vespasian made use of this consequence of the destruction of the Temple to deal the Jews a shrewd blow by making them all, Palestinians and the Diaspora, guilty and innocent alike, now pay a price for the privilege of religious liberty.

... The effect of this measure was that Judaism remained a *religio licita* only for those people who declared their allegiance by paying ... the "Jewish Tax", to Rome, and thus purchased the privilege of worshipping Yahweh and contracting out of the imperial cult by a subscription to Jupiter (pp. 344-345; see also Leon, 1995, p. 31; Westenholz, 1995, pp. 74-78; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 265 - 288 discussed the revolts of the Jews against the Roman Empire).

On the subject of the tax, Josephus noted that it was imposed on all Jews throughout the Roman Empire (*Jewish Wars* 7.218). Cassius Dio stated "it was ordered that the Jews who continued to observe their ancestral customs should pay an annual tribute of two denarii to Jupiter Capitolinus" (*Roman History* 65.7.2). This tax

may have had little or no effect on the bulk of ethnic Jews because most of them probably remained devoted to their ancestral customs (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.228-235 stated that Jews were loyal to their rites more than other peoples).

Feldman (1993) considers the subject of post-war attitudes towards the Jews:

After the bloody and unsuccessful Jewish revolution of 66-74, one would have thought that the Romans would have reversed their policy of toleration towards the Jews. And yet, though one might well have expected him after the capture of Jerusalem to be vindictive toward the Jews, Titus, when persistently and continuously petitioned by the people of Antioch (Josephus, *War* 7.1000-111) to expel the Jews from their city, refused, stating that now the Jews' country had been destroyed there was no other place to receive them. Thereupon the people of Antioch petitioned Titus to remove the special privileges that the Jews had, but this too, Titus refused. The non-Jewish inhabitants of Alexandria also, we hear (*Ant.* 12.121-22) asked Vespasian and Titus to deprive the Jews of the rights of citizenship; but the Romans refused this request likewise. Indeed, aside from the admittedly humiliating transformation of the Temple Tax into a poll tax called the *Fiscus Judaicus* for the upkeep of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the privileges of the Jews were not diminished (p. 99; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 289-290 discuss the tax. Pp. 113-118 below will provide further details as they relate to the reign of Domitian).

The end of the Jewish War led to a significant increase in the population of Rome and many who came to the capital were war captives. According to Leon (1995, p. 31) "many who came as war captives were doubtless freed from slavery either through the aid of their fellow Jews or through their own effort" (see also Feldman, 1993, pp. 99-100; Leon, 1995, pp. 31, 32, 237; Westenholz, 1995, p. 69; Feldman and Reinhold, 1996, pp. 285-289 discuss the aftermath of the war). Domitian's attitude to Judaism will be considered in later chapters.

Overview

Clearly, the First Century, up to the reign of Domitian, was a turbulent time for the Jewish people. In their homeland of Judaea, they had endured Roman occupation and finally, at the end of their unsuccessful revolt, the Jews suffered the destruction of their Temple. However, the Roman Jews were apparently not

persecuted for the behaviour of the Judean Jews, although dislike of Judaism within conservative Roman circles may have increased as a result of the revolts (Westenholz, 1995, pp. 88-93). This dislike was promoted by the satirists (e.g. Horace, Juvenal, and Martial; Westenholz, 1995, pp. 63-66) who inevitably focused on aspects of Judaism that they found unusual. These Jewish customs included monotheism, the rejection of images in worship, and the figure of Moses; however the satirists principally focused on circumcision (Schäfer, 1997, pp. 93-105), the Sabbath (Goldenberg, 1979, pp. 414-447; see also Schäfer, 1997, pp. 82-92), and abstention from pork (Rajak, 1992, p. 17; see also Westenholz, 1995, pp. 28-34; Schäfer, 1997, pp. 66-81). Gager (1985) notes:

The traditional view that anti-Semitism was widespread among Romans relies heavily on these satirists. By its very nature, however, the task of satire is to isolate and ridicule unusual behaviour. Thus Jewish customs were natural targets for Roman satirists, but no more so than other religious traditions. Circumcision in particular lent itself to exploitation because of its obvious associations with the erotic aspects of Roman satire. In short, it is a serious mistake to infer from these texts that their individual authors or Roman literary circles in general harbored strong negative feelings about Judaism (p. 57; also p. 84; see also Williams, 1989, p. 774).

As a community, the Roman Jews continued to grow in numbers and influence (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 131-132; see also Clarke in Gill and Gempf, 1994, pp. 464-466; Brandle and Stegemann, 1998, p. 119-120; Caragounis, 1998, p. 249; Jeffers, 1998, pp. 129-130 considered the numbers of Jews in Rome at various times). The fact that "a number of emperors counted Jews among their friends and associates" (Gager, 1985, p. 62) obviously did them no harm. There were, of course, exceptions, and anti-Semites seemed to be ever present (Gager, 1985, p. 62).

Throughout the First Century, Judaism, as a religion, was tolerated but not without practical conditions primarily involving law and order (Crook, 1967, p. 280;

see also Williams, 1989, pp. 780, 782, 783, 784; Rutgers, 1998, pp. 111-116; Novak, 2001, p. 243); and protected by Rome despite the fact that there had been ongoing problems in Judaea (Horsley, 1993, considered the subject of Jewish resistance in Roman Palestine and pp. 43-49 discussed Roman repression). An exception to Rome's toleration involved proselytism and steps were taken to curtail this activity amongst the Roman Jews (Smallwood, 1976, pp. 539-541; see also Leon, 1995, p. 45).

In 1981, Smallwood (p. 128) asserted that after Julius Caesar, the Roman authorities put into place a "comprehensive permanent legislation giving positive rights to legalize the practice of Judaism in all its aspects" (see also p. 379). However, this view has come in for some criticism. Quoting the work of Rajak (1984), Millar (1973), and Rutgers (1998), Harland (2003, pp. 221-222) concluded that the evidence indicates that there was no fixed "charter of Jewish rights" or "Jewish Magna Carta", but rather a series of impermanent ad hoc measures designed to address a particular situation (see Rabello, 1980, for an extended discussion of the legal situation of the Jews in the Roman Empire).

Commenting on the Jewish revolts, Gager (1985, p. 65) observes that Roman authors "saw in Judaism the expression of a fundamentally anti-Roman way of life; for them the revolts merely confirmed this anti-Romanism". Williams (1989, p. 775) notes the general dislike of *externae religiones*; adding, "that is why Suetonius always lists their suppression under the 'good acts' of the various principes". Rajak, (1984) stated:

Paganism is often said to have been tolerant and accommodating. But it was not so towards a monotheistic religion centred upon an invisible God, a system of religion which could not be easily assimilated, in the usual fashion, into the existing system.

...the Jews did not fit in to the cities where they lived: they were an anomaly and an inconvenience, for example in being unavailable on the Sabbath; and a drain on the cities' finances and solidarity, especially through their collections for Jerusalem (p. 122).

Commenting on the standing of Judaism in Roman society in the early First Century, Gager (1985) takes a more positive view:

First, from the comments of various Roman authors it is clear that Jews were waging a vigorous and successful campaign to disseminate their beliefs and practices. In some cases this led to conversion, in others to the adoption of certain practices, in still others to a general sympathy for Judaism. Second, the positive image of Judaism projected during Augustus' reign by various Greek writers ... supports the view that Judaism was seen as an attractive religious and philosophical alternative in this early period (pp. 86-87; Feldman, 1993, pp. 84-287 examined prejudices against and attractions towards Judaism; Schäfer, 1997, pp. 192-195 briefly commented on aspects of Judaism that attracted and repulsed the Romans).

It is important to note that there is no unanimity on the issue of proselytizing.

Goodman (1989, 1992, and 1994) expresses skepticism about the extent of Jewish proselytizing, and this subject will be resumed below in Chapter Six. This chapter will consider the subject of proselytism in greater detail and include comments about Domitian's alleged persecution of individuals identified by some historians as either Jewish or Christian.

Within the First Century, Judaism maintained an uneasy relationship with the Romans. In the eyes of many Romans, the Jews would always remain an unpopular ethnic and religious group, and the potential for disruption persisted. It was into this atmosphere that the Christians emerged from within Judaism and they inherited much of the negativity that was directed towards Orthodox Judaism.

Having briefly noted some aspects of how the Romans regarded the Jews, it is now necessary to focus on the beginnings of Rome's actions against the Christians living in Rome. This first event, which may have included Jewish involvement,

concerns Nero's actions against the Roman Christians. This occasion provides some understanding of how these people were regarded; how they were treated; how the Romans began to think about this group; and how this uneasy relationship began to develop throughout this century.

Chapter Three

Nero and the Christians

Introduction

In any discussion of the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96) and his alleged persecution of the Christians in A.D.95/96, the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68) should be considered. This is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, it is significant because the early church historian Eusebius likened Domitian to Nero (*H.E.3.17-20*; Tertullian, *Apol. 5.4* was quoted in *H.E.3.20*). Two of the earliest Christian sources are *The History of the Church (Historia Ecclesiastica)* and the *Chronicle (Chronicon)* written by Eusebius who is regarded by many as the first major historian of the church. His works included the growth of the Christian church from its origins to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 312. He “was also a biblical exegete, an apologist for Christianity against paganism, an activist in the Arian controversy, and an early interpreter of the duties of a Christian emperor” (Ferguson, 1990, p. 325. Grant, 1980, provides an assessment of Eusebius as church historian and pp. 114-125 focused on persecution and martyrdom. Mendels, 1999, p. 2 describes Eusebius’s work as “‘media history’, a special genre on a new topic”).

Had Eusebius not made any comparison between Nero and Domitian, later historians may not have taken up this issue and continued to promote that connection. This chapter will show that the action by Nero against the Christians in A.D. 64 was an isolated incident and unrelated in any way to the later alleged persecution by Domitian in A.D.95/96. As this thesis will further demonstrate, the only feature these two events have in common is that the Christians had been named

and linked to events in Rome. However, as will be shown later, the reference to Christians in the events of A.D. 95/96 is not found in the primary source documents. Rather, a later Church account by Eusebius (critically evaluated in Chapter Six) asserted that certain individuals involved in the events of A.D.95/96 were Christians.

Secondly, Nero's reign produced the first recorded account of imperial action taken against the Christians in Rome and this is significant because the Christians were identified by name. It has been suggested that by that time Christianity was no longer viewed as a sect within Judaism but as a religious group distinct from others. However, that may not have been the case and the lack of sufficient supporting evidence makes this issue difficult to determine with any accuracy. This chapter, together with later chapters, will consider the problems faced by the Romans in identifying and dealing with the Christians in a polytheistic society, and will also comment on the circumstances surrounding these identifications. Identification of key individuals is an important aspect and had a direct bearing on the events of A.D.95/96, as later chapters will show.

Thirdly, Nero's action against the Christians provided some indication about how these early Christians were initially recorded in pagan Roman society. These insights, from the early Roman historians, also give some indication as to how the early Christians were regarded by the people in Rome. These accounts will also assist in determining how the Christians were treated in the following decades, including the reign of Domitian, as Christian historians responded to these early pagan assessments.

In this examination of why Nero's reign is significant to the discussion of the later alleged persecution by Domitian, this chapter will examine the pagan and

Christian primary sources, examine the views of later Church historians, and examine aspects of the modern discussion surrounding key legal, social and religious aspects of Nero's actions against the Roman Christians. This examination will provide details about why the early Christians were persecuted, and, as the problems related to the fire of A.D. 64 are discussed, the motives, the intentions and desires of key groups and individuals will be assessed. The brief accounts of this early persecution as provided by Tacitus and Suetonius offer some information, but their accounts have created a range of questions that continue to engage modern historians.

Early church historians were quick to seize on the negative Roman comments about Nero's rule and they continued to portray Nero as an evil ruler and enemy of the early Roman church. Modern scholars also continue to debate various points of view and this chapter will note some of that debate. A review of the literature will trace the development of the persecutions legend and will show how these accounts changed, particularly in more recent times as new biographies and character studies of the key individuals emerged. The relative simplicity of the early accounts ('Nero was a bad emperor who therefore did bad things') should be reassessed in the light of more recent arguments articulated in modern scholarly literature.

There are some uncertainties about how Nero's reign was recorded including the difficulties of dating early Christian writings that allegedly relate to Nero's reign. Legal aspects of this early persecution also continue to involve historians and any consensus appears elusive. As always, finding the truth when ancient literary sources are incomplete or inconclusive is understandably difficult, but some degree of probability in some areas seems possible.

The circumstances of Nero's action against the Christians according to Tacitus

Tacitus wrote two substantial works: the *Annals* and the *Histories*. These works provided considerable material about Roman history in the first century (Potter, 1999 discusses Roman historiography; Mellor, 1999, pp. 76-109 on Tacitus). In A.D. 64 a controversial fire destroyed a large part of the city of Rome. Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.38-44 is the principal account that connected the fire to the Christians. By way of introduction, Tacitus wrote:

there followed a disaster, whether due to chance or to the malice of the sovereign is uncertain – for each version has its sponsors – but graver and more terrible than any other which has befallen this city by the ravages of fire (*Annals* 15.38).

After describing in some detail the duration and specific locations affected by the fire, Tacitus outlined Nero's reconstruction programme (*Annals* 15.38-43). Then Tacitus addressed the subject of how Nero determined to handle responsibility for the fire:

Now means were sought for appeasing deity, and application was made to the Sibylline books; at the injunction of which public prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpine, while Juno was propitiated by the matrons, first in the Capitol, then at the nearest point of the sea-shore, where water was drawn for sprinkling the temple and images of the goddess. Ritual banquets and all-night vigils were celebrated by women in the married state (*Annals* 15.44).

These measures apparently did not help the situation and Tacitus continued his account by describing Nero's further actions:

But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as

for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man [italics added] (*Annals* 15.44).

It is important to note that in this account, the identification of the Christians came from *'the crowd'* and not a named Roman official. Given that the Christians were a religious group, it is possible that *'the crowd'* included religious opponents who determined to get rid of this rival group. Religious intolerance may have been an influencing factor; however, Tacitus made no comment about that possibility.

Were the Roman Jews involved?

Using a number of conflicts between Jews and Christians in the New Testament book of *Acts* as a guide, it has been suggested that the Jews were responsible for the public identification and persecution of the Roman Christians (for example, Reese, 1976, p. 952; Bruce, 1979, p. 375f; Sanders, 1993, pp. 216, 321). On the involvement of the Jews, Scott (1970) states that they "have been charged with inciting Nero to his slaughter" (p. 139). In a similar vein, for Frend (1965): "a possible explanation is that Nero was able to transfer suspicion to the Jews; they in turn pushed the blame on to the hated rival synagogue, and this time it stuck" (p. 42; see also Benko, 1980, pp. 1067-1068). If the Roman Jews, or a section of that community, had wished to destroy the Christians, they had some useful facts to work with: Jesus was a false Messiah; the Romans rightly executed Jesus; and, Judaism was legal, whereas Christianity was not.

Reicke (1968, pp. 20-207; 210-224) considers the views of the Jewish Zealots and holds that their conflict with the Christians brought the infant church in Rome into an unpopular spotlight. He notes (p. 246) that although the Christians profited from the religious freedom given to the Jews, “the provocative nationalism of the Jewish circles” affected the Christian congregations and exposed them to charges of being anti-Roman. Focusing on the writings of the Christian apostle Paul, Reicke (1968) notes that Paul’s admonitions to the church at Rome reflected a genuine concern about nationalism, loyalty towards the Roman authorities, rejection of factions, and efforts to live in peace (*Rom 2:17-29; 13:1-7,13; 16:17-20; cf. Philippians 1:15,17; 3:2*). Reicke contends that “in the time of Nero the close ties between Judaism and Christianity could easily expose the followers of the Messiah to the charge of anti-social intentions” (p. 247).

Further, Reicke (1968) concludes that by the time of the fire:

their very numbers, their disregard of the material world, and their apocalyptic theories upset the populace; maybe some of them exhibited Judaistic zeal for the law and ritual purity or practiced impulsive arguing and prophesying. The persecution therefore came almost automatically (pp. 248-249).

Lampe (2003, p. 47, note 75) similarly acknowledges the possibility that the Jews may have influenced Nero into blaming the Christians (pp. 82-84 commented on Nero’s persecution). However, not all accept the view that the Jews were implicated in or responsible for Nero’s actions against the Christians, and the allegation remains unproven (Leon, 1960, p. 28; see also Stern, 1984, Vol. II, p. 91). Chapter Four below will provide specific references of opposition against the Christians by the Jews in the First Century as recorded in the New Testament.

Religion, Atheism, Superstition and perceived threat

In a helpful chapter on the subject of philosophy and Roman religion, Brunt (1989) provided a useful summary on the religious mind of the Romans. Some of his comments are worth repeating in an abridged form.

Brunt notes that:

The cults themselves comprised no moral teaching. None the less social morality was thought to be linked with belief in the gods; take that away, said Cicero, and worship will be neglected, piety and religion will disappear, and then, (who knows?) good faith, human solidarity and justice. Citizens should be imbued with the conviction that the gods were beneficent rulers of the world and observed the character and conduct of men; the sanctity of oaths depended on this, and many were deterred from crime by fear of divine punishment. 'It is in the interest of society', Diodorus wrote, 'that fear of the gods should be deeply embedded in the minds of the people; few men practice justice from personal virtue; the mass of mankind are kept from wrong-doing by the penalties of the law and of divine retribution'...

Posidonius also praised the reverence for the gods and justice towards men shown by Romans in the good old days, perhaps suggesting that the two qualities went together. Plutarch had read that Numa's religious institutions tamed the primitive ferocity of the Romans. Polybius too held that it was terror of divine anger that kept the multitude in check at Rome and produced that singular good faith in Romans that was hardly to be found among his own countrymen... Perhaps there was a more subtle connection between the civic religion and social morality felt but not clearly articulated by Cicero, Polybius, and Posidonius. The cults were part of the structure of a hierarchical society. If their validity were questioned by the masses, who could say how far questioning might then extend? To Cicero, and to other members of his class, the official religion, controlled as it was by men of the highest station, themselves engaged in politics, afforded useful devices for frustrating what they were pleased to call popular sedition; Cicero is perfectly open on this, in fact, exaggerated its utility (pp. 178-181).

Potter (1994) has added to this picture and his comments are helpful:

The ritual of passive cult provided psychological reassurance that there was help and reason to hope in the face of all this (i.e. illnesses). The urge to control the uncontrollable manifested itself in devotional exercises of all sorts. But the cults of the Roman world were often more than this. Classical polytheism existed on a plane beyond that of simple grunt and sacrifice in an effort to control the weather. Although the ancient world produced intellectuals of all sorts who laughed at the idea that the gods took an interest in human affairs, or that they could be influenced by the slaughter of animals at their altars, by far the greater number of intellectuals in this world believed profoundly in the gods. They might, and did, evolve their own, complex explanations of the way in which

humans could deal with the gods, and complex models of the way in which the divine world was ordered, seeking to explain the multitudinous manifestations of divine action that they perceived. But they did so in terms of the existing “passive” structure.

A community’s cults represented its historical success in the face of nature, its special relationship with the powers that controlled the earth. The celebration of these cults offered a very clear illustration of propriety and power. Public sacrifice in celebration of these cults was intended to bind the community together; the distributions of food and other gifts on the occasion of these celebrations were meant to reflect the order of the state. The priests of these cults were guardians of tradition and social order...

Their actions represented the idea that nature and society were under control. A civic priesthood was embedded within the nexus of wealth, family, and civic administration that defined a respectable person’s place in society, and that society’s place in the wider world. Such people were not to be innovators... So long as personal religious predilections did not offend a community’s notion of the natural order, and thus, by implication, the gods who were the active overseers of that order, there was no need to take offense...

Christians who were thought to practice incest (‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ loving one another) and cannibalism (the Eucharist) offended just about everyone’s sense of nature, and disturbances in the natural order were often thought to be the result of the presence of individuals whose actions were offensive to the divine guardians of that order. In antiquity, pollution, impiety, and error were all defined as actions that broke the proper relationship between mortals of their gods, they were actions that were quintessentially unnatural (pp. 7-8).

Cicero wrote in some detail about religion. For example, in his *De Natura Deorum* (written c. 45 B.C.), he wrote, “we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion, that is, in reverence to the gods, we are far superior” (*De Natura Deorum* 2.8). By way of explanation Cicero added, “Numa by his establishment of our ritual laid the foundation of our state” (*De Natura Deorum* 3.5). In a significant section of his treatise, Cicero explained:

For there are and have been philosophers who hold that the gods exercise no control over human affairs whatever. But if their opinion is the true one, how can piety, reverence or religion exist? For all these are tributes which it is our duty to render in purity and holiness to the divine powers solely on the assumption that they take notice of them, and that some service has been rendered by the immortal gods to the race of men. But if on the contrary the gods have neither the power nor the will to aid us, if they pay no heed to us at all and take no notice

of our actions, if they can exert no possible influence upon the life of men, what ground have we for rendering any sort of worship, honour or prayer to the immortal gods? *Piety* however, like the rest of the virtues, cannot exist in mere outward show and pretence; and, with *piety*, reverence and religion must likewise disappear. And when these are gone, life will soon become a welter of disorder and confusion; and in all probability the disappearance of *piety* towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues. [italics added] (*De Natura Deorum* 1.3-4. *Piety* = sense of duty, including careful devotion to religion; *pietas* in Latin; *eusebia* in Greek. Beard, North and Price, 1998, Vol. 2, pp. 349-359 and Wilken, 1984, pp. 54-62 provide additional details about the concept of *piety*. Goar, 1972, pp. 36-75, 78-111 comments on Cicero and the State religion).

Clearly, Roman religion, as expressed by Cicero, was a matter that affected the very foundations of Roman life and rule and it was not to be taken lightly. On the subject of superstition, Cicero wrote that it was “a groundless fear of the gods ... (and) also religion, which consists in piously worshipping them” (*De Natura Deorum* 1.117). Later he added, “‘superstitious’ and ‘religious’ came to be terms of censure and approval respectively” (*De Natura Deorum* 2.72).

Contained within his *Moralia*, Plutarch wrote an important work titled *Superstition*. Although this work does not mention Christianity, it does provide valuable comment about how religion, superstition and piety were viewed. For example, Plutarch asserted that one should not be guilty of “distorting and sully[ing] one’s own tongue with strange names and barbarous phrases, to disgrace and transgress the god-given dignity of our religion” (*Superstition* 166b). Further, he wrote, “the superstitious man enjoys no world in common with the rest of mankind” (*Superstition* 166c), and he added that “the former [i.e. atheists; see pages 49-51 below for definitions of ‘atheism’ and ‘superstition’] do not see the gods at all, the latter [i.e. superstitious people] think that they do exist and are evil” (*Superstition* 167d). Plutarch was in no doubt that “superstition provides the seed from which atheism springs” (*Superstition* 171a), and he regarded superstition as an

“antagonistic infirmity” which involved “a multitude of errors and emotions, and ... opinions so contradictory” (*Superstition 171 e-f*). Convinced that a very real danger existed here, Plutarch concluded that for “some persons, in trying to escape superstition, (they might) rush into a rough and hardened atheism, thus overlapping true religion which lies between” (*Superstition 171f*. Wilken, 1984, pp. 60-62 briefly discusses these references, and Smith, 1975; pp. 1-35 provides a detailed summary of *Superstition*. Benk, 1987, is helpful on the religious spirit of Plutarch).

Pagans and Christians

Comments about religion by Cicero and Plutarch (and others) indicate genuine seriousness about belief in the gods, and it would therefore be a mistake to say that the ‘pagans’ were irreligious. In fact, the reverse is obviously true. Benko (1984, p. 25, note 9) notes that the word pagan “is not used in a derogatory sense but rather as a general term for all members of the Roman empire who were not Christians”.

Benko further stated:

They may have been devotees of Greek and Roman state cults, initiates of mystery religions, followers of philosophical schools that demanded a certain conduct of life, or even people having a particular interest in spiritual matters. But most of them were not “pagans” in the modern sense of the word as St. Paul sharply observed standing in the middle of the Areopagus: “men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (*Acts 17.22*). (p. 25, note 9. Contreras, 1980, discusses Christian views of paganism).

But the practices of these varied, polytheistic belief systems could only have led to conflict with the monotheistic Christians and historians have commented about this uneasy situation. For example, Frend (1967, pp. 11, 95; see also Potter, 1994, p. 8) notes that the early Christians were regarded as atheists and were “feared and hated (because of) their obstinate refusal to acknowledge the gods of the community”. MacMullen (1981, p. 2) agrees, “monotheists rated as atheists; to have

one's own god counted for nothing if it denied everybody else's". Coleman-Norton (1966) considers another motive:

It was the secession from the State's religion which was punished, because the administration believed that those who refused at least lip service to the traditional gods and to the emperor's image were concealing some political conspiracy against the State (Vol.1, pp. 3-4; these comments related to the reign of Trajan).

In a similar vein, Smallwood (1956, p. 5) wrote that "it was presumably the Jews and Christians abhorrence of images, scorn for pagan cults, and above all their refusal to participate in the imperial cult, which lay behind this charge (i.e. atheism) (Benko and O'Rourke, 1971, pp. 67, 88; Pergola, 1978, p. 408; Fox, 1986, pp. 30, 427 make similar observations. For the Jews, Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.148 is helpful).

Keresztes (1973, p. 9) notes that the terms 'atheism' and 'Jewish ways' often meant Christianity and he adds that one of Justin's aims in his *First Apology* (c. A.D.151-155) was to clear Christianity of the charge of atheism. Keresztes (1979, p. 262; 1989, p. 88) further adds that the rescript of Hadrian to Minucius Fundanus and some of the letters of Antoninus Pius "also indicate widespread popular charges of 'atheism' against the Christians". It is significant to note that Tacitus labeled the Christians as a '*pernicious superstition*', and that comment was probably related to his statement that the Christians were '*loathed for their vices*'. Tacitus did not elaborate or describe how this '*superstition*' was '*pernicious*', and he did not describe those alleged '*vices*'. Walsh (1991, pp. 258-260) noted that Tacitus (together with Pliny, Trajan and Suetonius) made no mention of atheism in any of their accounts about the early Christians.

Commenting on events in 29 B.C., Dio offered the following advice:

Those who attempt to distort our religion with strange rites you should abhor and

punish, not merely for the sake of the gods (since if a man despises these he will not pay honour to any other being), but because such men, by bringing in new divinities in place of the old, persuade many to adopt foreign practices, from which spring up conspiracies, factions, and cabals, which are far from profitable to a monarchy. Do not, therefore, permit anybody to be an *atheist* or a sorcerer [italics added] (*Roman History*, 52.36.2. cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 2,148).

The charge of 'atheism' has been debated at great length and the precise nature of the charge is disputed. A brief summary of that discussion will prove useful. The word 'atheism' is derived from a Greek word which means, "not to recognise the gods" or "deny that the gods exist", or later, "to remove the gods" (Parker, 1996, p. 201). Livingstone (1997, p. 120) added that the word meant "without god", and it was used of those "who, whether they believed in God or not, disbelieved in the official gods of the state". The last aspect, in particular, proved to be a stumbling block for the Jews and the Christians due to their inflexible monotheism. (Further insights into this Greek word are found in Feinberg, 1986, pp. 96-97; Kleinknecht, 1985, pp. 330-331; and Arndt & Gingrich, 1979, pp. 20-21).

According to Frensdorff (1967):

'Atheism' had a rather wider connotation than the parallel Latin 'sacrilege' or 'impiety'. It included intellectual belief or otherwise in the gods, not necessarily connected with specific acts of impiety; and it seems clear that it involved not merely lack of respect for the 'usual gods', i.e. of one's own city, but of gods in general (p. 95).

Holding a similar view, de Ste Croix (1963) notes that:

The monotheistic exclusiveness of the Christians was believed to alienate the goodwill of the gods, to endanger what the Romans called the *pax deorum* (the right harmonious relationship between gods and men), and to be responsible for disasters which overtook the community. I shall call this exclusiveness, for convenience, by the name the Greeks gave it, "atheism" (ἀθεϊσμός) (p. 24).

Jeffers (1991, p. 26) considers that there are difficulties in applying any legal charge of 'atheism' to the adoption of Jewish practices because the Jewish religion

was a *religio licita*, a recognized religion of an allied state (see also Harris, 1979, p. 25; Smallwood, 1981, pp. 135, 344-345, 472; Harland, 2003, pp. 221-222 offers a different point of view to Smallwood). However, as Beard, North and Price (1998, Vol.1, p. 225) have noted, although the official Roman position towards Christianity was for centuries indisputably negative, “whereas Greek writers accused the Christians of being *atheoi*, ‘godless’, Romans did not trouble with the existence of the Christian god, but classified the worship negatively as *superstitio* (‘improper, excessive or illicit observance’), rather than *religio* (‘proper religious observance’)” (see also Vol. 2, p. 368). Walsh (1991, p. 268) provides a valuable article about early ‘Christian atheism’ and concludes that “its emergence as a charge is demonstrably late [i.e. up to 150 A.D.]”.

Within the New Testament and early Christian literature, the word translated as ‘superstition’ could be used in a good sense, an unfavorable sense, and in an objective sense (Arndt & Gingrich, 1979, p. 173). Tacitus *Annals* 15, 44.5; Suetonius *Nero* 16.2 and Pliny *Letters* 10.96.8 are early examples of the word ‘*superstitio*’ used negatively against the Christians. Janssen (1979, p. 158) provides an important discussion of ‘*superstitio*’ as it related to the Christians and he notes that conversion to the Christian faith meant a complete break away from the customs and religion of one’s ancestors (see also Wilken, 1970, pp. 439ff). This involved the construction of an entire new belief system that was seen as anti-Roman. Commenting on the accounts by Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny about the Christians, Sherwin-White (1964, p. 23) noted, “in all three the only ground indicated for the proscription of the cult is its association with crimes and immoralities” (reprinted in Ferguson, 1993, p. 49).

The Romans regarded the Christians negatively just as they did the Jews, and because Jesus was a Jew obviously made the early Christians unpopular. The fact that Jews had been expelled from Rome under Tiberius and Claudius, and that they had also rebelled against Rome, added to the opposition the Christians experienced if they could not satisfy the rulers and the populace that they were different from the orthodox Jews (Wiefel, 1991, pp. 85-101 discusses the Jewish community in Rome and the origins of the Roman Christians). The edict of Claudius, which banned Jews from Rome, is also significant because it would have identified and isolated the Gentile Christians as a group (Jeffers, 1991, pp. 12-13; 1999, p. 75; see also Wiefel, 1991, pp. 92-95). However, as Rutgers (1998, p. 107) observes, "Irreligious behaviour could be exploited in the courts, yet neither *impietas* nor *superstitio* was considered a criminal offence".

Tacitus also made no attempt to identify or prove that the Christians were any kind of direct threat to the ruling classes; in fact, Tacitus did not explain anything about this relatively new cult or its belief system. The origins of this group were quite unusual, yet Tacitus ignored a number of facts. For example, Jesus was not found guilty of any charge that could be sustained before the Roman governor, and that fact is made plain in the Gospels (e.g. *Luke 23:4, 14, 22*). The gospels indicate that Governor Pilate acquiesced in the face of an angry and vocal crowd and handed Jesus over to the Jewish authorities for crucifixion. Many traditional scholars accept the literal New Testament account, although there are differences in the Gospels because each of the accounts provides varying emphases. Sanders (1993, p. 274) does not agree with the view that Pilate was weak or reluctant to act; instead he describes this point of view as "Christian propaganda". Crossan (1996) believes that

the Roman government tried and executed Jesus as a social agitator. He further believes that any belief that it was the Jews who killed Jesus is nothing more than an early Christian myth which was directed against rival Jewish groups who opposed Jesus.

How much Tacitus knew about this group is unknown, but he might have considered this group unworthy of any further comment or explanation. The comments by Wardy about the Jews (p. 25 above) are probably applicable to the Christians; that is, Tacitus probably regarded the Christians as a sect within Judaism and worthy of the same disdain.

Garzetti (1974, p. 164) has commented on the distinction between the Christians and the Jews and noted that the fire in Rome was the first occasion that the Christians appeared as a group that was separate from the Jews. Further, he noted that the Roman people must already have known about and disliked the Christians (see also Benko in Benko & O'Rourke, 1971, p. 59). Syme (1958, p. 469) believed that Tacitus would have investigated the Christians in some detail and he added that he would have discovered "no deeds of crime or vice but only an invincible spirit that denied allegiance to Rome when allegiance meant worship of Caesar. Yet it was an 'exitiabilis superstitio'". That may be the case, however as noted above, Tacitus made no attempt to explain the beliefs or practices of the early Roman Christians.

Who was responsible for the fire?

Determining responsibility for causing the fire in Rome has remained an important question. Some early authors (e.g. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 17.1.5 (Roman historian; A.D. 23-79); Suetonius, *Nero* 38 and Dio 72.6) clearly put the blame on Nero whereas Tacitus (*Annals* 15.38) expressed some doubt about the

cause. Of the early sources, Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius did not connect the Christians with the fire in any way. Only Tacitus mentioned the fire and the Christians in the same account (Keresztes, 1989, pp. 69-70).

Tacitus' account of Nero's treatment of the Christians seems straightforward. The offenders were arrested, and then prosecuted and convicted based on their own confession. But as Tacitus clearly stated, they were convicted primarily because of their attitude to society rather than any arson charge. If the account by Tacitus is largely truthful and complete, a number of concerns need to be considered.

In his monumental work about martyrdom and persecution in the early church, Frend (1967, pp. 113-132) wrote in detail about the fire of A.D. 64. He noted that Tacitus recorded the incident c.115, some fifty years after the event, and he was not favourable towards the Christians. He regarded their religion as a "deadly superstition" which deserved at least repression (p. 123), and he added that the account by Tacitus indicated three things. Firstly, the attitude of the people towards the Christians was the same as that levelled against the Jews. In the *Histories*, Tacitus wrote about the Jews in extremely derogatory terms (*Histories* 5.5; Frend, 1967, p. 123; see also Syme, 1958, p. 530). Secondly, Tacitus used language that alluded to an earlier incident involving another religious group (the Bacchanal conspiracy of 186 B.C.) that caused the Roman authorities to intervene (pp. 123-124). Thirdly, the punishment was designed to both "appease the gods and to strike terror" (p. 124). The Roman Christians must have drawn attention to themselves by not participating in the usual Roman religious rituals, and therefore they must have been observed openly and flagrantly dishonoring the gods; an attitude that deserved punishment. The worship by the Christians was, like that of the Jews, separate from

that practiced by the pagan Romans. They did not support community worship of the traditional Roman gods. Not only that, again like the Jews, they also drew attention to themselves by not joining the rest of the population by consuming meat offered to pagan idols (*Acts 15:20,29; 21:25; 1 Cor 8:1,4,10,19; 10:19-28; Rev 2:14,20*).

Discussion has also focused on the interpretation of the 'confession' of the convicted Christians. The question is: was their 'confession' related to their faith or was it related to accepting responsibility for the fire? Tacitus wrote, "Nero substituted as *scapegoats* [italics added]... [the] Christians" and that term would appear to absolve them of the crime of arson (*Annals 15.44*). As Keresztes (1989, p. 69) notes, Tacitus implied that Nero was responsible for the fire and he added that the great majority of modern scholars regard the Christians as innocent of the burning of Rome in 64 A.D. That view seems reasonable and has been accepted by most commentators. Bishop (1964, pp. 81-82), however, disagrees. In his opinion, Nero was astonished that the Christians openly admitted the charge and that he used the first confession to convict many more of these hated individuals. T.D. Barnes (1971, p. 151) takes the view that "Nero deliberately confused the issue by equating the confession of Christianity with an admission of arson, and the equation found a ready acceptance from the hysterical mob". Both those views are possible but obviously speculative in the absence of further evidence. Like Bishop, Stockton (1975, p. 202) noted that "a confession of Christianity was treated as tantamount to a confession of arson; "if one considers how much they must have talked about the 'Fiery Furnace'". In *Luke 12:49*, Jesus referred to 'fire on earth', however the evidence of the Gospels does not portray the Christians as arsonists and Stockton's assessment has not been widely supported.

Yavetz (1975, p. 184) canvasses a number of opinions on who was to blame for the outbreak of the fire. One view is that a group of Christians set fire to the city, and this view was based on an understanding that the Christian community consisted of some “fanatics who were determined to establish their existence at any price” (p. 184). Another opinion is that “masses of Christian proselytes infiltrated the ranks of Nero’s Praetorians” and added “fuel to the fire” (pp. 184-185). Yavetz (p. 185) further notes “the view that the Christians did indeed set fire to Rome has not been completely abandoned”. Yet another suggestion has been the idea that when Tacitus wrote that “none ventured to combat the fire, as there were reiterated threats from a large number of persons who forbade extinction” (*Annals 15.38*), he was referring to the Christians as the ones who prevented the fire from being extinguished (Yavetz, 1975, p. 185). There is also another theory, added Yavetz (1975, p. 186); however, it is one that has not been forcibly argued. It is that there was a conspiracy against Nero and the fire was a part of that conspiracy (see also Keresztes, 1979, p. 250). Yet again, these comments cannot be accepted on the basis of available evidence.

But, for Keresztes (1984), there is a further concern for historians who are intent on coming to an understanding of what happened between Nero and the Christians. He notes:

That the charge of incendiarism is not mentioned and the persecution of the Christians is not connected with the fire by *any* of the many Christians apologists is very significant, and it cannot be said that they were keeping an embarrassed silence, since they were indeed willing and eager to raise any question concerning Christianity and to defend it against *all* charges. On the other hand, not a single anti-Christian polemist knows or speaks of any charge of incendiarism [author’s emphasis] (p. 408; see also Clayton, 1947, p. 82).

The solution posed by Keresztes is quite simple: Tacitus got it wrong. His belief is that Tacitus was writing more like a dramatist than a historian. His own

reconstruction says that a powerful anti-Christian lobby assisted the emperor in his efforts to shift the blame from himself. And who were the people that made up this anti-Christian lobby? Keresztes said that it was the Jews. Using Suetonius' comment about Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome because of 'Chrestus'; i.e. Christ; and selected passages from the *Acts of the Apostles*, Keresztes concluded that Jewish leaders used the catastrophe of the fire to get rid of their troublesome opponents (Keresztes, 1979, p. 257; 1984, pp. 408-413; 1989, pp. 73-82; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4). Borg (1972-1973, pp. 211-213) however, holds that Suetonius' reference is to "Jewish messianic agitation". In the *Acts of the Apostles* 7: 12 and chaps. 21-26, incidents involving Christians and Jews are described, and pp. 79-83, 93-97 below will provide further details about this aspect.

Keresztes appears to be unique in his view as most modern historians accept the account by Tacitus, although some have alluded to other possibilities. For example, Ramsay (1895, p. 227) noted that although Tacitus "was a very careful investigator ...his straining after literary effect often veils his description of facts". Millar (1977) describes the account as "brief, allusive and rhetorical" and adds that:

we are left wholly in the dark as to whether accusers came forward spontaneously, or supposedly so, whether anything resembling a formal trial was held, and if so whether before the emperor, or in other courts also (p. 554).

Clayton (1947, p. 81) argues that it is "impossible to remove all obscurity and self-contradiction from this passage" and adds that Tacitus was "an adept at vagueness and innuendo, when he wishes to overcome a lack of certainty in reporting or of evidence in accusation". Senatorial bias has also been suggested (Clayton, 1947, p. 82; see also Plescia, 1971, p. 218, note 2).

Keresztes (1989, pp. 70-71) contends that the words “were convicted” should perhaps be replaced by the alternative words “joined together”. Noting that an earlier version of the *ms* has this alternative wording, he added that “joined together” was good philology as well as better historiography. That fact does not change the account by Tacitus but it has provided further discussion of the text.

What was the basis for the conviction of the Roman Christians?

The reason given by Tacitus for the condemnation of the Christians was for their “hatred of the human race” (*Annals* 15.44; a charge that was also directed against the Jews (*Histories* 5.5). According to Keresztes (1989), this charge:

would mean something like dereliction of one’s duties towards the community of men, a separation from the rest of society. Applying the term to the Christians, this would mean practically the same as the celebrated charge that was brought against the Jews, namely, that they were fiercely loyal to their own kind and ever ready to exercise acts of mercy, but that they evinced hostility and aversion towards all others” (p.70; see also Frend, 1967, p. 123; Tacitus *Histories* 5.5.1).

Keresztes (1989) asked:

Could this so called *odium*, or “aversion”, be a basis for condemnation? There should be no doubt that this quite abstract *odium*, without any concrete proof of crimes, could be subject to juridical condemnation to death, in view of the indubitable fact that Tacitus’ Christians were tried by the *cognitio* [an investigation; a magistrate’s right to hear cases], or the *extra ordinem* [extraordinary or in an unusual manner], trial process of one of the high magistrates of Rome, perhaps the *praefect* [Prefect] of the City (pp. 70-71).

He adds (1989, pp. 36-40, 71) that a judge at an extraordinary trial would apply justice using the discretionary power of his office, and he notes the earlier trial of Christ at which Pontius Pilate presided (see also Sherwin-White, 1963/1992, pp. 24-47). Similarly, Crake (1965, p. 61) had earlier noted “the normal procedure in dealing with Christians was by exercise of the power of *coercitio* [right to

punishment; ability to enforce obedience to orders] inherent in any magistrate's *imperium* [supreme or ultimate power and authority]".

Keresztes (1989, p. 71) contends that although some scholars have been concerned that "hatred for the human race" is not a specific basis for condemnation, this attitude could have been the real grounds for conviction. Earlier (1979, p. 249) Keresztes used the word 'mysterious' to describe Nero's choice of the Christians as scapegoats, however this point of view is obviously speculative because "hatred of the human race" was not a crime and the Emperor's knowledge of the Christians is unknown.

T.D. Barnes (1971, pp. 151-152) adduces the important fact that at the time of the fire "there was no formal legislation to declare the new religion illegal, nor did the persecution extend outside the city of Rome" (cf. 1968, p. 34f). Barnes (1971, p. 152) further notes that Nero's persecution should not be exaggerated because "the connexion with other outbreaks of persecution has never been demonstrated, and is an unnecessary hypothesis".

Frend (1967) remains cautious on the subject of legal charges, noting that:

when one looks for some crime which could always be invoked against the Christians, difficulties arise. The most likely charge would be *maiestas* [treason] to which, insult to the gods *sacrilegium* or *impietas*, was closely allied (p. 128; cf. p. 79).

The charge of treason (*maiestas*) had a long history (possibly from 103 B.C.) and this charge could be used against offences including treason, revolt, failure in public duty, misbehavior in a popular assembly, and conspiracies against the emperor. Condemned persons became liable to death and their property was confiscated.

There were condemnations for *maiestas* under Gaius and Claudius and in the latter half of Nero's reign in contexts where an insecure emperor was being

confronted with genuine conspiracies or threats to his position, even if each individual condemned had not necessarily acted treasonably. The condemnations under Domitian fell into the same pattern ... (Balsdon & Lintott, 1996, pp. 913–914; see also Robinson, 1995, pp. 74-78).

However, Frend (1967, p. 129) also notes that during the Neronian persecution three factors need to be considered. If non-citizens refused to take part in the Imperial cult it was not regarded as treason ... the scope of the *maiestas* procedure was restricted ... and, down to A.D. 177 there is no evidence from formal trials of Christians of any charge of *maiestas* (cf. Reicke, 1968, p. 250).

The most probable solution, according to Frend (1967, p. 129) may have been quite simple. It could have been that magistrates viewed Christianity as an illegal organisation that involved “illegal oaths and conspiratorial conduct”. (This topic will be critically evaluated in further detail on pp. 88-93.) Frend believes that this attitude displayed by the Christians, when combined with “utter contempt for the established worship of the gods and flagrant disobedience to the commands of the representatives of Rome” (1967, p. 129), may well have caused the magistrates to take severe action. Similarly, T.D. Barnes (1971, p. 152) contends that, “Pagan governors, no less than the pagans they governed, were predisposed to detest the Christians. And they possessed the power to punish them without reference to the emperor”. These observations by Frend and Barnes do not appear to contradict the comments made by Tacitus.

Later, in his correspondence with the emperor Trajan (c.110), the younger Pliny wrote that when he investigated the Christians, he “found nothing but a *degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths*” [italics added] (*Letters, Book 10.96.8*; T. D. Barnes, 1968, pp. 36-37). Pliny made no attempt to explain that comment and he made no mention of *maiestas* in his account. However, he believed that they should

be punished. He wrote that if they persisted in the charge of being Christians, he “ordered them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished” (*Letters, Book 10.96.3*; Sherwin-White, 1966, pp. 691-712; and Williams, 1990, pp. 138-144 discussed this letter in detail). This correspondence is significant because it is the first recorded case of the Christians as a recognizable group being subjected to the processes of Roman law. Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan will be evaluated in greater detail on pp. 166-172 below.

Commenting on Tacitus’ account regarding the selection of the Christians for punishment by Nero, Griffin (1989) notes that:

the reason for choosing this unpopular group in particular is not recoverable. No doubt they had not participated in the preceding acts of worship, but then neither had the Jews: the clear distinction now made between these two detested sects, and the decision to punish only the younger offshoot, has been attributed to the influence of Poppaea [the Empress Poppaea Sabina, Nero’s wife] who was a Jewish sympathizer (p. 133).

Historians vary in their assessment of the influence of the Empress Poppaea.

According to Leon (1960, p. 28), Poppaea may have been a convert to Judaism who used her influence with Nero to gain influence for the Jews. He bases this on Josephus who called her ‘god-fearing’ and who further noted her kindness towards him (*Antiquities 20.8.11.195; Vita 3.16*). Smallwood (1976) states that in the accounts about Nero’s wife “no personal leanings towards Judaism are implied” (pp. 278-279, note 79; see also Wiefel, 1991, p. 94). Similarly, Stern (1980, Vol. II, p. 6, note 12) holds that we “cannot interpret this [that is Poppaea’s actions] to imply exclusive sympathy” [i.e. towards the Jews]. However, Bruce (1990, p. 542) notes “Poppaea’s pro-Jewish sentiments”, and Feldman (1993, p. 98) concludes that

“perhaps she was a ‘sympathizer’ with Judaism (cf. pp. 351-352, and p. 491, note 39).

Warmington (1969, p. 126) has also commented on the account by Tacitus. He states that it would be unwise to doubt Tacitus because his account of burning alive as a punishment is well attested as the regular penalty for incendiarism, “while exposure to the wild beasts or crucifixion also indicates the non-citizen and slave element which was numerous among the early Christians”. He further adds (p. 126) that although the Christians were not being ‘persecuted’ for their religion, they were obviously unpopular because of their beliefs and practices and therefore made ideal scapegoats. That fact is consistent with the account by Tacitus.

As a group the Christians were by no means unidentifiable and the New Testament clearly indicates that they were committed to public demonstration of their beliefs. For example, Jesus stated that he had “spoken openly to the world” (*John 18:20*). In the book of *Acts*, the apostles Peter and John, when faced with Jewish opposition stated, “we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (*4:20*). When the chief priests and leading men of the Jews brought Paul before King Agrippa (*Acts 25:2*), he stated, as a part of his defense, “this has not been done in a corner” (*Acts 26:26*). He was referring to the spread of the Christian message, how he was converted, and how he and others were expressing their faith. It is also important to note that in the book of *Acts*, Paul was repeatedly found innocent of charges that required imprisonment or death (*Acts 23: 9, 29; 25:25; 26:31, 32; 28:18*).

Later, the book of *Acts* concluded with the words that Paul kept “preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, *with all openness*,

unhindered" [italics added] (*Acts 28:31*). If those comments were true throughout the empire, including the capital, then the Christians would have been easily located and identified. Had there been any doubt about who was Christian and who was not, anti-Christian Jews and other citizens affected by the preaching of the Christians could have provided advice to the governing authorities (*Acts 13:50; 14:19; 17:5; 17:13; 19:24-41*). However, although the authorities were aware of the differences between Jews and Christians, confusion still occurred. For example, at Philippi Paul and Silas were described as 'Jews' rather than 'Christians' (*Acts 16:19-21*), and there may have been other unrecorded instances where this confusion existed.

Was there a specific law against the Christians?

It should also be noted that the New Testament book of *Acts* indicates, "no Roman official regarded Christianity as a punishable offence, still less as an offence which had been the object of recent legislation" (T.D. Barnes, 1968, p. 33). This fact is significant because there have been suggestions that there may have been a *senatus-consultum* (a resolution of the senate; often equivalent to legislation, but could also be *ad hoc*) in place as a legal instrument to make Christianity illegal. Although no such document has so far been located, Stockton (1975, p. 202) refers to an '*institutum Neronianum*' and Coleman-Norton (1966, p. 1190, note 3) believes that such a document probably existed but has not survived. T.D. Barnes (1968, pp. 34-35 and 1971, pp. 104-105) further summarizes the discussion and concluded that "Tertullian borrowed the idea [that only bad emperors like Nero and Domitian persecuted Christians] and coined the phrase '*institutum Neronianum*' to stigmatize persecution" (1971, p. 105; 1868, p. 35). Frend (1965, p. 44) noted, "it is just possible that after 64 the Christians were the subject of a *Senatus-consultum* just as

the Bacchanals had been in 186 B.C. but no trace of such a decree has been found, and no Christian apologist in the second century mentions its existence". Frend (1967, pp. 126-127) provides a summary of the legal position, and he further notes reasons why the existence of a *senatus-consultum* should be doubted. Those comments are worth noting:

Apart from the fact ... that no inscription relating to any such decree has ever been found, and no pagan or Christian inscription writer living in the first two centuries alludes to it, there are several reasons for doubting its existence. First, the persecution was confined to Rome ... Secondly, the existence of a *senatus-consultum* could hardly have escaped the knowledge of the experienced administrative lawyer, Pliny the Younger, and it would have formed an excellent basis for his report to Trajan concerning the Christians in Bithynia. Similarly, it could have formed the starting-point for the Christian Apologies of the second century... and finally, an edict presupposes a certain degree of importance for its subject, which it is doubtful whether the Christians at this stage could claim (p. 127; see also Sherwin-White, 1966, pp. 772-787 and Musurillo, 1972, pp. lvii-lxxiii).

On the subject of a law against the Christians, Stegemann and Stegemann (1999) add:

such a law is contradicted by the fact that Nero did not proceed against the *Chrestiani* as such but had them arrested and executed on the basis of a concrete accusation of crime (arson)(p. 320).

However, McKechnie (2001) observes that Nero and Domitian were subjected by the Senate to *damnatio memoriae*, or condemnation of their memory. This meant that their names were removed from all official acts and records and usually from all private records. Laws that they issued were also repealed. McKechnie notes:

If Nero had legislated against Christianity, no copy of the decree would exist now; it would have been excised from all Roman records, and no Christian would have wanted to keep a copy of it – particularly after it ceased to be in force (p. 62; see also Jones and Milns, 1984, pp. 36, 72, 92-93; Alston, 1998, p. 186)

There can be no doubt that the Roman authorities persecuted the Roman Christians. However, as Ferguson (1993, p. xi) notes, “the social factors behind individual outbreaks of persecution are less evident ... [and] ...the legal basis of the persecutions is far from evident”. Ferguson then adds:

A.N. Sherwin-White and G.E.M de Ste Croix have been the foremost modern interpreters of the bearing of the legal situation on the persecutions. Even without specific enactments against the Christians, there were legal precedents and some judicial basis for persecutions (p. xi).

Sherwin-White (1952) surveyed the earlier historical debate about the persecutions and summarized the various schools of thought that attempted to identify the source of Rome’s legal objection to Christianity. In 1963, de Ste Croix responded, in part, to Sherwin-White’s article (1952) and also his book (1963/1992). In 1964, Sherwin-White replied to de Ste Croix with ‘an amendment’, and in the same year, de Ste Croix replied with ‘a rejoinder’. The article by T.D. Barnes regarding legislation against the Christians, mentioned above, also formed an important part of the discussion (Frend, 1965, pp. 43-44; 1967, pp. 126-127; Lane Fox, 1986, pp. 422-428; Keresztes, 1989, pp. 111-120; McKechnie, 2000, pp. 55-65 and 109-135 provides comment about this legal debate). The discussion was largely about technical legal matters and the interpretation of key words and phrases, and each side has its supporters and detractors. At present, there is no unanimity on this subject. Most of the key articles have been reprinted in Finley, 1974 and Ferguson, 1993.

Nero and the Christians according to Suetonius

In one of his works, titled *The Twelve Caesars* (written c. 120), Suetonius included biographies of the Roman rulers from Julius Caesar to Domitian. Pliny the Younger held Suetonius in high regard and in a letter to the Emperor Trajan

described him as a fine scholar and a person of great integrity and distinction (*Letters 10.94*. Wallace-Hadrill (1983) provides an overview of the historian and his writings about the Caesars). As noted above, Suetonius made no connection between the fire of Rome and the punishment of the Christians by Nero. In his account of the fire, Suetonius wrote that:

For under cover of displeasure at the ugliness of the old buildings and the narrow, crooked streets, *he [i.e. Nero] set fire to the city* so openly that several ex-consuls did not venture to lay hands on his chamberlains although they caught them on their estates with tow and firebrands, while some granaries near the Golden House, whose room he particularly desired, were demolished by engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone. For six days and seven nights destruction raged, while the people were driven for shelter to monuments and tombs.

Viewing the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas and exulting, as he said, in "the beauty of the flames," he sang the whole of the "Sack of Ilium," in his regular stage costume [*italics added*] (*Nero 38*; see also Frensd, 1965, p. 124).

There is no mention of the Christians in this section and Suetonius was clearly in no doubt about how the fire occurred; Nero planned and orchestrated the whole event. When Suetonius reported on Nero's punishment of the Christians, all he wrote is contained in a single sentence: "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition" (*Nero 16.2*). In Suetonius' account of the life of Nero, the emperor's punishment of the Christians and the fire of Rome are two separate and unconnected events. Novak (2001, pp. 27-30) notes that Suetonius' use of the words 'new and mischievous superstition' (*Nero 16.2*) to describe the Christians could be interpreted to mean magical practices and sorcery. Novak considers that formal criminal charges of arson and/or the practice of magic may have been an important part of Nero's action against the Christians. Griffin (1984, p. 83) noted that Suetonius' account of "*the life of Nero* is constructed around a sharp division (at chapter 19) between blameless and commendable acts on the one

hand and shameful and criminal ones on the other, but examples come from the periods of Nero's reign". From Suetonius we could infer that the emperor's action against the Christians was merely a local measure that did not extend beyond the city.

Nero and the Christians according to later Church historians.

Later Church historians, for example Athenagoras (fl. 117-161), Tertullian (fl. 200), Eusebius (c. 260-339), and Sulpicius Severus (c. 360-420), obviously wrote with the considerable benefit of hindsight. By the time these writers wrote their own histories, they also had New Testament documents and other sacred literature to refer to and rely upon. Eusebius also wrote about the importance of this early literature and he indicated which documents were regarded as sacred and which were not (*H.E.* 3.3, 24, 25; 4.26; 5.8). The significant theological division between Christianity and orthodox Jewish sects (introduced in the Gospels and expanded in later New Testament writings) was, for these later Church historians, well established (for example, Hegesippus in *Eusebius H.E.* 4.22; 2.1). With the benefit of that hindsight, these writers were able to offer a point of view that may not have been so evident in the First Century. In addition, the later the sources, the more difficult it becomes to guarantee their authenticity and accuracy in any attempt to reconstruct a credible historical reconstruction. The line between legend and truth is often difficult to determine and Chapter Eight below will critically evaluate that issue.

Tertullian also wrote several passages about Nero (see pp. 141-142 below for further details about Tertullian's writings). In his *Apology* he stated:

When you sternly lay it down in your sentences, "*It is not lawful for you to exist,*" and with unhesitating rigour you enjoin this to be carried out, you exhibit the violence and unjust domination of mere tyranny, if you deny the thing to be lawful, simply on the ground that you wish it to be unlawful, not because it ought

to be [italics added] (4.4. Tertullian did not identify or explain the legal situation).

Then, he added the following:

Consult your histories; you will find that Nero was the first who assailed with the imperial sword the Christian sect, making progress then especially at Rome. But we glory in having our condemnation hallowed by the hostility of such a wretch. For anyone who knows him, can understand that not except as being of singular excellence did anything bring on it Nero's condemnation (5.3.4).

In his *Ad Nationes*, he stated:

This name of ours took its rise in the reign of Augustus; under Tiberius it was taught with all clearness and publicity; under Nero it was ruthlessly condemned, and you may weigh its worth and character even from the person of the persecutor. If that prince was a pious man, then the Christians are impious; if he was just, if he was pure, then the Christians are unjust and impure; if he was not a public enemy, we are enemies of our country: what sort of men are we, our persecutor himself shows since he of course punished what produced hostility to himself. Now, although every other institution which existed under Nero has been destroyed, yet this of ours has firmly remained – righteous, it would seem, as being unlike the author (of its persecution) (1. 7-9).

By way of explanation, Benko (1980) noted:

The so called *Institutum Neronianum* mentioned by Tertullian *Ad Nationes* 1.7.8f. and *Apol.* 5 may refer not so much to the promulgated law, but to something that was customarily done, i.e. Tertullian may have wanted to say that Nero was the originator of the custom to persecute Christians (p. 1067; cf. Reicke, 1968, p. 246).

Benko may have been correct in his assessment of Tertullian's intention; however it is unclear why Tertullian was not more precise when he wrote about matters of law.

Eusebius also provided details of Nero's reign (*H.E.* 2.20, 22, 24-26; 3.1, 5). Specifically Eusebius described Nero as "the first of the emperors to be declared enemy of the worship of Almighty God ... this man, the first to be heralded as a conspicuous fighter against God, was led on to murder the apostles." (*H.E.* 2.25).

Ramsay (1895, p. 243) included an account by Sulpicius Severus [*Chronic* 2.29.3] which noted that Nero was responsible for "severe measures against the

Christians. Afterwards the religion was forbidden by formal laws, and the profession of Christianity was made illegal by published edicts". Severus did not identify or explain the legal situation, and according to T.D. Barnes (1968, p. 35), "Severus clearly has no knowledge of any specific law or edict against the Christians".

Coleman-Norton (1966, p. 1190, note 3) observes that the language of *Chronic* 2.29.3 is reminiscent of Tertullian's charge in his *Apol.4.4*. T.D. Barnes (1971, p. 200) states that Sulpicius Severus "sought to combine the ecclesiastical history of Eusebius with the secular framework of Tacitus" (see also Coleman-Norton, 1966, p. 1179; T. D. Barnes, 1968, p. 35; reprinted in Ferguson, 1993, p. 63).

Athenagoras questioned:

why is it that they enjoy the licence to speak and write what they want concerning the divine being, whereas *a law has been imposed upon us* who can establish with compelling proofs and arguments the correctness of what we think and believe – that God is one? [italics added] (*Legatio* 7.1).

In that statement, Athenagoras did not identify or explain the legal situation.

Schoedel (1973, pp. 309-319) and Metzger (1988, pp. 125-127) provide details of his work.

Commenting on later church historians, Keresztes (1984) noted that Eusebius:

mentions both the fire and the punishment of the Christians by Nero, and places the fire to 64 A.D. and the massacre of the Christians to 68 A.D., at a distance of four years. He also mentions the persecution of the Christians by Nero in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. But Eusebius, incredibly, makes no connection between the two events. St. Jerome, of course, follows Eusebius (p. 408).

It can be concluded that the early Christian writers believed that Nero was a persecutor of Christians, and that while it may not have been sanctioned by law it led to legal injunctions against Christianity.

Uncertainties involving Nero's reign

Eusebius wrote that the Christian apostles Peter and Paul were killed during the Neronian persecution (*H.E.* 2.25), but there is no substantial evidence to support that claim. It is possible, perhaps even likely, but it is not yet verifiable (Reicke, 1968, p. 250; see also Benko and O'Rourke, 1971, p. 59; A. Barnes, 1938, p. 99ff). Why these men were condemned is not known; in any case, according to Christian tradition the reason lies in their activity as Christian missionaries.

It is interesting to note that the writings of Paul and Peter do not indicate any close working relationship between these two men, and in their letters they do not comment in any detail about the ministry of the other fellow disciples. In the New Testament book of *Acts*, Peter was associated mainly with John (*Acts* 3:1, 3,4, 11; 4:13, 19; 8:14), and mention of Peter in *Acts* concluded in *Acts* 15:7. The remaining chapters (*Acts* 16-28) concentrated on the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions. In fact, Paul had confronted Peter (*Gal* 2:11ff) over the issue of Jewish practices, and there was an obvious parting of the ways regarding ministry focus (*Gal* 2:7-9). There is also no documentary evidence to suggest that Paul and Peter were in Rome at the same time on missionary work, and the intention of *Rom* 15:20 ('not building on another man's foundation') may have been a factor here. As Chapter Four below will indicate, these apostles did not accuse the Roman officials of condemning them personally; rather their letters encouraged their contacts to remain firm in the face of opposition if and when it did threaten.

Additionally, in the New Testament book of *Romans*, Paul instructed the Christians to be in subjection to the governing authorities (*Rom* 13:1- "let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities". Borg, 1972-1973, pp. 205-

218, examines the historical context of this text). Their attitude was to be one of obedience towards the government, although the Christians would obviously have resisted pagan religious customs. On issues of faith, the Christian stand was clearly one of obeying God rather than men (*Acts 5:29*. Pp. 88-93 will provide additional details about how the Christians were regarded by the Romans).

Keresztes (1984, pp. 410-413; 1989, pp. 75-82), however, is in no doubt that Nero put Peter and Paul to death and he cites Clement as his authority. *1 Clement 5.1-7*; *1 Clement 5* noted of the death of Peter and Paul; however Nero is not named specifically). Frend (1965, p. 125) also believes that *1 Clement* refers to the reign of Nero and he has linked the Jews, and the fate of Peter and Paul, to Clement's comments about "jealousy and strife". He further notes that "a generation later, the worship itself was not proscribed nor was the organization of the Church destroyed".

There are also difficulties in any attempt to accurately assign the *Apocalypse*, *1 Peter* and *Hebrews* to a Neronian edict and/or persecution against the Christians (Stockton, 1975, p. 202; see also de Ste Croix, 1963/1993, p. 10). Although some church historians have stated that these documents do prove that Nero was responsible for an organised, on-going persecution against the Christians, opinion continues to remain divided because non-Christian primary sources do not support that view of Nero. For example, in his discussion about the Neronian persecution, Ramsay (1895, p. 245 ff) believed that the *Apocalypse* and *1 Peter* belonged to the later part of the century. By taking this point of view he obviously disagreed with those writers who accepted the statement by Eusebius that Peter and Paul were killed during the reign of Nero. Sordi (1988, pp. 32-34) has stated a different view and assigns *1 Peter* to the reign of Nero, and Jones (1991, p. 116) believes that

Revelation could well be assigned to Nero's reign. The problems associated with dating New Testament and other non-canonical documents, together with the view that Domitian was a kind of reincarnation of Nero, will be considered in more detail on pp. 87-88.

It is not surprising that there is disagreement about the date of composition of these documents. The obvious difficulty with many of these early Christian documents is that they do not clearly identify the precise circumstances of their compilation and the reader is left to work with a large number of seemingly unrelated clues. The fact that emperors and many key individuals are not named adds to this difficulty.

What can be stated with certainty about the interaction between Nero and the Christians is that a strong Christian tradition has survived which has been based on the limited source material from Tacitus and then supported much later by Christian writers. It can also be stated that irrespective of the fire in Rome of A.D. 64, the Christians were clearly unpopular but they were not illegal.

Between the reigns of Nero and Domitian, there appears to have been a time of relative quiet as far as relations between the Roman authorities and the infant church are concerned. However, events within the empire did not remain static and real tensions existed.

The truth about Nero

As for Nero, Griffin (1984, p. 15) has summed it up well. Noting that the emperor has been portrayed as the 'anti-Christ' by the church fathers and later historians, Griffin says "the picture of him as the incarnation of evil triumphed as

Christianity triumphed". Bruce (1969) notes that not all Nero's subjects thought badly of him however:

Some refused to believe the reports of his death, and for twenty years after it there was a succession of pretenders who claimed to be Nero, and received a measure of support in the eastern provinces. The last of these was Terentius Maximus, who for a time was sponsored by the Parthians; at last they reluctantly agreed to his extradition to Rome (A.D. 88). Even after that, it was believed in some quarters that Nero would return from the dead and reoccupy Rome at the head of an army from the east (p. 410 ; cf. Tacitus, *Hist.*i, 2; ii, 8; Suetonius, *Nero* 57; Dio Cassius, *Hist.lxvi*, 19.3; *Sib.Or.* 4: 119-24. Caird, 1966, pp. 79, 164, 165; Robinson, 1976, p. 245, note 128; Barnett, (personal communication, July 28, 2003) adds Dio Chrysostom *Orations* 21.10. Cohoon, 1993, pp. 280, and 281, note 2 and Gallivan, 1973, pp. 364-365 adds further detail).

When considering the accuracy of the accounts about Nero, some caution is obviously required. Elsner and Masters (1994) edited a collection of essays about Nero and provided this important introductory quote:

The traditional picture we have of Nero is, by contrast [to Augustus], impossibly crude. The historical sources constantly revile him: he is depicted as a monster of lust, a tyrant, an egomaniac, a murderer, an incompetent, indeed, in every way the antithesis of the ideal Roman statesman; and he is granted only so many virtues as will throw his vices into sharper relief. However attractive this may be as a story - and it does, undeniably, have its appeal - it is hard to believe that any historical figure could have been so uniformly depraved, or any era so hopelessly steeped in crime and sycophancy (pp. 1-2; quoted in Morley, 2000, p. 114).

Similarly, Laistner (1947/1977, p. 132) considers that Tacitus' picture of Nero, along with Tiberius and Claudius "comes perilously near caricature", and that "if Nero's name has become synonymous with unrestrained vice and cruelty, it is primarily thanks to Tacitus' *Annals*".

Those words of caution are by no means new. In his account of *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus wrote:

There have been a great many who have composed a history of Nero; some of whom have departed from the truth of facts, out of favor, as having received benefits from him; while others, out of hatred to him, and the great ill will which they bear him, have so impudently raved against him with their lies, that they

justly deserved to be condemned. Nor do I wonder at such as have told lies of Nero, since they have not in their writings preserved the truth of history as to those facts that were earlier than his time (20.154-5; Feldman and Hata, 1987, provide a range of articles from a variety of contributors who comment on the writings of Josephus as they impacted upon Judaism and Christianity).

Conclusion

The available accounts of the fire in Rome in A.D. 64 and the treatment of the anonymous Roman Christians by Nero were not written by eyewitnesses and differences exist between the available accounts. This should arouse caution among commentators, and speculative theories, while they make for interesting reading, should be considered carefully. Certainty cannot be guaranteed, however what is clear is that over the centuries Christian tradition has preserved and promoted the view that Nero was the first notable Roman persecutor of the early church. If the account by Tacitus is largely accurate, a number of statements may be made with some degree of certainty.

For example, it is apparent that an unspecified number of Christians were put to death by Nero and that they were probably innocent of the charge of arson. It would seem that they were identified as being disdainful and unsupportive of the Roman religious way of life. As a result of the fire, the crowd was apparently in an agitated state and some kind of quick resolution was required, at least by the Emperor who was allegedly under suspicion. As an identifiable group the unpopular Roman Christians proved to be an ideal scapegoat, at least as far as the emperor and the crowd was concerned, and they paid the price for their obvious self-imposed isolation from Rome's traditional religious life. Tacitus made no attempt to explain the legal situation surrounding this event and that has led to a wide range of speculative theories, which are all based on inconclusive evidence.

Available historical records do not indicate any further action against the Christians outside Rome or even in the capital immediately following the fire. It would appear then that this incident was a 'one-off' event that did not require repeating or follow-up; it may also be possible that the authorities were keen to eliminate as many adherents of this new group from the capital at the time of the fire to limit any ongoing influence in Roman society.

This chapter has demonstrated that the fire incident in Rome that led to the destruction of individuals identified as Christians was an isolated incident and that no recorded follow-up persecution is evident. The situation and circumstances of this incident was in no way connected to the later Domitianic events. This chapter has also shown that although the Christians were identified by name, there is no additional evidence to show that these people continued to be an immediate identifiable problem for the Roman authorities. Later, Vespasian (A.D. 69 -79) treated the Christians with toleration, and he extended that attitude to the Jews.

A review of the literature has also noted recent points of view which have assisted in a more complete understanding of the events described by Tacitus. Although some legal aspects remain uncertain, what is clear is that early Church historians seized on the negative portrayal of Nero and developed it considerably for their own purposes. For these early Church writers, Nero was an evil ruler who attacked 'the true people of God'. Therefore, he needed to be opposed, even to the point of death. And, other rulers like him who followed also needed to be identified and opposed even if that also meant death for the faith.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the next emperor to be likened to Nero by Eusebius was Domitian and that view persisted almost without opposition

until more recent times. Both early Christian and non-Christian Roman writers subjected Domitian's reign to a hostile assessment, and the accuracy of that assessment needs to be challenged. Of first concern is the emperor's character and some consideration of that aspect is necessary to determine if the historical record has assessed the emperor fairly and without undue prejudice. Once that is established, some discussion of the alleged persecution will be possible.

The next chapter will focus on the early Christian literary traditions about persecution in the First Century will show how the emperor's character came to be so closely linked to that of Nero. Later chapters will show how Christian writers promoted the negative view of Domitian and how that view survived over the centuries.

Chapter Four

Christian literary traditions about persecution in the First Century AD

Introduction

This chapter will consider what Christian writers had to say about persecution and is essential for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of the works about Domitian have neglected to comment in detail about the Christian perspective on persecution. If it can be demonstrated that a 'persecution expectation' existed within the Christian community prior to the reign of Domitian, then incorporating any alleged persecuting Emperor into the apostolic and later post-apostolic writings would not be too difficult. Secondly, discussion continues, particularly of the post-apostolic writings as they may apply to Domitian, and that examination should be reconsidered in the light of current revisionist writings.

In any discussion of Rome's relationship with the Christian church, there are broadly speaking two classes of ancient writers. There are those who write from a religious Judeo-Christian perspective and those who write with a pagan perspective. In this chapter, sources referred to as 'Christian literature' will be examined regarding persecution and this will include books from the New Testament, works from the apostolic fathers, and the apologists.

Opposition and persecution is an important theme in several New Testament books including the *Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)*, *Acts*, *Hebrews*, *1 Peter* and *Revelation*. Paul's letter to the *Romans* does not consider persecution in great detail; however this issue was briefly raised and will be noted after comments about the book of *Acts*.

This chapter will conclude that the *Gospels* and the *Acts of the Apostles* indicate that opposition to the Christians came from the Jews and not the Romans for the other canonical books which also comment on persecution - *Hebrews*, *1 Peter* and *Revelation* - there are a number of problems relating to these documents. For example, dating is uncertain, context is often vague, and Domitian is not mentioned in any of these records. Commenting on the Apostolic Fathers, some modern writers have assumed a Domitianic persecution, but that has not been conclusively proved. Again, the available ancient literature is non-specific when commenting on persecution. The Apologists, Tertullian and Lactantius did identify Domitian, but, as has already been noted, these authors (including the historian Eusebius) wrote much later than the events in question and they provided only brief details about the Emperor.

The study of New Testament material (including authorship, dating and genre) continues to be a widely debated subject and a wide spectrum of views exists (see Quasten, 1950; Wilder, 1964; Chadwick, 1996; Sider, 1971; Robinson, 1976; Kermode, 1979; Aune, 1987 and 1988; Metzger, 1988; Sanders and Davies, 1989; Tolbert, 1989; Cameron, 1991; Burrige, 1992; Bowersock, 1994; Dihle, 1994; Gamble, 1995; Barnett, 1997; Ehrman, 1997; Potter, 1999; Novak, 2001, and McKechnie, 2001). Similarly, the work of the Apostolic Fathers and the early Apologists also provides wide-ranging discussion and debate (see Quasten, 1950; Grant, 1988; Metzger, 1988; Holmes, 1999; McKechnie, 1999; Gamble, 1995; and Edwards, 1999). The acceptance of these documents as authentic and reliable has raised many contentious issues, and, by the time Eusebius' substantial history was compiled, a number of difficulties surrounding historical fact and accuracy had

already been established. Some non-canonical Christian writings indicated that the early Christians were persecuted because there were laws used against this illegal sect; however the New Testament offers no clear supporting proof.

The Gospels

At the beginning of His ministry (c. A.D. 30) Jesus spoke about being persecuted. For example, in the *Gospel of Matthew* it is recorded that He said:

Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (*Matt 5:11-12*; cf. *2 Chron. 36:16*; *Acts 7:52*; *Heb 11:33ff*).

In this *Matthew 5* passage, Jesus did not identify times or places or particular antagonists, however His hearers understood that opposition would come from any belief system opposed to the teachings of Jesus. This would obviously include the pagan Romans, but there is no direct mention of any Emperor who could be regarded as a dangerous persecutor to the Christians. Again, Jesus warned His followers to: "Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to *the courts*, and scourge you *in their synagogues*" [italics added] (*Matt 10:17*. Hare, 1967, focused on the theme of persecution in Matthew's Gospel.). Under pagan rulers, the Jews were permitted to deal with disputes among themselves in their own courts, including many civil issues. If and when such cases could not be resolved, pagan courts were available (for example, when Jesus was brought before Governor Pontius Pilate, *Matt 27:2, 11-26*). The reference to synagogues is clear; Christian disciples, like Jesus, were brought before Jewish authorities (*Matt 26:57-66, 27:1, John 18:13-24*); Peter and John (*Acts 4:1-21; 5:17-18*). In the *Gospel of John*, just prior to His crucifixion, Jesus added these words to His closest disciples: "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you ... all these things they will do to you for My name's sake" (*John*

15:20-21; see also *Mark 13: 9-13; Matt 10:22*; for the 'name' see *1 Pet 4:14, 16* and pp. 142, 167, 170-171 of this thesis). The *Matthew 5* and *John 15* passages connect the past ("the prophets"), the present (imminent crucifixion), and the future ("they will"), and indicate the importance of the 'name' of Christ. In the Gospels, the chief opponents of Jesus and His disciples were members of the Jewish religious hierarchy (e.g. *Matt 12:14; John 11:47, 48; Luke 13:14, 17; 20:19-20*), and the Jewish leaders were disturbed by the effect Jesus was having on the people (*John 11:47-48*). There are few references to pagan Romans in the Gospels. Notable examples are *Matt 8:5-13* where Jesus healed the servant of a Centurion; *Luke 13:1* where Governor Pilate destroyed an unnamed number of Galileans; and the crucifixion event (*Matt 27:54; cf Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47; John 18-19*). The Gospels point out that the common folk enjoyed listening to Jesus (*Mark 12:37; Luke 13:17*); large numbers followed Him (*Matt 4:25; Mark 3:7, 8; Luke 6:17*).

The Acts of the Apostles

Bruce (1990) noted that the book of *Acts* (written c. A.D. 62-70 according to some commentators) is important as a defense or an apologetic document because it provides:

First century prototypes: defense against pagan religion (Christianity is true; paganism is false), defense against Judaism (Christianity is the fulfilment of true Judaism), defense against political accusations (Christianity is innocent of any offense against Roman law) (p. 22).

In the book of *Acts*, the Christian church was formed and almost immediately began suffering attacks. Peter and John were arrested and then released (*Acts 4:3-21*); Peter and the apostles were arrested, jailed, flogged and released (*Acts 5:18-40*); Stephen was stoned (*Acts 7:58*); Saul persecuted the church (*Acts 8:1-3*); Herod attacked the church; killed James the brother of John; and arrested Peter (*Acts 12:1-*

3); Paul (formerly the persecutor Saul) and Barnabas were attacked at Iconium (*Acts 14:5*); Paul was stoned at Lystra (*Acts 14:19*); Paul and Silas were jailed at Philippi (*Acts 16:23*); there was opposition at Thessalonica (*Acts 17:5-9*; *1 Thess 2:14, 3:4*, *2 Thess 1:4-5*); further opposition at Corinth (*Acts 18:12-16.*); and at Ephesus (*Acts 19:23-41*); Paul was opposed in Jerusalem and this led to his appearance before Felix the governor and then Festus, who replaced Felix. An appearance before King Agrippa followed and Paul then appealed to Caesar (*Acts 21:27 - 26:32*). Paul was sent to Rome and the book of *Acts* concluded with Paul remaining in Rome for two years. As noted in pp. 61-62 above, it is significant to note that while in Roman custody, Paul was protected and was able to keep “preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, *with all openness, unhindered*” [italics added] (*Acts 28:31*. Rapkse, 1994, considers the book of *Acts* and Paul in Roman custody; see also Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, pp. 321-323, 333-334).

Opposition to the Christians as portrayed in the book of *Acts* clearly indicates that members of the Jewish hierarchy were the prime movers. The Pharisee Saul, who later became the apostle Paul, described how the Jewish leaders initiated attacks against the Christians. In *Acts 8:1*, Saul was in agreement with the stoning of Stephen and v.3 records that he was also involved in capturing and detaining Christians. Later Saul obtained permission from the high priest to round up Christians and bring them to Jerusalem (*Acts 9:1-2*). After his conversion to Christianity in *Acts 9*, Saul (now renamed Paul) recounted his Jewish actions against the Christians when he was called to give account of his faith (*Acts 22:1-8*; *26: 9-15*; cf. *1 Cor 15:9*; *Gal 1:13,23*; *Phil 3:6*; *1 Tim 1:13*). Opposition to Paul from the Jewish leaders should come as no surprise as he accused his fellow countrymen of

killing Jesus, whom he believed was the Son of God (*Acts 7:52,10:38,39; 1 Thess 2:15*). Three incidents in the book of *Acts* show how the early Christians related to the communities they visited and how the local citizens reacted to these missionaries. When Luke, Paul, Silas and Timothy visited Philippi (*Acts 16: 12-40*), they were brought before the chief magistrates by a group of Gentiles who had obtained finance by using a slave-girl for divination. Paul had exorcised her of a spirit (in the name of Jesus Christ, v. 18) and when released from these 'powers' she was therefore unable to continue her fortune telling. Paul and his companions were accused of "being Jews (not Christians), and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans" (vv. 20- 21). Here an anti-Jewish bias is obvious together with a clear understanding that the message involved "unlawful" practices. Although Paul and Silas were beaten and briefly imprisoned (vv. 22- 23), they were subsequently released.

Soon after, when Paul and Silas visited Thessalonica (*Acts 17:1-13*) they continued to teach and preach about Jesus. Paul began his work amongst the Jews (v. 2) and opposition soon came from some Jewish authorities (v. 5). They accused Paul and Silas of being men "who have upset the world" (v. 6), and having acted "contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (v. 7). A similar charge had earlier been successfully levelled at Jesus by the Jews (*Luke 23:2; John 19:12*), and their desired effect had been achieved. This situation had the potential to create enormous problems for the Christians; however the Thessalonian city authorities apparently did not take the charge of a rival king seriously. These officials no doubt knew that Jesus, the alleged 'king of the Jews', had been publicly disposed of in Jerusalem via crucifixion and was therefore no great threat.

Later, in Asia Minor, the apostle Paul again came into conflict with local officials (*Acts 19:23-41*; c. 54-58 A.D). While in Ephesus, he had spoken in opposition to Artemis (an Ephesian fertility goddess; see Oster, 1990) and the silversmiths who made shrines of the goddess attempted to bring him before the assembly. The motive for this action against Paul was clearly damage to business and this motive was later confirmed by Pliny (*Letters 10.96.10*). Paul was identified as “a Jew” (v. 34), and one who had opposed an authorized, approved and well accepted city goddess. Paul escaped formal charges and left the city. Again, although the message of the Christian missionaries was obviously unpopular, it did not result in any serious official action being taken against them.

Commenting on the Ephesian incident, Barnes (1968, p. 49) states that once it was realized that the Christian religion was a new one, which involved the abandonment of the established cults, “the Christians could expect little sympathy or protection”. The Christians were exhorted to behave in a manner which did not promote adverse community reaction; they were instructed to be good citizens and that included being subject to the governing authorities (Harland, 2003, pp. 231-237; *1 Thess 4:11-12; Rom 13:1-7*).

In addition, Syme (1958, p. 532) believes that as far as the Roman authorities were concerned, “alien cults presented a double danger – the aristocracy weakened, the lower classes a prey to fanatics and false prophets”. The Romans and their representatives tolerated the Christians and seem to have been unwilling to be involved in any widespread organised persecution (Latourette, 1970, p. 137; Conzelmann, 1973, pp. 127-133; Setzer, 1994, pp. 44-82 provided an overview of the book of *Acts* as it related to the Jews. Sanders, 1993, pp. 1-17 commented on the

literary evidence; Dunn, 1992, pp. 187-195; Gager, 1985; Evans & Hagner, 1993; and Schäfer, 1997 considered the subject of anti-Semitism). There is nothing in the book of *Acts* that indicates that the Roman authorities were determined to persecute the Christians, and the only mention of direct imperial action is found in *Acts 18:2* where it states that "Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome".

Other New Testament books

The book of *Romans* was, according to commentators, written by the apostle Paul to the Christian church at Rome, c. A.D. 55-59. In an important section it says:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? Just as it is written, "For thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (8:35,36).

Commenting on this text, Morris (1988, p. 339) notes, "*persecution* brings before us an ever-present possibility for the early church ... *sword*, of course means execution" and the Roman administration held that authority [author's emphasis]. Verse 36 included a quote from *Psalms 44:22* (cf. *2 Cor 4:11*) and Morris added that "the words of the original psalm express the perplexity of the people of God in the face of inexplicable suffering" (p. 339). Later, in *Romans 12:14*, Paul wrote "bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not". This attitude no doubt seemed strange to the pagans, but Jesus had already provided this instruction for His followers (*Matt 5:44/Luke 6:28*).

In the book of *Hebrews* (author, date and destination unconfirmed) it says:

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a *great conflict of sufferings*, partly, by being made a *public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations*, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one [italics added] (*Heb 10:32-34*).

Unfortunately the book of *Hebrews* contains a number of problems including doubt over authorship, destination of the document, recipients, and likely dates to name a few. Various suggestions have been made to locate this document in a particular time/frame but there is little agreement over possible scenarios (Robinson, 1976, pp. 200-220; and Guthrie, 1978, pp. 685-728 summarises the discussion; Aune, 1987, pp. 212-214 comments on efforts to describe this kind of literature. An assessment [p. 213] is that this document is a sermon designed to encourage the readers to take the message of Jesus more seriously).

Lane (1998) believes that:

Hebrews was first known and used in Rome. *I Clement* provides indisputable evidence of the circulation of Hebrews among the churches of Rome. Not only are there striking parallels to the form and statement of Hebrews throughout *I Clement*, but Clement is literally dependent upon Hebrews in *I Clement* 36.1-6. (p. 216; also pp. 196-244; Caragounis, 1998, pp. 245-279).

The connection between these two documents is not a recent idea. In a section on the works of Clement, Eusebius stated that Clement attributed *Hebrews* to Paul (*H.E.* 6.14).

I Peter (addressed to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappodocia, Asia and Bithynia) is another example of a New Testament book that is difficult to date, and which also includes comments about persecution. For example:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been *distressed by various trials* ... keep your behaviour excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they *slander you as evildoers*, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation ... for such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men ... beloved, do not be surprised at the *fiery ordeal among you*, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you ... if you are reviled *for the name of Christ*, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God ... be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil,

prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same *experiences of suffering* are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world [italics added](1: 6,2:12,15, 4:12, 14-16, 5:8, 9. Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, pp. 336-337 discusses 1 Pet 4:12ff).

Described as an “encyclical letter” (Aune, 1987, p. 221), the debate about *1 Peter* as a document that includes discussion about persecution has provided considerable argument and much of it has revolved around the issue of authorship (e.g. Robinson, 1976, pp. 140-199; Guthrie, 1978, pp. 773- 790; and Davids, 1990, pp. 3-7; Harland, 2003, pp. 230-237 discusses events in Asia Minor during the First Century and noted (p. 189) that *1 Peter* 2:12; 3:19,15-17; 4:3-5; 5:9 indicates suffering “in the form of verbal abuse”; see also p. 233). One notable problem is that if the apostle Peter was martyred in Rome during the reign of Nero, this letter obviously cannot refer to the later reign of Domitian. Eusebius stated that the apostle Peter was crucified during the reign of Nero, and he also acknowledged the value and authenticity of *1 Peter* (*H.E.* 2.25, 3.1, 3.25; Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 15 appears to assign the martyrdom to Nero’s reign, but cf. *On Prescription Against Heretics*, 32 that stated that the apostle Peter ordained Clement).

Ramsay (1895, pp. 282, 286) added that *1 Peter* was written soon after Vespasian resumed the Neronian policy, c. 80. Elliott (1981, p. 87) favors the period 73-92 C.E. Elliott (p. 112) further notes that most scholars agree that the conflict in the book is “the result of imperially instigated persecution, or, as is more likely, the manifestation of local and social animosity”. On the subject of authorship, Elliott proposes:

That *1 Peter* originated from a *Petrine group* in Rome which included persons named Silvanus and Mark and an unnamed Christian “sister” (5:12-13) and was sent in the name of the martyred apostle Peter, with whom this group had been most intimately associated, to the suffering Christian household communities of

Asia Minor (p. 272).

The book of *Revelation*, addressed to the seven identified churches in Asia, has perhaps been the focus of most of the recent discussion. Clearly, the document “belongs to a type of ancient revelatory literature called ‘apocalypse’” (Aune, 1987, p. 226). Again, historians are faced with very little internal evidence, to assist in establishing the document in a timeframe. This aspect is obviously important because locating the document within the reign of a particular Emperor would help to explain Biblical texts and enable a clearer picture to emerge of the persecutions. Verses which refer or allude to persecution include:

I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in *the tribulation* and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus ... do not fear what you are about to *suffer*. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into *prison*, that you may be tested, and you will have *tribulation* ten days. Be faithful *until death*, and I will give you the crown of life ... even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was *killed among you* ... I saw underneath the altar *the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God*, and because of the testimony which they had maintained ... and I saw the woman drunk with the *blood of the saints* ... for they poured out the *blood of the saints* ... and I saw the souls of those who had been *beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God* [italics added] (1: 9,2: 10,2: 13,6: 9,17: 6,16: 6,20: 4. Guthrie, 1978, pp. 951-953 and Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, pp. 320-321 summarize the discussion about the persecutions in the book of *Revelation*).

According to Eusebius the apostle and evangelist John wrote the book of *Revelation*, and he quoted Irenaeus who identified the writing of this book to “the end of Domitian’s reign” (*H.E.* 3.18. Also Justin Martyr, *Dia. Tryph* 81.4). Collins (1984, pp. 25-29, 55-57, 76) summarises the discussion about the dating and authorship of *Revelation* and accepted that Irenaeus provided “the strongest external evidence for the date of Revelation” [c. 95 or 96 C.E.] (p. 76). Jones (1991, p. 116) however regards Irenaeus as “a somewhat unreliable second century source”.

Scholarly views regarding the dating of *Revelation* concentrate on two main periods; during or just after the reign of Nero, and during or close to the reign of Domitian. The first period is favoured by Robinson (1976, p. 252), Bell (1978, p. 93ff) and Wilson (1993, p. 605), while the second period is supported by Ramsay (1895, p. 301), Frend (1965, p. 68), Caird (1966, p. 6), Keresztes (1973, pp. 23-27), Thompson (1982, p. 15) and Collins (1984, p. 76). Pergola (1978, p. 410) believes that *Revelation* (and *1 Clement*) can be dated the end of the First Century, after the death of Domitian, and that these documents refer to Domitian's reign.

Commenting on *Revelation* within its Roman setting as it related to Domitian, Barnett (2003) noted:

There is reason to believe that, evil as *Domitian was seen to be by the Christians, he was viewed as a kind of incarnation of the real monster, Nero.*
John refers to "seven kings" (17:10):

the five [who] have fallen are Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, Nero.

the one [who] is is Vespasian [69-79]

the other [who] is not yet
come and who must remain
for a little while is Titus [79-81]

the beast who once was
and now is not is an eighth king ... Domitian [81-96]

belongs to the seven
and is going to destruction Nero incarnate [italics added] (p. 4; cf. similar views in Caird, 1966, pp. 163, 216-219; Robinson, 1976, pp. 243ff; Harris, 1979, p. 18).

Murphy (1998) adds that:

Nero was the first persecutor of Christians. It is quite probable that "Babylon the Great ... drunk with the blood of the saints" (17:5-6) refers back to Nero's pogrom against the Christians in Rome, which is so vividly described by Tacitus (*Annals* xv. 44). John may here be portraying Nero/Domitian as a parody of God's true king, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5). Just as Jesus was (incarnate life) and is not (ascension) but will come again (parousia) so too, *Nero once was,*

now is come and yet will come, but as Domitian the beast, destined not for triumph but for destruction (17:8,11).

Revelation 13 refers to “one of the heads of the beast which seemed to have a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed” (v.3)... It is likely that the “fatal wound ... healed” refers to *the fear that Nero would return and that he had in fact returned in the persona of Domitian [italics added]*(p. 43ff).

Commenting on the work of some scholars who have sought to reconstruct the period of Domitian, Murphy (1998) notes:

The conclusion is that Domitian was no worse than most other Roman emperors when it came to issues of importance for Jews and Christians, and he was considerably better than Caligula and Nero. [However] for someone with our author’s views, *Domitian or any other Roman emperor was quite bad enough to merit his complete condemnation, especially when the emperor was seen through the lens of the imperial cult in Asia Minor [italics added]* (p. 15).

These views by Barnett (2003) and Murphy (1998) may well contain truth; the fact remains that *Revelation* makes no mention of either Nero or Domitian. Collins (1984, p. 56) discussed the portrayal of Domitian as the second persecutor, ‘a new Nero’, and noted, “there is extremely little evidence that this tradition was accurate. Harris (1979) further noted that although *1 Peter* and *Revelation* both speak about persecution, there are noticeable differences:

What stands out, however, in regard to *1 Peter* is the strong contrast in the attitudes towards Rome and the secular authority. In the letter the tone is respectful and in general obedience is enjoined; in *Revelation* we have a deep-seated and sometimes violent hostility to the imperial power. Surely these two documents were not being circulated and winning approval (both claiming apostolic authority) at one and the same time? (p. 16; see also Harland, 2003, pp. 251-264 for new perspectives on *Revelation*).

Pagan recognition of the Christians

From a theological point of view, the Christians did not regard themselves as a threat to Rome in the sense of any political overthrow. Jesus rejected any thought of armed national resistance against the Romans and He made that plain in His teachings (*Matt 22:21* - “render to Caesar the things that are Caesars”; *John 18:36* -

“my Kingdom is not of this world”), and the apostles Paul and Peter supported that position (*Rom 13:1-5* – “let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities”; *Titus 3:1* – “be subject to rulers ...”; *1 Pet 2:13,14* – “submit yourselves ...to a king ...or to governors”). As noted above (p. 82), Christians were to be good examples in the community and be very mindful of their impression on their pagan neighbours (Harland, 2003, pp. 229-237; Wedderburn, 2004, pp. 192-195). Christians were prepared to pray *for* their rulers, but not *to* them.

As noted above (pp. 79-83), the New Testament book of *Acts*, which traced the early development of the Christian church, does not portray Rome as a force determined to destroy the infant church. In fact, *Acts* indicates that the Roman authorities gave the Christians every opportunity to defend themselves publicly whenever action was taken against them. Chapter Six (pp. 166-172) also indicates that Christians could be and were killed for their faith if the local governor (e.g. Pliny) decided to take action against this group. However, the chief opposition clearly came from the Jewish religious hierarchy, which was opposed to the teachings of Jesus and these officials attempted to persuade the crowds and Roman officials to confront the Christians missionaries.

In his book about Rome and the Christians, Benko (1984, p. ix) notes in his *Preface* that “there are no pagan references to Christianity in the first century of the empire and very few in the second”. In an earlier lengthy article about pagan criticism of Christianity, Benko (1980, pp. 1108-1110) considers the first two centuries and came to the conclusion that pagan authors had mixed perceptions of Christianity. He noted that during the first two centuries, the pagans viewed Christianity as a Jewish sect, a superstition, a conspiracy, a civic association

(*collegium*), a new mystery, and a philosophy (see also Wilken, 1970, pp. 437ff, 1984, pp. 31-47; Stambaugh and Balch, 1986, pp. 124-127; Jeffers, 1991, pp. 36-47 and 1999, pp. 71-88 summarise details about 'collegia'). Wiefel (1991, pp. 85 -101) focused specifically on the Jews in Rome and the origins of Roman Christianity, and in an important section that discussed the organization of the Jewish communities in Rome, Wiefel states:

The loose structure ... provided an essential prerequisite for the early penetration of Christianity in Rome. The multitude of congregations, their democratic constitutions, and the absence of a central Jewish governing board made it easy for the missionaries of the new faith to talk in the synagogues and to win new supporters. Permission for missionaries to remain in the autonomous congregations could only be revoked if the governing body considered exclusion to be necessary and enforceable. However, since Rome had no supervising body, which could forbid any form of Christian propaganda in the city, it was possible to missionize in various synagogues concurrently or to go successively from one to the other. *It is likely that the existence of newly converted Christians alongside the traditional members of the synagogue may have led to increased factions and even tumultuous disputes* [italics added] (p. 92).

On the subject of these mixed perceptions of Christianity, Benko concludes that:

There were, therefore, many opinions concerning Christianity, depending on the time period which the historian wishes to scrutinize, but also depending on the geographic location, the composition of the local congregation and also the goodwill or lack of it of the individual pagan who was exposed to the Christian movement (p. 1110).

Regarding pagan attitudes towards the early Christians, Cameron (1991, p. 22) adds that "the standard view is that Christian teaching and writing – the doctrinal and moral content of Christianity – made little if any impression on contemporary pagans, who knew little of it and cared even less"(see also p. 44). On the same subject, MacMullen (1984) confirms that:

... non-Christians generally did not know much about Christianity. Writings originally directed or later offered from within the church to an audience beyond did not include, of course, any pages that are now canonical or, for that matter, apocryphal; for those pages were rather for internal consumption. At best, the

occasional outsider who investigated them was an enemy, like Celsus or Porphyry. That leaves nothing but Apologetic literature for a wider readership. ... the experts today are generally agreed that that literature likewise served chiefly for internal consumption. And there was little enough reading of any sort, anyway. Three quarters or more of the population were illiterate. Points of contact and media of communication that we take for granted in our world simply did not exist in antiquity (pp. 20-21). Gamble, 1995, p. 113 adds, "We can only guess how widely Christian apologies circulated among pagans, but we know that they were rapidly disseminated in Christian circles".

Also in 1984, Wilken added the following:

For almost a century Christianity went unnoticed by most men and women in the Roman Empire. When the Christian movement first appeared, there was little common ground of understanding between Christians and non-Christians. The earliest Christian writings, highly theological and directed primarily at Christian readers, present the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the church as the turning point in history, whereas non-Christians see the Christian community as a tiny, peculiar, antisocial, irreligious sect, drawing its adherents from the lower strata of society. In the section on Palestine in his *Natural History* - a book written approximately a generation after the death of Jesus - the elder Pliny does not even mention Jesus or the beginnings of Christianity. By that time many of the books of the New Testament had already been written. The first mention of the Christian movement in a Roman writer does not occur until eighty years after the beginnings of Christianity (pp. xiv-xv).

How much did the early pagan historians know about Christianity? Very little if the sources are any indication. Wilken further added:

Early in the second century, however, Greek and Roman authors began to take notice of the new movement. What we have from these observers are little more than casual comments made in passing in writings that are concerned with other matters. It is not until later in the century that a pagan observer (Celsus) made a serious effort to study the movement and to acquaint himself at first hand with its practices and beliefs (p. 31. Wilken focused on the writings of Pliny, Galen, Celsus, Porphyry, and the emperor Julian).

For the most part, Wilken's observations were correct, however, in recent times views about the social composition of the early Christians communities has undergone some revision. Cameron (1991) notes:

It is no longer generally argued ... that the majority of early converts came from

lower classes. Closer analysis of the available material shows that even from the earliest stages, as can be seen from the Acts of the Apostles, converts included – indeed, depended on – people of substance who proceeded to lend their patronage to the missionaries and to fellow converts (pp. 36-37. Meeks, 1983, p. 73 states that “there was a mixture of social levels in each congregation” including “wealthy artisan and readers”. For a critique of Meeks and other sociohistorians, see Harland, 2003, pp. 177- 212).

And, notes Cameron (1991, p. 44), “before the end of the first century, Christians were few and communities were small. Pagans could afford an attitude of unselfconscious disdain” (Stark, 1996, pp. 3-27 considers conversion and Christian growth from a sociological point of view. Hopkins, 1998, p. 186ff, also discusses possible Christian numbers. Stark, 1996, pp. 29-47 and Hopkins, 1998, pp. 207 - 213, address the matter of literacy and stratification. McKechnie, 2000, pp. 55-65 provides an assessment of Stark and Hopkins).

Mention has already been made of the literary contributions of Tacitus and Pliny regarding their attitudes towards Nero and Domitian which involved people identified as Christians. In addition to the fact that they wrote as members of the educated Roman senatorial elite, Cameron (1991, p. 76) noted “the prejudices of their education and social class made them impervious to Christian ideas”. In effect, their writings made no attempt to encourage their readers to consider that Christianity was anything more than a minor, irrelevant, unwelcome intrusion into Rome’s civic and social life. The apostle Paul also added the very important observation that the idea of ‘Christ crucified’ was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (*1 Corinthians 1:23*; see also *1 Corinthians 1:18, 21, 25; 2:14; 4:10*). Early Roman historians obviously had more important things to write about than some foolish superstition (literature on why there are few classical references to Jesus has been briefly summarized by Van Voorst, 2000, pp. 68-74).

Within the canonical literature, a 'persecution expectation' is evident although the references are general and non-specific and there is no identification of any persecuting Emperor or any other Roman official who deliberately and intentionally sought to destroy any Christian community. Rather, Christian disciples were warned to expect negative responses from any group opposed to the teachings of Christ and local persecution undoubtedly existed. As noted earlier, the position of the Christians in relation to the Jews could be quite precarious. Whereas the Jews had recognition of their national identity and religion, which guaranteed a degree of tolerance, the Christians had no such status. No imperial edict had ever been issued to the Christians accepting their separatism (Harris, 1979, p. 21; Collins, 1984, pp. 85-87, 90-94, 97-99).

Jewish opposition to Christian mission

In the *Gospels* and the book of *Acts*, Jesus instructed his disciples to take the message of Christianity into the world (*Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8*). That meant that this 'new religion' / 'superstition' would very quickly come into contact and conflict with both the Roman authorities and the Jewish hierarchy, and the persecution that Jesus promised in the *Gospels* and the book of *Acts* soon came to fruition. One of the key objections related to the issue of Jewish proselytes (There are four references to proselytes in the New Testament: *Matt 23:15; Acts 2:10, 6:1, 13:43*).

Quoting Dale, Reese (1976) provided the following definition:

There were two classes of proselytes: 1) a *proselyte of the gate* was one who limited his obedience to the Jewish law and was not circumcised. His worship at the temple was also limited. 2) A *proselyte of righteousness* was one who accepted the full responsibility of the Law, and was circumcised. Such a gentile enjoyed the full privileges of the temple (p. 54).

An indication of the tension between the Jews and Christians involving proselytes can be seen in *Acts 13*. Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch and they visited the synagogue. Paul was invited to speak and his message, which included the resurrection of Jesus, obviously caused interest and dissension. The text states:

And as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the *God-fearing proselytes* [i.e. proselytes of the gate] followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming [italics added] (*Acts 13:42-45*. See Reese, 1976, p. 486).

Acts 13:50 adds that "*the Jews* aroused the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and *instigated a persecution* [italics added] against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of the city". Competition for converts is obvious in that text and that incident was repeated wherever Paul and his associates went. As the book of *Acts* indicates, it was Paul's habit to begin his mission in the town's synagogue and then move on if and when opposition arose (*Acts 17:1, 2; 19:8, 9*). Such incidents are important because they indicate that difficulties between the Jews and Christians quickly came to the attention of local authorities as a matter of law and order. These events would do nothing to endear the Jews and Christians to the local pagans and may even have resulted in such disturbances being reported to Rome. If that occurred regularly, Emperors and local authorities may have been much more likely to respond to religious clashes with greater zeal (cf Pliny/Trajan correspondence above on pp. 166-172). At the very least, negative views about

disputes involving Jews and Christians would bring unfavorable attention upon these two groups and make them more susceptible to dislike within local communities.

On the subject of relationships between the Jews and the Christians, Hopkins (1998) makes an interesting observation. He writes:

For all the differences between Jews and Christians, *Jews constituted the most obvious target customers for evangelical Christians*, particularly after the destruction of the temple, and three disastrously unsuccessful rebellions against Rome (66-74, 117-18, 132-35). By then, many Jews must have been disenchanted, disaffected and despondent, ready to receive alternative messages, or even to desert their Judaism. Some Jews must have been tempted, as the original followers of Jesus were, to join a radical renewal movement. After all, Jews knew half the Christian story, some expected or hoped for a messiah, and believed in an interventionist God; they largely shared Christian ethics, and thought that religious piety involved religious control over private life[italics added] (p. 214)

Lampe (2003) investigates the Christians at Rome in the first two centuries and included details about the relationship between the Jews and the Christians (pp. 69-79 discussed Jewish and Gentile Christians). Detail provided by Lampe is extensive and some aspects can be included here to support the comments made by Hopkins (1998) above. Lampe notes:

Gentile Christians may already have belonged to Christianity while it was still thriving *within* the Roman synagogues. Such Gentile Christians would have been recruited from the ranks of the *sebomenoi* [a pagan favoring Jewish monotheism, who is not yet a proselyte], who, on the fringes of the synagogues revered the God of Israel as pagan sympathizers of Jewish monotheism. These folk were the target of the earliest Gentile Christian mission. Christian teaching was attractive for them because it promised them a full share in salvation without circumcision and thus relativized the second-class status they may have felt within the synagogues [author's emphasis] (p. 69).

Any discussion of salvation among the early Jews and Christians would have included debate about the person and work of Jesus; identified in the Gospels as the Christ. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus was condemned by the Jews before the Roman governor (*Matt 27:2, 11-14; Mark 15:1b-5; Luke 23:1-5; John 18:28-38*). In

an attempt to make their case against Jesus as strong as possible before the Roman governor, the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of declaring Himself a King (*Luke 23:2*), and Governor Pilate queried that accusation with Jesus; a fact noted by all the Gospel writers (*Matt 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33*). Later when Pilate attempted to release Jesus, John's Gospel (*19:12*) records that the Jewish leaders told Pilate, "if you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar". Pilate was undoubtedly unwilling for any kind of Imperial scrutiny of his governorship so he acquiesced to the demands of the Jewish leaders. This incident shows that these Jewish leaders held some influence regarding law and order issues brought before the Roman governor, however this situation was probably limited to Judaea.

Opposition to Christianity from the Jewish leaders is obvious and that attitude was translated into their writings. Barrett (1989, pp. 210-211) quotes the Twelfth of the *Eighteen Benedictions* which was compiled near the end of the First Century A.D. as a 'test benediction'. *Benediction 12* states:

For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the Nazarenes and the *minim* perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may not be inscribed. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humbles the arrogant.

Barrett (1989, p. 211) believes 'the arrogant kingdom' is "perhaps Rome", and *minim* includes Jewish Christians (p. 210).

Earlier in Chapter Two of this thesis (pp. 17-18), it was noted that Van Voorst (2000, pp. 75-134) examined 'Jesus in Jewish writings'. His conclusion is worth noting:

All Jewish sources treated Jesus as a fully historical person. Like classical opponents of Christianity the rabbis and the later *Toledot Yeshu* [a medieval

document] used the real events of Jesus' life against him. They believed that Jesus had an unusual conception (the product of some sin), worked amazing deeds (by evil magic), taught his disciples and the Jewish people (heresy), was executed (justly, for his own sins), and was proclaimed by his disciples as risen from the dead (conspiratorially).

If we were to characterize the Jewish view of Jesus in one word or phrase, what would it be? The main Jewish tradition, originated in the first century, carried through the rabbinic tradition and adapted for more popular use by in [*sic*] the *Toledot Yeshu*, is that Jesus is a *magician and a deceiver*. He founded and led a movement that tried to lead Israel away from the one true God and his Torah. He used deception and magic worked in alliance with evil. Like all deceivers, he was rightly tried and executed for his religious crimes, as the Hebrew Bible directs [author's emphasis] (p. 134).

Conflict between the Jews and the Christians continued and later Christian writers made no secret of their animosity towards the Jews. In his *Dialogue with Trypho 16*, Justin wrote: "You are powerless to lay hands on us, because of our overlords [the Romans], but you have done so whenever the opportunity arose ...", and Tertullian added that: "the synagogues of the Jews are the cause of our persecution" (*Scorpiace 10*) (Quoted in Hopkins, 1998, p. 196, note 23).

The Apostolic Fathers

Many modern historians believe that *I Clement* is a principal source that discusses the reign of Domitian; however this point of view continues to be the subject of considerable debate and disagreement (Metzger, 1988, pp. 40-73 summarized the Apostolic Fathers; brief details on Clement are found on pp. 40-43).

Eusebius wrote, "Clement has left us one recognized epistle, long and wonderful, which he composed in the name of the church at Rome and sent to the church at Corinth, where dissension had recently occurred" (*H.E. 3.16*). *I Clement 1.1* does refer to "our recent series of unexpected misfortunes and set-backs", but there are no details about victims or circumstances of the problem. There may have been difficulties involving Christians, Jews or pagans.

Lightfoot (1877, p. 265; see also Holmes, 1999, p. 23) stated that Clement “was a man of Jewish parentage, a freedman or the son of a freedman belonging to the household of Flavius Clemens the emperor’s cousin”. He further believed (p. 266) that the imperial household was a chief centre of Christianity in Rome and he named other individuals who were later regarded as Christians. Those views, which promoted the idea of a ‘persecution’ by Domitian, were popular for some considerable time, but have since been challenged (summarized by Barnard, 1963-4, p. 255ff; Keresztes, 1973, p. 8). Barnard (1963-4) writes that it has been assumed for some time by commentators that *1 Clement* did refer to a Domitianic persecution. Noting a wide range of views about the dating of this document, Barnard (p. 255) finds no good reason for doubting the usual date of the last decade of the first century. In his own translation of *1 Clement*, Staniforth (1968, p. 17) concurred with that view. Keresztes (1979, p. 269ff; 1989, p. 96ff) has also considered the importance of *1 Clement* and *Revelation*, and he believed that they are testimonies to persecutions in the final years of Domitian’s reign. Barnes (1971, p. 150; *1 Clement* 3.1ff) is skeptical noting that *1 Clement* “implies strongly that there had been no persecution of Christians in the capital itself”. Jones (1992, p. 115) notes that *1 Clement* has “often been cited as evidence of a Domitianic persecution, for the work is at times ascribed to his reign (e.g. in *Hist. Eccl.* 3. 15, 16).” (*H.E.* 3.13 introduced Domitian’s reign and *H.E.* 3.17ff discussed Domitian’s persecution of John the apostle). This is possible, but Jones was not convinced. He added that it could be that:

the phrases in question might refer to prominent Christian sympathizers denounced by informers late in the 90s: three or four executed or banished could well have represented a calamity to a comparatively small group (p. 115; see also Bell, 1978, p. 96).

Jeffers (1991, pp. 90-94) has written in some detail about *I Clement* and he provided an overview of various views about the likely circumstances that may have led to the writing of the book. He too favors a time frame of about A.D. 93-97; however he outlined other points of view with alternative dates. Similarly, Holmes (1999, p. 24) favors A.D. 95-97 (see also Lampe, 2003, pp. 85-87, 206-217). As Harland (2003, p. 186) correctly noted “there is no explicit reference either to Domitian or to actions by Roman authorities, and this passage could refer to any number of troubles affecting the churches” (see also pp. 187, 229-232, 235-236).

In addition to *I Clement*, other documents contained within the Apostolic Fathers include information about persecution and reflected New Testament teachings about persecution. Like some of the canonical documents examined above (pp. 78-88), many of the writings within the term *Apostolic Fathers* carry the same disadvantages. For example, some are anonymous, context is often vague, and time-frames are not obvious. These documents did however assist later historians in establishing accounts about the ‘terrors’ faced by the early Christian church (further references to persecution can be found in Holmes, 1999, pp. 10-11, 24 and in the following letters: *The Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*, pp. 78-81; *The Letter of Ignatius to the Romans*, pp. 170-173; *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, pp. 202-221; *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, pp. 226-245; *The Didache*, pp. 246-269; *The Fragments of Papias*, 5, 6; pp. 556-561, 570-575).

Books contained within the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers that allegedly relate to the reign of Domitian are difficult to assess because Domitian is not specifically named. It can reasonably be argued that if Domitian were such a

significant persecutor, there should have been many direct references to him and accounts of his attacks against the Christians.

Conclusion

Although problems exist regarding dating and context of some of the canonical books of the New Testament, these documents make two facts plain. Firstly, the early Christians lived in an environment where physical and verbal attacks were possible at any time (pp. 166-172 below), and they knew from experience that opposition was a reality. However, the Romans are not identified as persecutors of the early church; the Christian records repeatedly state that it was the Jews who opposed the Christians. Secondly, and most importantly, Domitian is not mentioned in any of the canonical books. As noted earlier, Domitian has been likened to Nero as the second emperor who persecuted the Christian church in Rome. Christian authors have seen references to Nero and Domitian in *Revelation* (pp. 87-88 above), even though the emperor has not been named in that document, and that point of view has survived even until today. Even in the face of revisionist attempts to restore the emperor's reputation, many Christian commentators accept the long held tradition that *Revelation* was written during Domitian's reign and reflected his persecution of Christians. Domitian's reign may have caused *Revelation* to be written and the likelihood may even be strong. However, sufficient proof is not yet available. Similarly, certain proof of a persecution by Domitian cannot be found in the Apostolic Fathers. Evidence in these books is non-specific about persecution and a number of likely scenarios are possible. It is only in the later books written by the Apologists that mention is made of Domitian as a persecutor, and even then, details are brief and offer little factual content regarding dates, persons involved, and

specific laws that the Christians may have violated. The following chapters will investigate what can be known about Domitian's character from the pagan historiographical sources and what evidence there is for any alleged persecution.

There was very little early response in Roman literature to Christianity due to obvious disinterest amongst the Romans. Why was that so? Clearly, the Romans regarded themselves as spiritually superior; so why bother with a superstition whose leader was put to death in Judea? How can this apparent disinterest be reconciled with the opposition and persecution recorded in the Christian documents? The fact is that Rome responded to the Christians, and any other groups, whenever law and order issues were compromised. There is no evidence to suggest that the Christians were the victims of any Empire-wide policy of persecution. As the Pliny/Trajan correspondence indicates, the actions of the 'superstitious' Christians could and did bring unwelcome attention to their separatist position in society. If local authorities were inclined to take some kind of action, the Christians were likely to suffer in some way. Given that situation, it is not difficult to see how Christian authors continued to write within the context of opposition, and the idea of the oppressed Christian became increasingly important in the literature.

At no stage were the Christians any real threat to the Romans, at least as far as armed aggression was concerned. They had no army and promoted no wars. Yet they described themselves as sufferers in a world that disregarded their faith, and they obviously faced opposition and persecution if the local conditions conspired against them. Their literature included the concept of opposition and those who stood firm in the face of opposition were held in high regard in this life and in the one that was believed to be coming. Did the early Christian writers deliberately attempt to deceive

their readers, or try to enhance their position as 'underdogs' to garner sympathy or support? Probably not.

Chapter Five

Domitian's character in the Pagan Historiographical Sources

Introduction

This chapter will consider the character of the emperor Domitian and will focus initially on some of the early Roman literary sources. These accounts provide insights into the personality of the emperor and help to determine if the traditional negative comments about the emperor can be justified. This focus on the emperor's character is necessary and important for three reasons. Firstly, the sources often show a close link between character and actions; 'a bad emperor did bad things'. If it could be proved that Domitian was 'a bad emperor', then the contention that he persecuted Roman Christians, or any others, has a plausible context.

Secondly, some primary sources have sought to compare and name emperors who were later held in poor regard. For example, Eusebius described Domitian as "the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God" (*H.E.* 3.17. Tertullian, *Apol.* 5.4 quoted in *H.E.* 3.20. Juvenal noted, "Rome was enslaved to a bald-headed Nero" [i.e. Domitian] (*Satire* 4.37-38).

Thirdly, there is no uniform assessment of the reign of Domitian at present, and while some modern historians have accepted the assessment of the ancient writers, others have challenged the traditional views. Several works over the last four decades have sought to rewrite the story of Domitian and their aim is clear: they seek to introduce additional evidence from a number of sources and therefore correct and explain inaccuracies in ancient literary accounts.

To assist in the task of examining the emperor's character, Thompson (1990, p. 97) has listed the "standard sources" for Domitian (Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Dio Chrysostom, Juvenal, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and Philostratus); Jones (1992, pp. 273-279) provides a detailed 'Author Index' of primary sources; and Saller (1990, p. 5) notes the main revisionist authors (Jones, Pflaum, Oliver, Pleket, Waters and Syme).

Historians who support the traditional view accept the unfavorable reports of Domitian by the ancient historians at face value and are clearly reluctant to accept any change to that assessment. On the other side of the debate, several historians are convinced that Domitian has suffered far too much at the hands of biased ancient historians, and these revisionist scholars have challenged the traditional view from a number of points of view as this chapter will indicate. Jones introduced his approach by noting that "the traditional portrait of Domitian as a bloodthirsty tyrant has not completely disappeared and still needs emendation" (1992, p. vii; cf Vinson, 1989, p. 431). This chapter will establish that the Jewish Tax continued the negative picture of Domitian and that the emperor Nerva made changes when his rule began. Anti-Jewish prejudice may have been present, possibly promoted by informers; however, it is more likely that tax evaders fell foul of an emperor who was also an able administrator. On the subject of Jewish proselytes, it will be seen that many may have turned to Judaism, possibly motivated by tax evasion. However, the genuine appeal of Judaism, as opposed to traditional Roman religion cannot be discounted.

This chapter will also note responses in the early sources to the emperor's assassination and consider whether or not his character provided sufficient reason and genuine evidence for such drastic action. Included in this chapter are aspects that

relate to the writing of early biographies together with the issue of bias among the early writers. Finally, after noting cautions about periodization in literature and the use of limited literary sources, this chapter will determine if there is anything in the emperor's character that can be praised. As this chapter will demonstrate, revisionist reassessments of the emperor's reign have much to offer and provide some balance to the portrait of Domitian. This chapter will conclude that, although the historical primary sources are uniformly negative about the emperor's character, Domitian was not the evil tyrant the ancient sources describe.

In this chapter pagan primary sources will be considered first, and accounts by the historians Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius and Dio Cassius will be noted. However, before considering the ancient historical accounts, it is helpful to acknowledge comments made by Jones (1979). He notes:

of the nine hundred or more Domitianic senators, only three ... have left accounts of his reign [i.e. Pliny, Tacitus and Frontinus]. [These accounts] can hardly be considered representative of the senate as a whole, for it was not a homogeneous body; its members' origins and attitudes were far from identical (p. 2; see also p. 83).

Domitian's character according to Tacitus

Tacitus wrote about Domitian in his *Agricola* and the *Histories* (on Tacitus' historiographical method, see Plass, 1988; Mellor, 1999; Potter, 1999; and Hedrick Jr, 2000). In the *Agricola* [published c. A.D. 98], Tacitus included comments about Domitian in his account of the life and times of his father-in-law, Agricola, who died in A.D. 93. Referring to the reign of Domitian, Tacitus wrote:

Assuredly we have given a signal proof of our submissiveness; and even as former generations witnessed the utmost excesses of liberty, so we have the extremes of slavery. The investigations of the secret police have deprived us even of the give and take of conversation. We should have lost memory itself as well as voice, had forgetfulness been as easy as silence (*Agricola* 2).

Tacitus then added:

For the term of fifteen years [the length of Domitian's reign] a large space in human life, chance and change have been cutting off many of us; others, and the most energetic, have perished by the Emperor's ferocity; while we few who remain have outlived not merely our neighbors but, so to say, ourselves; for out of our prime have been blotted fifteen years, during which young men reached old age and old men the very bounds almost of decrepitude, and all without opening their lips (*Agricola* 3).

Tacitus noted that, in response to a series of dispatches from Agricola: "Domitian greeted, as his manner was, with affected pleasure and secret disquiet: in his heart was the consciousness that his recent counterfeit triumph over the Germans was a laughing stock" (*Agricola* 39). Tacitus further added:

harassed with these anxieties, and wholly absorbed in his secret – a symptom that murderous schemes were afoot – he decided to treasure up his hatred until the final burst of popularity and the applause of the army should die down; for Agricola was still master of Britain (*Agricola* 39).

The *Germania* discussed Rome's war against the Germans; however the emperor's character was not specifically discussed. The opinion of Tacitus in the *Agricola* was by no means unchallenged. Commenting on the war against the Germans, Frontinus noted that Domitian:

acted for the good of the provinces (*Stratagems* 1.1.8)... [and] he ordered compensation to be made for the crops which he had included within his fortification. Thus the renown of his justice won the allegiance of all (*Stratagems* 2.11.7).

After Agricola's death, Tacitus added:

For though he was not permitted to survive to the light of this happy age, and to see Trajan ruling - a consummation which he foretold in our hearing alike in prayer and prophecy – yet he reaped a great compensation for his premature death, in escaping those last days wherein Domitian no longer fitfully and with breathing spaces, but with one continuous and, so to speak, single blow, poured forth the life-blood of the state (*Agricola* 44).

In the next section, Tacitus noted:

It was not his fate to see the Senate-house besieged, the Senate surrounded by armed men, and in the same reign of terror so many consulars butchered, the flight and exile of so many honourable women. Mettius Carus was still rated at one victory only; Messalinus' rasping voice was confined to the citadel; and Baebius Massa was still as before, on trial. A little while and our hands it was which dragged Helvidius to his dungeon; it was we who were (put to shame) by the look which Mauricus and Rusticus gave, we who were soaked by the innocent blood of Senecio. Nero after all withdrew his eyes, nor contemplated the crimes he authorized. Under Domitian it was no small part of our sufferings that we saw him and were seen by him; that our sighs were counted in his books; that not a pale cheek of all that company escaped those brutal eyes, that crimson face which flushed continually lest shame should unawares surprise it (*Agricola* 45.)

In Book 4 of the *Histories* (c. A.D. 100-110), Tacitus commented on the early years of Domitian. Unfortunately, the last books of the *Histories*, which included Domitian's reign, are not extant. However, Tacitus did identify some attributes of the young man who would become emperor. For example, he wrote, "Domitian had accepted the name of Caesar and the imperial residence, with no care as yet for his duties; but with debauchery and adulteries he played the part of an emperor's son" (*Histories* 4.2). Later he observed:

When Domitian realized that his youth was treated contemptuously by his elders, he abandoned the exercise of all imperial duties, even those of a trifling character and duties which he had exercised before; then, under the cloak of simplicity and moderation, he gave himself up to profound dissimulation, pretending a devotion to literature and a love of poetry to conceal his real character and to withdraw before the rivalry of his brother, on whose milder nature, wholly unlike his own, he put a bad construction (*Histories* 4.86).

Domitian's character according to Pliny the Younger

Pliny the Younger had a successful public career and wrote about Domitian in his *Panegyric* and in his *Letters*. In his *Panegyric* [c. 100 CE], he wrote:

... this is the place where recently that fearful monster built his defences with untold terrors, where lurking in his den he licked up the blood of his murdered relatives or emerged to plot the massacre and destruction of his most distinguished subjects. Menaces and horror were sentinels at his doors, and the

fears alike of admission and rejection; then himself in person, dreadful to see and to meet, with arrogance on his brow and fury in his eye ... None dared approach him, none dared speak; always he sought darkness and mystery, and only emerged from the desert of his solitude to create another (48.3-5).

Later, in the same book, Pliny added this description of Domitian's palace:

Who dared then to open his mouth or say a word except the poor wretches called on for the first speech? The rest, too terrified to move, endured the forced necessity of giving assent in silence, without rising from their seats, their mental anguish as painful as their physical fears. A solitary senator expressed a single view for all to follow, though none approved, and least of all the speaker (76.3,4)

Later, in a letter (c. A.D. 105-8), Pliny referred to the senate under Domitian and he wrote:

We too were spectators in the Senate, but in a Senate which was apprehensive and dumb, since it was dangerous to voice a genuine opinion and pitiable to express a forced one ... On becoming senators we took part in these evils and continued to witness and endure them for many years, until our spirits were blunted, broken and destroyed with lingering effect (*Letters 8.14.8-10*. In 1.12.8 the emperor is further described as a 'robber', and in 4.11.5-7 his fury, rage and cruelty is described in an incident involving the chief priestess of the Vestal Virgins).

Domitian's character according to Suetonius

Suetonius also noted the emperor's arrogant and cruel nature and early in his account of Domitian's life he wrote:

In his administration of the government he for some time showed himself inconsistent, with about an equal number of virtues and vices, but finally he turned the virtues also into vices; for so far as one may guess, it was contrary to his natural disposition that he was made rapacious through need and cruel through fear (*Domitian 3.2*).

Despite the fact that the emperor "often gave strong proofs not merely of integrity, but even of liberality" (*Domitian 9.1*), "he did not continue this course of mercy or integrity, although he turned to cruelty somewhat more speedily than to avarice" (*Domitian 10.1*).

Later, after listing further negative examples of the emperor's character, he introduced his narrative of the plot to kill the emperor with a clear connection. He added, "in this way he became an object of terror and hatred to all, but he was overthrown at last by a conspiracy of his friends and favourite freedmen, to which his wife was also privy" (*Domitian 14*).

The character of Domitian according to Dio Cassius

About a century later, Dio Cassius wrote his *Roman History*. This eighty-two book narrative, which traced the history of Rome from its foundations to A.D. 229, is only partially extant. Portions survive in various MSS and in the epitomes of Zonaras and Xiphilinus (Millar, 1964, pp. 2-3; Potter, 1994, pp. 133-135 and 1999, pp. 74-78; Murison, 1999, pp. 1-27).

In his *Roman History* (c. 215), Dio Cassius devoted a book to the reign of Domitian (*Book 67*), and the opening sentence set the tone of the book. He wrote:

Domitian was not only bold and quick to anger but also treacherous and secretive; and so, deriving from these two characteristics impulsiveness on the one hand and craftiness on the other, he would often attack people with the sudden violence of a thunderbolt and again would often injure them as the result of careful deliberation (*67.1.1*).

Dio further noted that:

There was no human being for whom he felt any genuine affection, except a few women; but he always pretended to be fond of the person whom at the moment he most desired to slay. So faithless was he even towards those who showed him some favour or helped him in his most revolting crimes, that, whenever persons provided him with large sums of money or lodged false information against large numbers of people, he was sure to destroy them ... the very offences to which they had been urged by Domitian were commonly made the pretext for their destruction, his object being that they alone should appear to have been the authors of the wrongdoing (*67.1.3-4*).

The end of the tyrant – was this a turning point?

After Domitian's death, Suetonius (*Domitian 23.1*) reported that reactions to the

emperor's death were mixed:

the people received the news of his death with indifference, but the soldiers were greatly grieved ... the senators on the contrary were so overjoyed ...they even had ladders brought and his shields and images torn down before their eyes and dashed upon the ground; finally they passed a decree that his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated (Jones, 1979, p. 4; Hedrick Jr, 2000, pp. 89-130 discusses the subject of *Damnatio Memoriae*).

Dio recorded that:

Because of the hatred felt for Domitian, his images, many of which were of silver and many of gold, were melted down; and from this source large amounts of money were obtained. The arches, too, of which a very great number were being erected to this one man, were torn down (68.1-2; Pliny, *Pan.52.4-5*).

The above sources clearly indicate that the emperor was regarded as a tyrant and the comments about his character uniformly focused on his cruel and savage nature. It is significant to note that both Tacitus and Pliny regarded Domitian's entire reign as one of total and complete violence (Tacitus, *Agricola 3*; Pliny, *Pan.52.7*).

Summarizing the emperor's assassination, Wallace-Hadrill (1984) notes:

The death of Domitian marked a turning point of sorts in the history of Latin literature. Writers could again breathe the air of liberty and express their feelings without inhibition (or so Tacitus claimed). Intellectuals congratulated themselves on a minor literary renaissance. A Golden Age had returned, in which one could look back in astonishment and relief at the grim era that had preceded. The empire had paused in its downward progress towards senility; and recovered a measure of youthful vigour. Suetonius too shares in this Golden Age euphoria. A crow on the Capitol had predicted that after Domitian all would be well, and the abstinence and moderation of succeeding rulers had confirmed their hope (pp. 200-201. *Dom 23.2*. See also M. Grant, 1970, pp. 271-340; Jones, 1979, p. 46ff; Ogilvie, 1980, pp. 180, 226-228, 236, 250-257; Martin, 1981, pp. 36, 38, 40, 59; Mellor, 1993, pp. 8-9, 13-14, 34, 98, 100).

In a supporting footnote, Wallace-Hadrill (1984, p. 201, note 5) adds that "the topos of the return of life to literature after Domitian's death is widespread: Tacitus *Agricola 3*; *Hist. 1.1*; Pliny. *Ep.1.10*; *1.13*; *3.18.5*".

Coleman (1990, p. 20), however, believed that “periodization in literature is even more misleading than it is in history”, and, in an article that focused on literature after A.D. 96, he concluded that:

It appears that AD 96 does not represent a dramatic transformation for Latin literature, although neither was the change negligible. Under Nerva and Trajan some liberalization was achieved; even though it was still imprudent to criticize the contemporary establishment, there was apparently less risk that a satirist or historian might inadvertently run into danger in alluding to the evils of the past. It is clear that, even without any fresh initiative from the Emperor, luminaries at the court continued to prompt and produce literary composition. Imaginative literature may have to some extent suffered as a result of indifference on Trajan’s part, and technical prose may accordingly have been especially promoted. But the atmosphere of sycophantic adulation of the emperor is, if anything, intensified, and it is to the age of Trajan that we owe the earliest extant example of prose panegyric, a genre that was destined to become one of the most fertile areas of Latin literature in the later Empire (pp. 38-39).

This caution is helpful because a number of writers, both ancient and modern, readily accepted the view that with the passing of Domitian a great deal changed. Clearly that may not have been the case in all aspects.

The actions of a feared emperor

Given that the above quotes about the emperor’s character are extremely negative, what specific evidence has been provided about the emperor’s actions to support those critical assertions? A number of observations may be made.

Firstly, there is the issue of the emperor’s cruelty. Suetonius provided considerable evidence of actions the emperor took against certain individuals, many who are named. Victims included a pupil of a pantomime actor, a historian and his writers, a householder who commented about a gladiator, many senators, and even one of his own stewards (Suetonius, *Domitian 10-11*).

Dio Cassius also recorded a macabre dinner party that Domitian gave for a number of prominent senators and knights. The entire occasion was made to

resemble a funeral and the emperor's discussion focused on death and slaughter. Later, when the frightened guests had gone home, gifts were sent to them including a 'grave-stone' with their names engraved. As Dio noted, the guests "passed the entire night in terror" (*Roman History, Book 67.9*). Was this a genuine attempt by the emperor to use terror, or was it merely a rather elaborate, tactless joke? Opinions remain divided, but given the immediate lack of action taken against the terrified diners, it looks more like a joke.

Secondly, it was alleged that Domitian often made charges of disloyalty and treason and that he employed informers to further that cause (Rutledge, 2001, pp. 129-135, 155, 173-174). According to Suetonius, "He [Domitian] used to say that the lot of princes was most unhappy, since when they discovered a conspiracy, no one believed them unless they had been killed" (*Domitian 21*). Pliny recorded that Domitian brought charges of treason to incriminate "men who had committed no crime" (*Pan.42.1*). Later he added that Domitian was "that most treacherous of emperors" (*Pan.95.3*).

Suetonius added, "it was enough to allege any action or word derogatory to the majesty of the prince" (*Domitian 12.1*). Even in public entertainment arenas people were not safe. Pliny also wrote that:

He was a madman, blind to the true meaning of his position, who used the arena for collecting charges of high treason, who felt himself slighted and scorned if he failed to pay homage to his gladiators, taking any criticism of them to himself and seeing insults to his own godhead and divinity; who deemed himself the equal of the gods yet raised his gladiators to be his equal (*Pan.33.4*).

Thirdly, there were charges about Domitian's alleged sexual misconduct.

Suetonius wrote "not to mention all details, after making free with the wives of many men, he went so far as to marry Domitia Longina, who was the wife of Aelius

Lamia" (*Dom.1*). That same chapter also accused the emperor of youthful homosexuality; and already noted was the comment by Tacitus that debauchery and adulteries marked Domitian's early years (*Histories 4.2*; cf. Dio Cassius, *Roman History 67.2.3*).

Evidence of cruelty, and accusations of treason to get rid of suspected opponents, together with sexual misconduct marked the reign of Domitian. Clearly, these accounts provide a compelling picture of an emperor who was feared by some members of the senatorial class. As far as these ancient sources are concerned, fear certainly appears to have been one of the ways Domitian deliberately chose to exercise personal power and control, particularly over the senators.

The issue of the Jewish Tax

Suetonius explained Domitian's situation. The emperor was "reduced to financial straits by the costs of his buildings and shows" (*Dom 12.1*), and to achieve his goals, "he had no hesitation in resorting to every sort of robbery" (*Dom 12.1*; cf. Jones, 1979, p. 62). In a revealing passage, Suetonius further added:

Besides other taxes, that on the Jews was levied with the utmost vigour, and those who were prosecuted 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. I recall being present in my youth when the person of a man ninety years old was examined before the procurator and a very crowded court, to see whether he was circumcised (*Dom 12.2*).

In the first year of Nerva's reign, in A.D. 96, coins were minted which proclaimed '*fisci Judaici calumnia sublata*' ('Jewish Tax Misrepresentation Removed'), and although the tax was not removed, it seems certain that Nerva changed the method of collection. Grainger (2003, p. 53) explains; "Nerva's measure was not a relief for the Jews, for the tax was not cancelled, but a relief for those who had been made to pay the tax wrongly – that is, those who were identified

as Jews by tax collectors, but who were not" (see also Smallwood, 1956, pp. 1-13; 1976, pp. 376-385; Bruce, 1964, pp. 34-45; Reicke, 1968, pp. 285- 286, 297; Thompson, 1982, pp. 329-342; Goodman, 1989, pp. 40-44; 1994, pp. 120-126; Jones, 1992, pp. 118-119; Williams, 1990, pp. 196-211; Feldman, 1993, pp. 344-348; Judge, 1993, pp. 82-98; Westenholz, 1995, pp. 74-78).

The effect of this tax as it related to the alleged persecution by Domitian has also been the subject of much discussion. Past historians like Lightfoot and Kidd made no connection between the tax and the alleged persecution, but Ramsay (1895, p. 265) acknowledged, "the exaction was accompanied with much hardship, with insult, and even with violence to the person of suspects". Later commentators identified the tax as an important aspect of Domitian's harsh actions and the Suetonius passage has generated considerable discussion.

Smallwood (1956, p. 3; 1976, pp. 376-378) notes two classes of people who could be regarded as tax-evaders; "those who lived a Jewish life without admitting it, and those who concealed their nationality and failed to pay the tax due from them. The latter were clearly Jews by race". Smallwood goes on to add (1956, p. 3; see also 1976, p. 376) that some of these tax-evaders were practicing Jews who were protesting against the tax; some would have been Jews who had abandoned their faith and lapsed into paganism; and others may have been Jews who had become Christians. This last group of tax-evaders may have considered themselves exempt from the tax. Circumcised proselytes would have obviously been eligible for the tax due to easy identification, as described by Suetonius in his account of the physical inspection of the ninety year old man. Jones (1992, p. 118) is convinced that "the Jewish policy of active proselytizing aroused Domitian's anger", and added to his

determination to collect the tax. Smallwood (1956, p. 3) also makes the helpful observation that “the imposition of a tax on the Jews possibly helped to clarify the distinction between the two religions” (i.e. Judaism and Christianity). Goodman (1994, pp. 46, 124-125) is convinced that the tax enabled the Romans to determine who was a Jew for the purpose of the tax and it also helped to clarify the religious status of the individual. Goodman’s hypothesis:

is that this new definition of Jewish identity by the Roman state may have resulted in an increased concern by Jews themselves to define who did and did not belong to their community (p. 125; 1989a, pp. 40-44).

Those who lived a Jewish life without making a formal profession of Judaism were obviously gentile converts, and these are often identified as ‘Judaizers’.

Smallwood (1976) notes that they:

were loose adherents of Judaism, clinging to its fringes by the adoption of monotheism, Sabbath-observance, dietary laws and the major requirements of the moral code, but shrinking from the decisive commitment of stamping themselves as Jews (p. 206).

This group of converts was obviously financially valuable and provided the emperor with a much wider group to tax, but this also raised the possibility of abuses. Smallwood (1976, pp. 377-378) poses two questions: “how far did one have to go in Jewish practices to count as an adherent?”, and, “could adherence be demonstrated or proved legally?” Smallwood believes that the evidence for abuses is clear from the measures that Nerva took to end them, and as for demonstrating adherence, Smallwood notes the cases of Flavius Clemens, Flavia Domitilla, and Glabrio.

Pergola (1978, p. 408) believed that a “temporary coalition” of influential Judeo-Christians and traditionalist senators worked to get rid of Domitian; however, given the anti-militant nature of early Christianity (*Matt 26:52*), and their desire to be

separate from the pagan society (2 Cor 6:14-18), this suggestion seems unlikely. Pergola added (p. 408) that a “de-facto solidarity” probably existed between Jews and Christians based on community hatred against these two monotheistic groups, and that this situation was encouraged by the fact that Domitian deliberately confused the differentiation between Jews and Christians in order to include Christians in payment of the Jewish Tax (p. 409). Roman Jewish Christians may have sought spiritual reconciliation and unity with the Roman Jews, but no form of united opposition amongst Jews and Christians towards the Jewish Tax has not been established. In fact, the Roman Christians were under instruction from the apostle Paul to be obedient to the governing authorities (*Rom 13:1; c.f. Matt 22:17-21*).

More recently, Thompson (1982) found some of the earlier views unsatisfactory and he believed that the emperor was responsible for:

A systematic attempt to levy the tax on *apostates* [a person who has given up on Judaism] from Judaism ... and on other circumcised men who were not Roman citizens: people who had not previously been liable, but were regarded as *Judaei* by Domitian's administration [*italics added*] (p. 331)

Commenting on Thompson's assessment Goodman (1989) noted:

It was long assumed that the vulnerable who suffered with regard to the tax under Domitian were gentiles who had taken up Jewish practices, but L.A. Thompson has argued that this is an impossible reading of Suetonius: in these years such gentiles were accused of *ἀθεότης* and executed, so they could not have been given legal recognition by a tax at the same time. It seems more likely that those at risk were ethnic Jews who had given up public identification with their religion either by hiding their continued Jewish practices or by pretending that their customs had nothing to do with their Jewish ethnic origins, which they dissimulated ... If it was this group of non-religious ethnic Jews who were persecuted for the tax by Domitian, it is a reasonable hypothesis that what Nerva did to end the *calumnia* was to release such people from payment. (pp. 40-41; see also 1994, pp. 121-126).

Having also noted the difficulty of the state to recognize when a Jew was living a Jewish life, Goodman (1989a, pp. 41-42) concluded, “Jews were taxed if, and only

if, they declared themselves as Jews – that is, if they carried on their Jewish customs *professi*”.

Williams (1990, p. 204) concurred with Syme (1930, p. 67, note 2) when he wrote, “the ruthless exaction of the *Fiscus Iudaicus* is not a mere by-product of financial straits, but is something very much like a persecution”. Williams (1990) summarizes her views about the tax by stating:

With Domitian’s administration of the *Fiscus Iudaicus*, justice tended to come off rather poorly when it had to compete with *cupiditas* [‘sound financial sense’] and anti-Jewish prejudice. It seems fairly clear that both things were operating in this case besides powerful political and social considerations (p. 210).

Jones (1992) adds:

... men of wealth and property, those of senatorial or equestrian rank were the ones to fear for they were the only group to interest the *delatores* who could make use of it to play on the emperor’s prejudices and so, perhaps, devise charges of *maiestas* (pp. 118-119).

In addition to the numismatic evidence that Nerva moved to put an end to abuses relating to the tax, Dio wrote, “no persons were permitted to accuse anybody of *maiestas* or of adopting the Jewish mode of life” (*Roman History* 68.1.2). Keresztes (1973, p. 3) adds that “the meaning of *maiestas* was at that time well extended, the business of informers and false accusations was encouraged to suit his [i.e. Domitian] desperate purpose” (see also L. Barnard, 1997, p. 1). Jones (1992, p. 180) believes that Domitian’s reputation was damaged by his ready acceptance of information given to him by *delatores* [political informants]. Tacitus wrote that these informers, lured on by rewards, destroyed the state and could not be controlled even by penalties (*Annals* 4.30; see also *Agricola* 2). This is an important subject and additional brief comments will assist.

In his major study of prosecutors and informants in First Century Rome, Rutledge (2001, pp. 176-177) notes that Tacitus commented upon a number of intimidatory prosecutions against the Senate. Occurring late in the reigns of Tiberius, Nero and Domitian, these actions were obviously used to satisfy personal hostilities, and Tacitus clearly disliked those initiatives. Rutledge further notes that the prosecutors and informants of the first century were not instruments of terror like those of modern police states. Rutledge concludes (p. 181): “personal enmities and vendettas, court intrigue, genuine attempts to punish injustice – for the most part this is not the stuff of tyranny, but of Roman law, politics and culture”.

Discussion of the Jewish Tax enables a few conclusions to be made. The negative view of Domitian continued throughout the discussion of the Jewish Tax in the available sources, and supporting evidence is the fact that Nerva made changes to the administration of the Tax. Anti-Jewish prejudice may have been a contributing factor especially if Domitian made significant use of informers (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5 condemned the financial actions of the Jewish proselytes). However, the main factor seems to be that the emperor was an astute administrator and he took strong action to combat tax evaders.

Recent historical discussion – revising the picture of Domitian

Until recently, historians have treated Domitian rather harshly. For example, Ramsay (1895, p. 256) used words like “execration and condemnation” to refer to the emperor, and Barnard (1963-4, p. 253) likened Domitian’s reign (A.D. 81-96) to “that of Stalin in Russia” (see also L. Barnard, 1997, p. 97, note 2). Frensd (1967) referred to the emperor’s “profound hostility towards any form of religious unorthodoxy” (p. 157), together with a “growing megalomania” (p. 158). Syme

(1983, p. 134) described Domitian as “arrogant and impulsive” and having “a propensity to erratic behaviour”. Wilken (1984, p. 5) described Domitian as “truculent and ruthless”, and in a similar vein to Barnard, Wiseman (1996, pp. 19-24) likened Domitian to Saddam Hussein. Clearly, these writers accepted the evidence of the ancient sources.

Recent modern historians are obviously seeking a more balanced view of the emperor, and are less inclined to accept at face value the extremely negative early accounts of his rule. Some modern scholars have also noted that some of what the early historians wrote does not agree with more recently discovered epigraphic, numismatic, and prosopographical evidence from the Domitianic period (see Pleket, 1961, pp. 303-308; Thompson, 1986, pp. 153-159; 1990, pp. 101, 108-109; Jones, 1992, p. 197; see McCrum & Woodhead, 1961, for epigraphical, papyrological and numismatic evidence for the principates of the Flavian emperors; Carradice, 1983 regarding coinage; and Jones, 1979 regarding a prosopographical study of Domitian’s relationship with the Senate, A.D. 81-96. Chapter Seven will examine the views of archeologists and historians who have studied the archeological evidence).

In an article that focused on Domitian’s relationship with the Senate and the provinces, Pleket (1961, p. 297) noted that since Gsell’s 1894 biography of the emperor, more recent epigraphic evidence has come to light. Thompson (1990, p. 101) agreed with Pleket and Jones made a similar observation (1992, p. vii). For example, Pleket (1961, p. 303) noted that a passage from the *Oracula Sibyllina* hailed Domitian “as a benefactor of all provinces in general and of the Oriental ones in particular”. This is significant, added Pleket (p. 303), because “it reflects the feelings of those Oriental provincials who are not biased against the emperor because

of any nationalistic or religious prejudice” (see also Thompson, 1990, p. 136. The interpretation of this reference has been disputed; see Jones, 1992, pp. 110-111; Thompson, 1990, p. 229, notes 7 and 8). Pleket (p. 304) further noted the evidence provided by a letter from Domitian to the procurator of Syria. In that correspondence, the emperor instructed the official to follow orders and not permit the provincials to be burdened with demands for transport and lodgings (see also Thompson, 1986, pp. 159-160; 1990, pp. 165-167; Jones, 1992, pp. 111-112).

Some modern commentators have correctly noted that even Suetonius conceded Domitian’s care and oversight of provincial administration. Suetonius wrote that the emperor: “took such care to exercise restraint over the city officials and the governors of the provinces that at no time were they more honest or just, whereas after his time we have seen many of them charged with all manner of offences” (*Domitian* 8.2. See Pleket, 1961, pp. 314-315; Levick, 1982, pp. 63ff; see also Jones, 1979, pp. 50, 60ff; 1992, p. 109 for further supporting quotes; Thompson, 1990, p. 166; Jones and Miln, 1984, pp. 128-129 provide a further example). As Pleket (1961, p. 314) concluded: “...if Suetonius, who was openly hostile to Domitian, praises the emperor for his good administration, this praise must have been deserved: S. would indeed have welcomed *every* opportunity to blacken Domitian!” (see also Syme, 1958, p. 210; Thompson, 1986, pp. 159-162; Jones, 1992, p. 109).

Carradice (1983) wrote extensively on coinage and finances in the reign of Domitian and demonstrated (pp. 153-171) the importance of numismatic discoveries since Gsell’s 1894 biography. Carradice noted (p. 153) that “the principal difficulty lies in reconciling Domitian’s reputation as a conscientious and efficient administrator with the claims that his management of finances caused bankruptcy”,

and he concluded that “the view that Domitian's financial history represents a failure to restore a difficult situation inherited from the reign of Titus should be rejected” (p. 165; see also Jones, 1992, pp. 75-77 regarding numismatic evidence).

In 1979, Jones published a prosopographical study of Domitian's relationship with the Senate during the years A.D. 81-96, and he stated (p. 1) that Gsell's work had “been rendered obsolete in some areas by the sheer mass of recently discovered evidence”. In his conclusion (p. 83), Jones noted that “Domitian's relationship with the senatorial order is probably the aspect of his principates that has suffered most in the literary tradition”, and he added (p. 84) that it was the Emperor's revision of the Senate's role and power that led to a breakdown in their relationship (see also Pleket, 1961, pp. 296-315).

Southern (1997, p. viii) produced another biography that sought “to add a psychological dimension to the study of this man [Domitian].” This account provided a modern psychological assessment of the emperor and began by commenting on his childhood. According to Southern, Domitian suffered from maternal deprivation, which led to insecurity, and this accounted for the emperor's later bouts of solitude, cruelty and paranoid behaviour. Without minimizing the emperor's attempt to provoke terror, Southern (pp. 119-125) admitted that there was much speculation in this view, but added that modern psychological literature could offer valid points of view which could be brought to bear in this case. This approach to re-examining ancient history will no doubt produce further useful studies.

In his assessment of Domitian's character, Jones (1992, p. 196) noted two factors of concern; “the bias of the literary sources and the judgemental standards adopted by the aristocracy”. The question of bias is a very important consideration and some

brief comments about the relationship between the early writers are necessary.

However, before looking at the subject of bias, it will prove useful to briefly consider an important feature of Greco-Roman biography. Aune (1988) noted the following and these quotes provided some focus on how ancient biographies may be understood:

Greco-Roman biography, in contrast to its modern counterpart, was primarily focused on famous people as representative *types* (i.e., as representatives of group values) rather than as individuals. The primary identity of ancient individuals was anchored in kinship groups ... as well as in larger social and political units ... Individual personalities were assumed to be as fixed and unchanging as the kinship groups and the social and political units within which they were enmeshed. Greco-Roman biographies, therefore, are more *idealistic* than *realistic*. Consequently, the subjects of most ancient biographies are depicted as static personalities presented as paradigms of either traditional virtues or vices, rarely as a mixture of both (pp. 109-110).

The consistency of the ancient historians in their assessment of Domitian as an evil ruler seems to bear out that observation by Aune.

A question of bias - relationships between the early writers

Pliny and Tacitus were good friends and corresponded regularly about a number of subjects (e.g. *Letters* 1.6, 1.20, 7.20, 8.7, 9.10. Sherwin-White, 1966, provides a detailed commentary on Pliny's letters). The nature of their friendship was noted by Pliny in a letter to Tacitus where he wrote: "I am delighted to think that if posterity takes any interest in us the tale will everywhere be told of the harmony, frankness, and loyalty of our life-long relationship" (*Letters* 7.20.2-3; see also 8.7 and 9.23).

Suetonius was also a member of Pliny's circle. Pliny helped him at the bar; in purchasing property; and in gaining a military tribunate, although Suetonius turned it down (*Letters* 1.18, 1.24, 3.8). In a letter to the emperor Trajan, Pliny asked for special privileges to be granted to Suetonius who:

is not only a very fine scholar but also a man of the highest integrity and

distinction. I have long admired his character and literary abilities, and since he became my close friend, and I now have an opportunity to know him intimately, I have learned to value him the more (*Letters 10.94*).

As Thompson (1990, p. 97) noted, “those three authors and rhetors set the terms for the understanding and remembering of Domitian’s reign”. Waters (1964) also examined the aspect of authorship of the historical records and added:

the senatorial class was still in control of literature, certainly the literary history. Suetonius, though not a member of this class, was closely associated with its leading literary figures; ... Tacitus and Dio Cassius ... *wrote with a strong senatorial bias* [italics added]” (pp. 50, 65; see also Laistner, 1947/1977, pp. 131-136; Jones, 1979, p. 83ff).

However, ancient historians were mindful of the need to write with accuracy and authenticity, and, at the beginning of his *Annals*, Tacitus wrote:

... the histories of Tiberius and Caligula, of Claudius and Nero, were falsified through cowardice while they flourished, and composed when they fell, under the influence of still rankling hatreds. Hence my design, to treat a small part (the concluding one) of Augustus’ reign, then the principate of Tiberius and its sequel, without anger and without partiality, from the motives of which I stand sufficiently removed (*I*).

In his *Histories* he added:

I cannot deny that my political career owed its beginning to Vespasian; that Titus advanced it; and that Domitian carried it further; but those who profess inviolable fidelity to truth must write of no man with affection or hatred (*I*).

However, Tacitus made no attempt to disguise his extreme dislike of tyrants like Nero and Domitian. For example, he also wrote, “I shall not regret the task of recording our former slavery and testifying to our present blessings, even though with unpractised and stammering tongue” (*Agricola 3*. Mellor, 1993, pp. 76-109 noted Tacitus’ historical methods including comments about sources, accuracy, facts and impressions; Potter, 1994, pp. 132-133 notes Tacitus’ attitude to rumour and

innuendo). Similarly, Pliny made no secret of his hatred of Domitian when he described him as a “monster” (*Pan.* 48.3); Southern (1997, p. 133, note 2) describes this as “hysterical hyperbole of the sort that affords a glimpse of the depth of feeling about Domitian in his last years”.

In his major study of prosecutors and informants in the First Century, Rutledge (2001) provides the following important quote about Tacitus:

What is his purpose if not to denounce, to “out” – to “delate” – the early *principes*? What drives him, if not the same cultural dynamics that impelled his fellow prosecutors during the Principate? And let us not doubt that the *Agricola*, *Historiae*, and *Annales* are just that – prosecutions. This should be surprising to no one. Given Tacitus’ rhetorical power, his reputation as an orator under Domitian, and his apparent eloquence as Priscus’ prosecutor, how else are we to take the cases he makes against Domitian, Tiberius and Nero – especially when his presentation draws heavily on those elements rhetorical theorists noted were essential to prosecution, such as *indignatio* and innuendo? It is clear, moreover, that some of the deeper cultural fundamentals which always had motivated prosecutions are present in his works, including enmity, *pietas*, desire to make a lasting name for himself, and *fides* towards his patron the princeps (p. 181; see also p. 376, note 4).

By linking Domitian, Tiberius and Nero, Rutledge also encourages us to ask:

‘was Tiberius a model for Domitian’? A clue may be found in Suetonius’s history of Domitian:

At the beginning of his rule he neglected liberal studies, although he provided for having the libraries, which were destroyed by fire, renewed at very great expense, seeking everywhere for copies of the lost works, and sending them back to Alexandria to transcribe and correct them. Yet he never took any pains to become acquainted with history or poetry, or even to acquiring an ordinary style. *He read nothing except the memoirs and transactions of Tiberius Caesar; for his letters, speeches and proclamations he relied on others’ talents* [italics added] (*Dom.* 20).

Commenting on this connection between Tiberius and Domitian, Syme (1958)

notes that Tacitus saw similarities with these two tyrants including the fact that:

both rulers were noted for a careful management of the Empire, choosing their governors well, repressing abuses, and protecting the subject population. And

both reigns were indelibly stamped with the reproach of indictments for high treason (Vol.1, p. 422).

Levick (1978) added to Syme's observations by stating:

To Domitian, whose aim it was to reduce the Senate's role in politics to a nullity, it was the latter part of the principate that was of interest, and Tiberius' success (as he would see it) in using the *lex Maiestatis* to intimidate his peers. Besides, like Domitian, he had long been kept from power, and brought in only because the favoured heirs were lost (p. 221).

Levick also believed that:

Tacitus was writing the *Annals* when Hadrian, not Domitian, was in power, and it is a convincing suggestion that the historian discerned features that Tiberius had in common with the later Princeps, not only with Domitian through whose tyranny he had suffered (p. 222).

Levick (p. 223) further added, "both Tacitus and Suetonius (and Dio who wrote a hundred years later) present Tiberius as a man their readers ought to hate". Before the recent generation of revisionist writers emerged, the same could obviously be said about Domitian.

Was Tiberius a model for Domitian? If Suetonius's account is accurate, and if the above commentators have assessed the situation correctly, the answer would appear to be 'yes'.

While writing about events in 27 B.C., Dio made the following comments about his own *History*:

...in my own narrative of later events, so far as they need to be mentioned, everything that I shall say will be in accordance with the reports that have been given out, whether it be really the truth or otherwise. In addition to these reports, however, my own opinion will be given, as far as possible, whenever I have been able, from the abundant evidence which I have gathered from my reading, from hearsay, and from what I have seen, to form a judgment that differs from the common report (*Book 53.19.6*; Potter, 1994, pp. 133-135 provides additional details about Dio's historical methods).

In this quote, Dio made mention of 'the truth' and that aspect has understandably interested historians for generations (see Russell & Winterbottom, 1972; Woodman, 1988; Cameron, 1989, 1991; Gill and Wiseman, 1993; Bowersock, 1994; Grant, 1995; and Potter, 1999). The various sources that Dio referred to may have included the works of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny, however, as Millar (1964, p. 34) noted, "hopeless uncertainties prevail in the field of source-criticism". Despite that observation, there can be little doubt that by the time Dio wrote his Roman history, the substantial negative accounts of Domitian's reign must have had some impact on Dio (Grant, 1995, pp. 104-105; see also Murison, 1999, pp. 26, 188, 224-225).

Several modern scholars are in no doubt that the early writers consistently and intentionally defamed Domitian by focusing specifically on his evil actions and that they deliberately omitted any significant comment about any favourable actions that the emperor may have performed (See Pleket, 1961, pp. 296-315; Waters, 1964, p. 49ff; Levick, 1982, p. 50ff; Thompson, 1990, p. 101; Jones, 1992, pp. 196-198).

Why would they have done that? A number of factors have been provided. Pleket notes that the Senate probably objected to the emperor because he attempted to rule them as an autocrat; that he was tactless; and that he intervened far too much in the running of the provinces. In other words, Domitian treated the Senate with disrespect (1961, pp. 296-315; see also Murison, 1999, pp. 210, 212, 249, 255, 261-262; Harland, 2003, p. 187). Waters (1964, p. 65) agrees with that view noting, "the key to the perversion of the historical tradition is to be found in the relations of Domitian with the Senate" (see also Levick, 1982, p. 50ff; Jones, 1979, pp. 1-87; 1992, pp. 177-182, 196-198; Southern, 1997, pp. 48-50).

Earlier, Pliny's comments about the emperor's relationship with the Senate were noted and Pliny made no secret of the fact that it was dangerous to speak out against events that were taking place during Domitian's rule (*Letters*, 8.14.8-10). Sherwin-White's assessment (1966, p. 462) is that "there is not much exaggeration in Pliny's account", whereas Jones (1992, p. 162) refers to Pliny's description of Domitian's senate as "so tendentious that it is difficult to assess its worth as historical evidence".

In defence of the emperor

Thompson (1990) adds that those who wrote about Domitian did so during the early years of Trajan when this emperor was being lavishly praised. As Thompson notes, "for all those writers, contrast with Domitian serves as a device for praising Trajan" (p. 114; see also Waters, 1964, p. 71; Jones, 1992, p. 163). In his *Panegyric* to the emperor Trajan, Pliny praised the emperor by noting his modesty in rejecting his own statues be placed alongside the gods; unlike Domitian (*Pan.* 52.6). Pliny then described sacrifices made to Domitian:

Yet previously the vast herds of victims were often stopped on the Capitoline Way and large numbers forced to turn aside, for in honour of that grim statue of a brutal tyrant the blood of victims had to flow as freely as the human blood he shed (*Pan.* 52.7).

Pliny wrote at length about how Trajan's principate was a vast improvement on previous reigns (*Pan.* 53). Specifically, he wrote the following about Nero and Domitian:

Have we already forgotten in our troubles how Nero was but lately avenged? Can you imagine that *he* would have allowed the breath of criticism to fall on Nero's life and reputation when he avenged his death? Would he not guess that anything said against one so like himself could be applied to him? [translator's emphasis] (*Pan.* 53.4-5).

Can anything be said in Domitian's defence? Clearly, the emperor did have his good points and that much of his rule was not only constructive but also benevolent (Pleket, 1961, p. 303ff; see also Waters, 1964, pp. 66-67; Reicke, 1968, p. 282; Levick, 1982, p. 50ff; Thompson, 1986, pp. 159-163; 1990, p. 157; Jones, 1992, pp. 27, 78, 109-114). However, Saller (1990, p. 4) states that neither the traditional nor the revisionist position had taken sufficient notice of what he describes as "methodological problems and generic shifts of our evidence". He believes (p. 6) that the ancient documents "cannot provide the antidote to the hostile literary sources that is sought by modern historians" On the subject of accepting ancient anecdotal evidence, Saller notes that the revisionists accepted or rejected these accounts based on what they considered to be realistic. He found three objections:

the principles for distinguishing between realistic and unrealistic are always unstated and sometimes puzzlingly arbitrary ...the standard of realism is usually based on modern sensibilities ... it is logically possible for a story to be both plausible and false (p. 6; see also Potter, 1999, pp. 58-59).

Saller believes that the fragmentary evidence makes it virtually impossible to reconstruct a history that can provide sound conclusions. His own conclusion about interpreting Domitian's character is worth repeating:

The anecdotal evidence for his personality and policies is intrinsically unreliable and should not be deployed with ad hoc justifications with regard to plausibility. The documentary evidence can offer only limited illumination and must be interpreted in context. Read in isolation, an individual document is likely to be overinterpreted; only in the context of the series of imperial edicts can the document's contents be evaluated as generic or characteristic of an individual emperor... Suetonius may have been right in his portrayal of Domitian as an especially controlling administrator, but the content and number of documents from his reign do not provide corroboration (pp. 16-17; cf. Gowing, 1992, who expresses some concern about the extent and interpretation of literary evidence. Potter, 1999, pp. 59-66 discusses the problems of fragmentary evidence).

Saller remains "skeptical about the possibility of writing imperial biography in the

absence of substantial first-hand testimony from the emperor himself" (p. 17) and believes that these revisionist historians had based their findings on evidence that is scanty and in some cases unreliable. There is obviously some truth in this observation. Even modern historians acknowledge the paucity of materials, yet they believe that a clearer picture of the emperor is still possible despite the limited evidence.

In a brief response to Saller's article, Jones commented that Saller had not discussed Carradice's work on coinage under Domitian (pp. 119-121 above; Carradice, 1983, pp. 141-152, 153-171), which provided evidence that Domitian was an efficient administrator. Jones further believes that Saller's skepticism implied that modern historians should give up writing about such matters altogether (B. Jones, personal communication, 29 May 2003; 1992, pp. 75-77 considered numismatic evidence). Saller's comments, while noteworthy, appear to be overly skeptical, over cautious and ignore the vast amount of research that is a feature of the revisionist writings.

Conclusion

Was Domitian as bad a character as he has been portrayed in the ancient sources? The traditionalists say 'yes', and they continue to accept the views of the ancient writers. These modern writers believe that changing or modifying the original accounts is unacceptable because this would negate the consistent views of those closest to the events. It has been further noted that the amount of available evidence is insufficient to consider any kind of significant rewrite of history.

The revisionists say 'no' to the question about Domitian's character and they have made an influential effort to promote the idea that the early Roman sources

were extremely biased in their assessments of Domitian's reign. They accept that the emperor could be a cruel, despicable and tyrannical despot; yet he was also a shrewd administrator who exerted unappreciated control over some sections of the Senate.

As noted above, these historians believe that there is sufficient evidence to make an adequate case for revising the traditional historical account of Domitian's reign. This revised picture of the emperor is by no means superficial and is very persuasive. The revisionist view is a strong one because it has shown clearly that the early accounts were biased and that much of the emperor's reign was productive. Based on this view, it is possible to conclude that Domitian was not as evil as he was originally described. Domitian was clearly disliked by many senators, but he wasn't the first or last emperor to be held in poor regard.

What is obvious is that the pagan Roman historians, whose accounts have been noted in this chapter, provided the early Christian writers with every opportunity to continue the image of Domitian as a persecutor. They did that by portraying Domitian as a cruel tyrant. Such an individual would certainly qualify as the kind of ruler who could, would, and perhaps did, persecute the early church. Obviously it is easy to believe a person is capable of doing monstrous things if examples of such acts had already been well established in history.

Having established the view that Domitian was not as corrupt as he was originally portrayed, it is now possible to look at the specifics of the alleged persecution.

Chapter Six

Domitian's alleged persecution

Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, early Roman historians uniformly wrote negatively about the character of the emperor Domitian and a number of modern historians have sought to rehabilitate the emperor's image. Focusing directly on the bias of the early historians, these writers have portrayed the emperor as a much-misjudged ruler whose greatest deficiency may have been his inability or lack of desire to work with an uncooperative, disagreeable Senate (see Jones, 1979, for a detailed study of the emperor's relationship with the Senate). Suetonius and Dio have provided limited details of the alleged persecution and their accounts have led to an on-going debate about a number of issues. This chapter is required for two reasons. Firstly, these issues continue to be actively discussed, and, secondly, the recent revised portrayals of the emperor require that the traditional view of the alleged persecution be revisited.

Many modern scholars have suggested that there was 'a reign of terror' towards the end of Domitian's rule, while others have preferred to see these events as a brief purge of a few individuals who had unfortunately fallen foul of the emperor for some reason (Jones, 1979, p. 86f briefly considers the 'reign of terror' label). The identity and religious status of the persecuted individuals and the way the Roman writers and authorities regarded their religious identity is an area of ongoing discussion and dispute. The dividing line between Christians and Jews may have been indistinct at the time of the alleged persecution and that topic will also require some discussion.

Several issues, which have an impact on the emperor and his possible attempt to terrorize certain sections of Rome's population, include Jewish proselytism, Domitian as Lord and god, and the Imperial cult and the Christians. These subjects provide texture to a brief period that was marked by intrigue, accusation and murder. Also included here is an examination of correspondence between Governor Pliny (the Younger) and the Emperor Trajan. This material will provide helpful details about conditions within the Empire that specifically related to the treatment of Christians and will offer some helpful reflections on the reign of Domitian and existing attitudes towards the local Christians.

On the subject of Domitian as Lord it is likely that the emperor permitted worship as part of the existing religious system and as a means of uniting the empire. The Imperial cult posed a real problem for the emerging Christians. They were always under threat if loyalty to the Emperor and the Empire was questioned, even though they were prepared to pray *for* (but not *to*) the Emperor and the Empire. Also, the Pliny/Trajan correspondence will show that Christianity was regarded as an illegal superstition which required prosecution and the execution of any individuals who did not deny their faith.

This chapter will consider a number of difficulties. Firstly, the ancient accounts of the alleged persecution are not in agreement. Secondly, there has been disagreement about the identity and religious status of key individuals. Thirdly, a further difficulty is that the earliest account which sought to identify key individuals as Christian is late; i.e. by Eusebius. Finally, the existence of a persecution is open to doubt.

This chapter will conclude that although the ancient sources provide little detail about the alleged persecution, they do suggest lines of enquiry about the key individuals. The final assessment about the key individuals, after noting ancient and contemporary sources and available evidence, is that the consul Clemens and his wife, Domitilla, were probably not Christians. Sympathy towards Judaism is the most likely religious factor present and there appears to be no sound reason to change that view. It is possible, however, but as yet unproven, that Domitilla was or became a Christian. This chapter will also note how the earliest Christian history was used to promote a negative view of Domitian, and will conclude that it is very unlikely that any form of persecution against Christians took place during the reign of Domitian.

Suetonius and Dio and the alleged persecution

Suetonius and Dio Cassius recorded the alleged persecution of individuals who have either been referred to as Christians or who were, according to some later historians, possibly involved with or related to Christian. Suetonius wrote that Domitian:

put to death many senators, among them several ex-consuls, including Cives Cerealis, at the very time when he was proconsul in Asia, Salvadius Orfitus, Acilius Glabrio while he was in exile – these on the ground of plotting revolution, the rest on any charge, however trivial (*Dom 10.2*).

Suetonius later added:

Finally he put to death his own cousin Flavius Clemens, suddenly and on a very slight suspicion, almost before the end of his consulship; and yet Flavius was a man of most contemptible laziness and Domitian had besides openly named his sons, who were then very young, as his successors, changing their former names and calling the one Vespasian and the other Domitian. And it was by this deed in particular that he hastened his own destruction (*Dom 15.1*).

Suetonius did not explain what “plotting revolution” meant. However, in an age when informants were used to dispose of alleged enemies, it would not have been difficult for Domitian to get rid of any opposition. Pages 117-118 above examined the practice and influence of informants.

Further, the allegation by Suetonius that “Flavius was a man of most contemptible laziness” is not explained. Did it mean that he failed to fulfil his senatorial duties; or was it that he refused to participate in the religious affairs of the State, which included worship of the gods? Either or both of these attitudes may have been the case. Or, the reported allegations may have been totally and completely false. Jones (1992, p. 184) notes that “non-participation could, if the emperor or one’s opponents wished, be a serious matter indeed; Flavius Clemens’s *inertia* was *contemptissima* (*Dom 15.1*) and he was executed” (see also Keresztes, 1973, p. 14, note 36; 1979, p. 261; 1989, p. 92). Suetonius did identify Stephanus, Domitilla’s steward, as one of the conspirators against Domitian (*Dom 17.1*) and he also named Glabrio and Flavius Clemens (*Dom 10.2 & 15.1*). Suetonius made no mention of Domitilla.

Much later, Dio wrote:

And the same year [A.D.95/96] Domitian slew, along with *many others* [italics added], Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had a wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor’s. The charge brought against them both was that of *atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned*. Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria [as noted in Chap. 4 above, Tacitus wrote about “the flight and exile of so many unnamed honourable women”; *Agricola 45*]. But Glabrio, who had been Trajan’s colleague in the consulship, was put to death, having been accused of the same crimes as most of the others ... [italics added]. (*Roman History, 67.14.1-3*).

Clearly, there is no agreement between Suetonius and Dio regarding the specific

charges against the named individuals.

Flavius Clemens (Jones, 1992, pp. 47-48 summarises the family background of Flavius Clemens) was a consul and cousin to the emperor and was married to Flavia Domitilla, daughter of Domitian's sister and Vespasian's grand-daughter. Clearly, both were close to the throne. They had seven children, two of whom, according to Suetonius (*Dom 15.1*) were designated as Domitian's successors and their names were changed. Syme (1983, p. 132) notes that the two renamed successors survived and perhaps they were the only survivors. According to Suetonius it was Clemens's execution that brought about Domitian's assassination (*Dom.15.1*) and because one of the emperor's attackers was identified as Domitilla's freedman (Stephanus) (*Dom.17.1*), there is obviously some support for that theory (Jones, 1992, p. 48). Not long after his appointment as consul, Flavius Clemens was charged with 'atheism', and according to Dio (*67.4.1-2*), he was executed and his wife exiled to Pandateria (an island, also known as Ventotene, is 70 miles west of Naples; Fasola, 1986, p.8). Acilius Glabrio had been consul in A.D. 91 and Dio stated, "his prowess in the arena was the chief cause of the emperor's anger against him, an anger prompted by jealousy" (*Book 67.3*).

As noted above on pp. 47-50, the charge of atheism was obviously one that was not dismissed lightly, and Dio's comment that some of those charged with atheism were put to death while others were deprived of their property further indicates the seriousness of the charge. The account by Suetonius made no mention of atheism or Christians or Jews, and there is no specific charge against Clemens.

Page 50 above also established that laying charges of atheism against Jewish practices was difficult because Judaism was a recognized religion. Smallwood

(1981, p. 379) notes that atheism “had been accepted as a Jewish idiosyncrasy by Rome ever since contacts began with the race”. This charge was leveled at the Jews prior to the First Century A.D., but they had religious liberty which included exemption from participation in the state cults (Smallwood, 1981, pp. 128, 378-379; Keresztes, 1979, p. 262 adds that this term was used by Jewish and Christian monotheists; repeated in 1989, pp. 88-89). However, as Smallwood (1981, pp. 378-379) further notes, the adoption of “*Jewish ways*” by people not born as Jews constituted “atheism” because it meant the repudiation of accepted Roman pagan cults (see also Reicke, 1968, p.297; Sordi, 1988/1994, p. 47). Lampe (2003) believes that the accusation of “godlessness” in Dio needs to be clarified. He holds that:

The accusation of atheism rests apparently upon the fact that Domitilla, as a Christian or a Jewish sympathizer, did not participate actively in the cult of the emperor and therefore, brought suspicion upon herself as unloyal. Under Domitian, many were condemned because of *lèse-majesté* (Suetonius, *Dom*, 11f). “*Every action or speech against the majesty*” endangered your life. “Pietas” was defined essentially as loyalty and love of *Caesar*. “Impietas” was seen as *lèse- majesté*, as “*impietas in principem*” (the last two words could be omitted; during the reign of Domitian they are self-explanatory; for example, Pliny, *Ep*.7.33.7; 1.5.5f; cf. further Pliny the Younger, *Paneg*. 33.3f). All this points to interpreting *ἀθεότης* in Dio as the refusal to worship Domitian as god. ... *A refusal of the cult of the emperor is conceivable for a Christian woman or a Jewish sympathizer* [italics added] (pp. 200-201).

The suggestion that the cult of the emperor was the prime factor in the condemnation of Flavia Domitilla is not new and this aspect needs to be examined further.

Domitian as Lord and god

Because it is an issue that is repeatedly raised by scholars, the matter of Domitian’s divinity also needs to be critically examined. However, before examining this subject as it applied to Domitian, it is necessary to make a few general observations about the Imperial cult (the literature is extensive as this section

indicates; see also Bowersock, 1965, pp. 112-121; 1982, pp. 171-182; de Ste Croix, 1981, pp. 394-398; Momigliano, 1987, pp. 92-107).

Goodman (1994) states:

Of all the pagan cults known to have been widely disseminated in the early Roman empire, perhaps only one was, at least potentially, a proselytizing religion, and that was the imperial cult, the worship of emperors...

It is likely that the main motive force for the introduction of emperor worship in some areas, particularly in the Greek-speaking East of the empire, came from the provincials themselves, but official approval must have always been implicit, since emperors were acknowledged to have the right to intervene if they disliked the building of shrines in a particular place and occasionally in the West encouragement was explicit ... *Nor was this just a mission to inform, for those who participated in the cult thereby signified their membership of a quite specific group defined by fellow devotees – that is, the Roman empire. In the same way they undertook the adoption of a specific frame of mind – namely, loyalty to the Roman state* [italics added] (p. 31; Feeney, 1998, pp. 109-114 and Hopkins, 1978, pp. 197-242 also commented on the imperial cult as a binding factor)

Price (1984) concludes:

The imperial cult stabilized the religious order of the world. The system of ritual was carefully structured; the symbolism evoked a picture of the relationship between the emperor and the gods. The ritual was also structuring; it imposed a definition of the world. *The imperial cult, along with politics and diplomacy, constructed the reality of the Roman empire* [italics added] (p. 248).

Suetonius recorded that Domitian “delighted to hear the people in the amphitheatre shout on his feast day ‘Good fortune attend our Lord and Mistress’” (*Dom 13.1*). He then added: “with no less arrogance he began as follows in issuing a circular letter in the name of his procurators, ‘our Master and our God bids that this be done’. And so the custom arose henceforth of addressing him in no other way in writing or in conversation” (*Dom 13.2*. See also Dio *Roman History* 67.13.4; 67.4.7; Pliny *Panegyrics* 33.3-4). These quotes appear to give an impression of Domitian’s “quite extraordinary obsession with his own divinity” (Williams, 1990, p. 208), and several historians have made similar observations.

Ramsay (1895, p. 275) believed that the real motive behind the Imperial cult was political in character and he wrote that Domitian, like Caligula and Diocletian, “delighted to be styled *dominus et deus*” (Suetonius, *Caligula* 22.2-3; Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13-14). Kidd (1922, p. 74) agreed that Domitian “found satisfaction in being saluted as divine”. Smallwood (1956, pp. 5-6; see also 1976, pp. 379-381) believes that the emperor’s attitude to the Imperial cult indicated that he carried it “to greater lengths, as far as his own person was concerned” and added, “the evidence suggests that during the last years of his principate emperor worship became a test of loyalty”. Frend (1965, p. 158) notes that the emperor “appears to have persuaded himself that he was ‘Deus et dominus’” and he gave orders that he should be addressed that way. Keresztes (1973, p. 22; see also 1979, pp. 270-271; 1989, pp. 97-98) writes that Domitian was determined to have himself recognized as *dominus et deus* and he stated that “the first steps in his own personal cult were taken earlier in the provinces, but then this policy was introduced in Rome also, and opposition to it was pitilessly crushed” (see also Sordi 1988, p. 47; D. Jones, 1980, p. 1033). Lohse (1976, p. 220) is in no doubt that it was “this refusal to worship the gods of Rome and the Emperor himself which brought about the death of Flavius Clemens”. Pergola (1978, p. 407) accepts Suetonius’ statement that Domitian, unlike Vespasian and Titus, insisted on the title *Dominus et Deus* (Suetonius, *Domitian* 13). This attitude added to the emperor’s opposition to and isolation from the Senate and added to his existing cruelty, which ultimately led to his downfall.

In more recent times these views have been challenged. In a helpful summary Thompson (1984, pp. 469-475; 1986, pp. 153-159 [particularly regarding Statius and Quintilian]; also 1990, pp. 104-107) considered ancient and modern accounts of the

imperial cult. He concludes that the imperial cult was widespread both before and after Domitian; that Domitian did not seek or encourage divine titles; and it was the later writers who wrote disparagingly about Domitian in an attempt to flatter Trajan. (See also Collins, 1984, p. 72; summarized in Sanders, 1993, pp. 168-169).

Jones (1992, p. 109) agrees adding that Domitian knew that he was not a god but “whilst he did not ask or demand to be addressed as one, he did not actively discourage the few flatterers who did” (Dowden, 1992, pp. 61-63 provided a helpful summary). Southern (1997, pp. 36, 45-46) believes that Domitian did not seriously believe that he was a god; Murison (1999, p. 229) states that the word ‘dominus’ was commonly applied to emperors, and he adds (p. 259) that “the blunt *deus* may be an exaggeration perpetrated by posthumous denigrators of Domitian”, rather than “*alleged* self-deification”. Gradel (2002, p. 160) notes that the title ‘master and god’, “was never a formal title: it was never granted by the Senate, and it is never found in inscriptions” (see also pp. 190-191, 227-228, 260).

Westenholz (1995) included a photo of a bust of Domitian (c. 90 C.E) and notes that:

Domitian is shown wearing a *corona civica*, a wreath of leaves tied with two ribbons at the nape of the neck. This crown was worn only by emperors, and appears in their statues from the reign of Augustus onwards; it symbolized their status as *divi* (gods) (p. 128).

On the subject of busts of the emperors, Westenholz adds (p. 137) that heads were often “*idealized*” portraying the emperors as strong and competent, and they were used ‘as a “*form of propaganda*” [italics added] to impress the citizens with the power and splendour of their ruler’.

Reicke (1968) added:

... the Jews were not compelled to join in the worship of the emperor's image that was usual in the East (pp. 284-285; Josephus, *Ap.ii.73*, written in the time of Domitian; Schürer, 1986, Vol. III, pp. 121-122, see note 1).

Because Domitian upheld the State religion, and participation in this religion meant loyalty and support to the Roman state, it can be concluded that Domitian did not really believe that he was a god. Rather he permitted imperial cult worship as an established part of Rome's religious system and an important means of uniting the Empire.

Obviously, if Dio's assessment of Domitian is correct, and if the negative assessments of Domitian's character are to be believed, Domitian would have had no difficulty in overcoming the problem of atheism; he just eliminated the key individuals whom he assessed as a threat to either his rule or Roman traditions. The fact that some individuals were close to the Imperial throne may also have disturbed the emperor and he acted to halt the spread of whatever situation existed. These general comments will be expanded on pp. 144,150-156 below as the identity and beliefs of specific individuals are discussed. Domitian's motives will also become clearer as the thesis develops, and issues of emperor worship, taxation and Domitian's devotion to state religion become more obvious.

Jones (1992, p. 117) notes that there had been hints of anti-semitism in Latin literature for over 150 years, and he concluded that given his devotion to traditional Roman religion, Domitian may well have had views very similar to those of Tacitus or Quintilian. Who would oppose Domitian? Chapter Five has shown that opponents were apparently not forthcoming due to the pervading climate of fear.

The early Christian sources – The Apologists and Eusebius

Important successors to the New Testament writers and the early church fathers

were the Latin and Greek apologists of the second and third centuries. McKechnie (1990) notes:

Greek '*apologia*' means primarily 'a speech for a trial' and generally 'a written explanation/justification of a course of action'. Hence an 'apologia' for Christianity, or 'Christian apologetic writing', is not an 'apology' (in the sense of an expression of contrition) but an explanation of the truth and value of Christianity (p. 94, note 3; see also Price, 1999, p. 105).

The impact of the early second century apologetic writings remains unclear.

Tertullian wrote "far less do men assent to our writings, to which no one comes for guidance unless he is already a Christian" (*The Soul's Testimony* 1.4). In a study on the history of early Christian texts, Gamble (1995) states:

It has to be supposed that Christians produced the copies [of the apologies] and insinuated them among non-Christian readers. Propaganda, more than other types of literature, requires a greater effort of distribution. We can only guess how widely Christian apologies circulated among pagans, but we know that they were rapidly disseminated in Christian circles (p. 113).

Tertullian wrote numerous treatises on a wide range of subjects. In particular, his apologetic material provides valuable insights into how early Christianity related to pagan Roman society. Eusebius used quotes from Tertullian's *Apology*; one of many documents which has survived (*H.E.* 3.20; Williamson, 1989, p. 419). Tertullian ridiculed attitudes and procedures used against the Christians. In his *Apology*, he referred to Tacitus as a liar and identified him as the one who first put the idea into peoples' heads that the Christian god was an ass's head. After commenting on Tacitus' account of the origins of Judaism, he added: "and as Christianity is nearly allied to Judaism, from this, I suppose, it was taken for granted that we too are devoted to the worship of the same image" (16; Mellor, 1993, p. 40). In his *Ad Nationes/To The Gentiles*, he pointed out that the proceedings against the Christians

differed from those used against other criminals (1.2.1-3; cf. *Apology* 4.3ff).

Tertullian agreed with Pliny; what is punished is 'the name'. He wrote, "Your sentences, however, import only that one has confessed himself a Christian. No name of a crime stands against us, but only the crime of a name" (1.3.5-10; McKechnie, 2001, p. 113. Price in Edwards, Goodman and Price, 1999, pp. 107-111 provides a summary of five treatises of Tertullian; Sider, 1971 examines the rhetorical influences that shaped Tertullian's work; see also Metzger, 1988, pp. 157-160).

On the subject of the 'name', Athenagoras wrote:

But in our case – and do not you be misled as are the majority by hearsay – hatred is shown because of *our very name*. Yet *names* are not deserving of hatred; only wrongdoing calls for punishment and retribution. If the charge stops short at *our name* – and to this day what is said about us amounts to only the low and untested rumour of the populace, and no Christian has yet been convicted of evil. We too, then, ask to enjoy the equity you show to all that we may not be hated and punished simply because we are Christians – for how could *our name* make us wicked? Let no *mere name* be subject to accusation. [italics added] (*Legatio* 1.2.3; 2.1, 2, 4, 5; cf. Justin, *Apology* 1.3.1; 1.4.1).

On the subject of Domitian as a persecutor, Tertullian briefly noted:

Domitian, too, a man of Nero's type in cruelty, tried his hand at persecution; but 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 (*Apology* 5.3; quoted by Eusebius in *H.E.* 3.20. See *Ad.Nat.* 1.7.8f re Nero and T. Barnes, 1971, p. 6).

Lactantius also provided valuable information on the persecution of the early Christians and he included the reign of Domitian. He wrote:

Several years after Nero there arose another emperor who was no less of a tyrant. [that is, Domitian]. Despite the unpopularity of his despotism, he was a burden to the necks of his subjects as long as he could be and he ruled in safety until he stretched impious hands against the Lord. But after he had been spurred on at the prompting of demons to persecute the righteous people, then he was delivered into the hands of his enemies and paid the penalty. Nor was enough vengeance taken upon him by his being killed in his home – even the memory of his name was erased (*De Mortibus Persecutorum* 3.1-3).

Creed (1984, p. 83) noted that although Domitian is not named in the manuscript there is no doubt that this emperor is referred to in this section. Creed added that Lactantius followed the early Christian tradition that Domitian was the second persecuting emperor. In an important chapter about Latin apologetic, Edwards (1999) noted that some apologists attacked paganism from within. Using Arnobius and Lactantius as examples, Edwards stated:

Each rebuts the charges by presenting Christianity as the only path to virtue, as the most enduring bond of human society, and as the heir to the *mos maiorum*, the ancestral way, which Romans praise but rarely emulate (Edwards, 1999, p. 206).

In brief, this approach meant that: Christ was the pattern of Christian character and the one who surpassed all counterparts in Roman literature; the triumph of the Lord would produce a true, just and everlasting society; Christian religion was not vain, wrong and depraved as charged, but the truth which any educated Roman could learn from his own library where the corruption of their own institutions would be revealed (Edwards, 1999, pp. 206-219. Grant, 1988, discussed Greek apologists of the Second Century including the later use of these writers).

Eusebius used extensive quotations from sources no longer extant. For example, Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons and recognised by many as the greatest theologian of the second century (Metzger, 1988, pp. 153-156 provides a summary about the life and work of Irenaeus). Two of his works have survived and Eusebius also mentions several letters, treatises and homilies (*H.E. 3.18* noted comments about the apostle John by Irenaeus [*Against Heresies, V.30.3*]). Located in the first half of the Second Century by Eusebius, Hegesippus was a Jewish Christian and was one of the historian's principal sources for the early history of Jerusalem. His works now

survive only in fragments mainly preserved by Eusebius who regarded him as an important source. Eusebius also quoted from Melito who was bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor during the last third of the second century. Although Melito wrote numerous works, only fragments remain and some works attributed to him are regarded as forgeries (Metzger, 1988, pp. 122-123 provided a brief summary of the life and work of Melito). Eusebius listed many of these works (*H.E. 4.25*), and quoted a few passages, however they are all lost except for a few fragments.

Regarding Eusebius' appraisal of Domitian, Jones (1992, p. 115) notes that it was Eusebius, using earlier comments by Melito, who first referred to Domitian attacking the Christians and Jones is convinced that Eusebius began the legend of Domitian as a persecutor of the church. Eusebius wrote, "many were the victims of Domitian's appalling cruelty" (*H.E.3.17*), and he added that the emperor "showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God" (*H.E.3.17*). Eusebius stated, "so brightly shone at that time the teaching of our faith that even historians who accepted none of our beliefs unhesitatingly recorded in their pages both the persecutions and the martyrdoms to which it led" (*H.E.3.18*). Eusebius noted a specific example by stating:

that in the fifteenth year of Domitian Flavia Domitilla, who was a niece of Flavius Clemens, one of the consuls at Rome that year, was with many others, because of the testimony to Christ, taken to the island of Pontia as a punishment (*H.E.3.18*).

In that quote Eusebius identified only one victim, Flavia Domitilla, whom he incorrectly identified as the niece of Flavius Clemens and not his wife as stated by Dio (*Roman History 67.14.1-3*; Suetonius *Domitian 15.1*; Robinson, 1976, p. 232). Robinson (1976, p. 232, note 59) further adds that in his *Chronicle*, Eusebius referred

to “many Christians martyred and Flavia Domitilla and Flavius Clemens banished”. Suetonius stated that Flavius Clemens was executed (*Dom. 16*).

Eusebius then added a quote from Hegesippus, which stated that Domitian “ordered the execution of all who were of David’s line” (*H.E. 3. 19*). Hegesippus also recorded an incident that involved the emperor interrogating descendants of Jesus. Given the negative statements already made about Domitian, one might have expected the emperor to take action against such people. But Eusebius stated that the emperor “found no fault with them, but despising them as beneath his notice let them go free and *issued orders terminating the persecution of the church*” [italics added] (*H.E. 3. 19, 20*. Jones, 1992, p. 119 dismisses this incident as a legend; Wright, 1992, pp. 351-352; Bauckham, 1990, pp. 95-101, 103-105, 175 note a number of historical difficulties).

Eusebius later quoted from Melito who recorded that:

of all the emperors, the only ones ever persuaded by malicious advisers to misrepresent our doctrine were Nero and Domitian, who were the source of the unreasonable custom of laying false information against the Christians (*H.E. 4. 26*; identified by Eusebius as *Petition to Marcus Aurelius*).

In an earlier part of the same letter, Melito had complained about the treatment the Christians had been receiving. He wrote:

Whatever never happened before is happening now – religious people as a body are being harried and persecuted by *new edicts all over Asia*. Shameless informers out to fill their own pockets are taking advantage of the decrees to pillage openly, plundering inoffensive citizens night and day [italics added] (*H.E. 26*).

Assessments of Melito vary. Foxe (n.d., p. 143) described him as “an eloquent and learned man, much commended of Tertullian”. However, according to T.D. Barnes (1971, p. 150), Melito is not a credible witness because he “had no precise evidence: he employed (or invented) the story of the persecution by Domitian to

justify his argument that only bad emperors condemned Christians” (Quasten, 1950, pp. 242-248; Hall, 1979, pp. xi-xvii; Harland, 2003, pp. 185-186, 214, 229-230, 235-236 discuss the life and writings of Melito). Collins added that Melito appeared to have:

wanted to show that only those emperors who had a bad reputation among the Romans themselves [e.g. Juvenal, *Satires* 4.38; Pliny, *Panegyricus* 53.3-4] persecuted Christians, not because the Christians deserved punishment, but because the emperors [i.e. Nero and Domitian] were evil” (p. 56).

Collins (1986, p. 56) concludes, “once the assimilation was made, it seems it became traditional”.

In his *Chronicon*, Eusebius repeated information about Domitian as recorded in *The History of the Church* (Jones, 1992, pp. 47, 119). He also identified a ‘Bruttius’, who appears to be one of his non-Christian authorities for the persecutions and this unidentified person was “his authority for Domitilla’s relationship to Clemens and for her banishment to Pontia” (Jones, 1992, p. 116; Bruttius is absent from the *Church History*). Frend (1965, pp. 161, 463, note 27) states that Bruttius could be L. Bruttius Praesens; governor of Galatia under Hadrian, and Barnes (1981, p. 348, note 31) and Syme (1979, pp. 489-491) adds that he might be identified as the correspondent of Pliny (*Ep.* 7.3) (see also Barnes, 1968, pp. 35-36 reprinted in Ferguson, 1963, pp. 63-64; Keresztes, 1979, p. 266ff; 1989, p. 94ff; Sordi, 1988, pp. 43-45, 49; Jones, 1992, pp. 116, 221, note 107 regarding Bruttius).

Lampe (2003, p. 199) notes that the Eusebius text differs on three points from Dio’s text. “Nothing is said about the execution of the consul and his religious confession. Flavia Domitilla is not his wife but the niece of the consul. She is not exiled to Pandateria but to Pontia”. Lampe further adds (p. 199) that Eusebius stated

that he took his information from pagan historiographers, and that cannot mean Dio because Dio contradicted him. It is more likely that he is referring to Bruttius who reported that Domitilla was exiled to the island of Pontia because of her Christian belief.

According to Lampe (p. 199), Bruttius's account was equal to that of Dio and Suetonius. He adds that because Eusebius, both in his *Ecclesiastical History* and *Chronicle* records the circumstances almost the same, this indicates that in both cases he is accurately reporting from Bruttius. Lampe then focuses on two points where the three independent witnesses (Dio, Bruttius and Suetonius) were in agreement. He notes firstly (p. 199), that for religious reasons one (or two) Flavia Domitilla(s) have been condemned (Dio and Bruttius; Suetonius does not contradict them because he said nothing about Flavia Domitilla). Secondly, the consul Flavius Clemens is not a Christian believer because Bruttius, Cassius Dio and Suetonius make no mention of that fact. Regarding the second point Lampe observes that:

This silence is especially eloquent in Bruttius's case. Bruttius mentions the Christianity of the close relative Domitilla as the reason for the condemnation: It is improbable that he would not have also brought this reason into play and named it with Flavius Clemens, whom he mentions by name, if this reason had actually existed. Why Bruttius should have been silent about the Christianity of one and mentioned it with the other would be inexplicable. For his part, Eusebius would have loved to take up a report of the Christianity of the consul if it had been mentioned by Bruttius" (p. 200).

Summarising the evidence in Eusebius and Tertullian [*Apol 5, 4*] about Domitian, before 250 A.D., T. Barnes (1968, p. 35) notes:

Melito, Tertullian, and Bruttius stated that Domitian persecuted the Christians. Melito and Bruttius vouchsafe no details, Tertullian only that Domitian soon changed his mind and recalled those whom he had exiled. Hegesippus makes Domitian stop the persecution after seeing and discharging members of the family of Jesus who were peasant farmers, presumably in Palestine. Eusebius alleges that Flavia Domitilla was banished for being a Christians whereas Dio reports her crime, and that of others, was sympathy for Judaism and Suetonius

omits her exile altogether from his lists of Domitian's good and bad actions (pp. 35-36).

Recent assessments of Eusebius' account of Domitian

For some unexplained reason, many historians have neglected to comment on the discussion about the identity of Domitilla. Jones (1992, p. 116) observes that Eusebius banished Clemens' *niece*, Domitilla, to Pontia (3.18; not his *wife* to Pandateria, as Dio stated). Keresztes (1973, pp. 15-20; 1979, pp. 266-268; 1989, pp. 93-96), Sordi (1994, pp. 49-50), and Lampe (2003, pp. 198-205) have discussed this anomaly and the issue of 'two Domitillas'.

Keresztes (1973) explains:

Most modern writers discussing these passages concentrate their attention and efforts on the person of this newly emerged Flavia Domitilla, the elsewhere unheard-of niece of Flavius Clemens. Especially those who quite apparently wish to minimize the significance or even deny the existence of any persecutions under Domitian, mainly reject her existence and identify her with Flavia Domitilla, the wife of Flavius Clemens, as reported by Dio Cassius. On the other hand, those who more or less strongly emphasize the significance of Domitian's reported persecutions of the Church accept her separate and Christian identity and take her as only the one illustrious example of the Christian victims of Domitian. Thus the lines are drawn between the believers of the glorious existence of the Eusebian Flavia Domitilla, as niece of the consul, and those who do not believe in her existence and regard her as a phantom, a creature of Eusebius, and wipe her out of history by making her identical with the Dionian Flavia Domitilla, the wife of the consul. The number of non-believers appears far greater than that of the believers (p. 16).

Having noted the divisions, Keresztes (1973) adds:

It may be noted *there is no writer in antiquity who reports on both these Domitillas*, and it might be recalled also that while the Eusebian Flavia Domitilla was reportedly exiled to Pontia, that of Dio Cassius had to go to Pandateria, both islands favourite places for exiling disgraced Imperial ladies. Those, then, who identify Eusebius' Domitilla with that of Dio Cassius put themselves into the double difficulty of having to explain away the difference between these 'two' Domitillas' relation to Flavius Clemens and their different places of exile [*italics added*] (pp. 16-17).

Keresztes (1973, p. 17) notes some of the suggested conclusions. One solution makes Domitilla the sister of Clemens; therefore contradicting Eusebius and Dio Cassius. Another denies Eusebius' account and believes Dio Cassius, making one Jewish proselyte Domitilla. Some of those who hold this view allow for this one Domitilla to be a Christian based on archaeological 'evidence', or they believe that 'atheism' means Christianity. Then there are those who believe in two Domitillas; one being the husband of the consul Clemens and the other being Clemens's niece. Clearly, the accuracy of the Eusebius passage has been questioned and that fact also requires comment. Those who have rejected the niece suggestion believe that Eusebius' text has been corrupted or that Bruttius cannot be taken seriously as an authority (pp. 18-19). Keresztes (1973, p. 18) notes that the identity of Dio's Domitilla is well authenticated while the existence of the Eusebian Domitilla has limited support, and, that support is relatively late. Keresztes believes however, that Eusebius is just as reliable as Dio, and he finds no reason to doubt his account even if it appears to be inadequate. Keresztes's solution is that Eusebius was correct in his account; that he recorded the only Christian victim, Domitilla the niece of Flavius Clemens and his wife Domitilla. The other victims were not named because they were non-Christians and Eusebius "was not interested in including Jewish martyrs in his history of the Church" (pp. 19-20).

Sordi (1994) responded to Keresztes explanation by stating that:

the Flavia Domitilla of Bruttius' account, exiled to Pontia, is not the same Flavia Domitilla that Dio records as having been exiled to Pandataria. However, the two stories complement each other; for example, both talk of the 'many others' condemned together with the person or persons in whom the author is directly interested... However, this does not mean, as Keresztes would have us believe, that Bruttius' Flavia Domitilla was the only true Christian while others were converts to the Hebrew faith. Both Bruttius and Dio record that she was convicted with 'many others' and among those we are bound to include Dio's

Flavius Clemens and his wife (pp. 49-50).

Lampe (2003) considers the contradictions between Dio and Bruttius over the subject of Flavia Domitilla, and he notes two ways of dealing with the difficulty:

1. We are dealing with two persons named Domitilla. One of them, the wife of a consul, was sympathetic towards Judaism. The other was a Christian, the niece of the same consul and belonged as senatorial lady to the Flavian house as well. Both women were exiled to two different islands, Pandateria and Pontia, which lie off the Neapolitan coast.

2. We are dealing with the same woman. One of the two authors, Dio or Bruttius, has confused the name of the island, which is understandable in view of the geographical proximity of both islands and the alliteration of their names. Beyond this, Bruttius appears to have confused Domitilla's relationship to consul Clemens with her relationship to Domitian. She was not the niece of the consul, but his wife; she probably was, however, the niece of Domitian (p. 200).

Lampe concludes that two solutions are possible:

(1) The Domitilla named in the sources is always the same: she is a Christian, does not participate in the cult of Caesar, and is, therefore exiled. Her husband, the consul T. Flavius Clemens, is a pagan and is, likewise suspected by Domitian (apparently in respect to his sons). (2) A Flavia Domitilla, niece of the consul T. Flavius Clemens and close relative of Domitian, is a Christian. She does not participate in the cult of Caesar and is, therefore, exiled to an island. The consul himself and his wife sympathize with Judaism. Therefore, *they cannot likewise religiously worship the emperor, and their loyalty is suspected* [italics added] (pp. 203-204).

Lampe believes the two solutions held the same degree of probability:

Thus, there is a 50 percent chance for the possibility that two members of the Flavian household were inclined towards Judaism. In both cases, however, the consul was not a Christian. And in both cases, a woman of the Flavian family of the senatorial rank named Flavia Domitilla was a Christian (p. 204).

Keresztes, Sordi and Lampe all add well-considered points of view; however the discussion about two Domitillas must remain speculative because, as noted above none of the primary sources mention more than one Domitilla. This thesis accepts that Flavia Domitilla was the wife of Flavius Clemens.

Were the key individuals Jews or Christians?

As noted above, the three key characters are Flavius Clemens, his wife Flavia Domitilla, and Acilius Glabrio. The historical assessment regarding the religious status of these people varies considerably and the views have been expressed in three ways: 'they were Jewish'; 'they were Christian'; and 'the evidence is so problematical that a firm assessment is impossible'.

Frend (1967, p. 86, see also p. 159) believes that "there seems little reason to doubt that the formal grounds for the execution of Acilius Glabrio and Flavius Clemens by Domitian in 95 was suspected conversion to Judaism". He later added (p. 161) the qualification that if Eusebius' comments in his Chronicle were accurate, Domitilla (but not the unnamed Clemens) might have been a Christian. Applebaum (1976, p. 2) notes that "under Domitian it looks very much as if among the Senatorial aristocracy judaization had become a form of protest against Domitian's terror. The Emperor's assassination was the direct result of the penalization of Flavius Clemens and his wife for judaization". Smallwood (1976, p. 382; see also 1956, pp. 1-13) states that "the simplest and most satisfactory way to take Dio's account of Clemens and the rest is to assume that when he says "Jewish ways", he means what he says". Smallwood (1956, p. 7) believes that "the theory that Clemens was Christian rests on very flimsy foundations", adding that the Christians did not immediately claim Clemens and Domitilla until centuries later. On the subject of Glabrio, Smallwood concludes (p. 7) that "the evidence that Glabrio was guilty of a religious crime is weaker" (see also 1976, pp. 376-385). Stern (1980, Vol. 2, p. 381) believes that a number of scholars prefer to take Dio's account (that Judaism is meant and not Christianity) at face value, "a view that seems more acceptable". Feldman (1993, p.

347) accepts Dio's evidence and believes that the key individuals were Jewish "sympathizers". This first point of view recognizes that Dio's statement about Jewish ways meant conversion to, or sympathy towards, Judaism. The lateness of the Christian claim obviously enhances this position.

De Rossi (1879, Book I, Chap. III, pp. 84-85); Lightfoot (1868/1890, pp. 21-23, 1885, Part II, Vol. I, p. 13); Lanciani (1892/1967, p. 6; Gibbon (1776-1788/1887, p. 239); Ramsay (1895, p. 261), Harnack (1908, p. 46); Kidd (1922/1976, Vol. I, p. 73); Hertling and Kirschbaum (1956/1960, p. 122); Pergola (1978, p. 497ff) and Sordi (1988/1994, pp. 49-54) believe that Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla were Christians. On the religious identity of the key individuals, Sordi (1988/1994, p. 48) notes that "the only logical conclusion ... is that they were in fact converts to Christianity rather than the Hebrew religion". Sordi (1988/1994, p. 51) is further convinced that Domitian's persecution of these Christians "marked the beginning of the dramatic crescendo of accusations and convictions, which eventually brought about the fall of Domitian". Jeffers (1991, p. 25) believes it is "uncertain" whether Domitilla and Clemens were Christians, but he concludes (p. 62) that Domitilla "probably patronized the practice of Christianity (see also p. 187-188). Livingstone (1997, p. 499) notes that Domitilla is "regarded since the 4th cent. as a Christian martyr". Regarding Glabrio, Ramsay (1895, p. 261) noted that "in the account given by Dio it is difficult to separate his offence from that of Clemens and the others". Harnack (1908, Vol. II, p. 46, note 3) believed that perhaps Glabrio was a Christian; Kidd (1922/1976, Vol. I, p. 73) believed that he was a Christian. Leon (1960, p. 35) believes that "all that one may reasonably concede is that at some later time members of the family Acilii Glabrones became Christians". This second point of view,

predominantly promoted by Christian historians, accepts Eusebius's account that Flavia Domitilla was a Christian.

The problems with evidence from the primary sources have been apparent for some time and many historians have noted those problems. For example, Lightfoot (1885, Part II, Vol.1, p. 13) believed that there was confusion between Judaism and Christianity during Domitian's reign. Reicke (1968, p. 297) resolves the problems within the primary sources by stating that Glabrio, Clemens and Domitilla were punished for "a non-Roman faith characterized as sympathetic to Judaism", but he qualified his view. Unlike Lightfoot, Reicke believes that by the time of Domitian, identification of the Christians as a separate group from the Jews was well established, and that "there is every possibility that Domitian included adherence to Christianity among the criminal inclinations towards Judaism on the part of prominent Romans" (p. 298). Reicke concludes (pp. 301-302) that Clemens and Domitilla were patrons of Christianity; sympathizers rather than fully committed members of the infant Christian church in Rome. He believes that Glabrio was not a Christian. Robinson (1976, p. 232) notes, "the facts of the case of Domitilla and Clemens are by no means clear. Domitilla was probably a Christian, Clemens possibly a sympathizer". Bell (1978, p. 94) also finds difficulties with the evidence and concludes that "it seems risky at best to baptize and martyr Flavius Clemens on the word of an eleventh-century epitome of a third-century source" (quoted in Wilson, 1993, p. 591). Bell further notes (p. 96) that Suetonius had credited Nero with persecuting the Christians (*Nero 16.2*), "so it is likely that if Domitian had taken similar action against them as a group he would have received a favorable notice" (see also Collins, 1984, p. 69). Suetonius and Tacitus identified the Christians in

their connection to the fire in Rome in A.D. 64 and the actions taken by the emperor Nero (Suetonius *Nero* 16; Tacitus *Annals* 14). They were obviously aware of the Christians as an identifiable group and would surely have named them if they were present during this alleged persecution by Domitian (see Stern, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 130; Feldman, 1993, p. 347). Suetonius did not praise Domitian for persecuting Christians. Keresztes (1973, p. 9) also suggests that “the Jewish tragedy of 70 A.D. should have polarized the differences”. Keresztes (1979, p. 262ff) notes the difficulty of determining how to interpret ‘atheism’ and ‘Jewish ways’ and he states that those terms were used to describe Jewish and Christian monotheists (repeated in 1989, p. 88ff). As for Clemens and Domitilla, Keresztes states (1973, p. 10) that the Dio text “makes it *reasonably certain* that the category of people ‘living like Jews’, as distinct from those born in Judaism, were *gentiles turned to Jewish life*” [italics added] (repeated in 1979, pp. 262-263, and 1989, p. 89). This suggests that these people were Jews and not Christians, however Keresztes (1973, p. 14) adds that, “Eusebius, whenever he has the sources, is after all in the habit of listing in the *H.E.* Christian and not pagan or Jewish martyrs” (repeated in 1979, p. 265, and 1989, p. 95). In a section about Jewish proselytizing, Keresztes (1973, p. 15) adds that “it is not at all clear in Dio Cassius’ text that M’. Acilius Glabrio, Trajan’s colleague in the consulship of 91 A.D., was accused of and punished for Jewish proselytism”. It is obvious that the primary sources are lacking in sufficient detail and ambiguous regarding the religious status of the key individuals. Williams (1990) has summarised the dilemma:

Dio’s language is simply too imprecise to permit firm conclusions of any kind being drawn about what these alleged ‘martyrs’ believed, or did, and that the Eusebius passage which is often claimed to clinch the case for Christianity does nothing of the kind. As to the exact proclivities of Clemens and Domitilla, doubt

will persist – probably for ever (p. 207).

As Jones (1992, p. 48) notes, “some have argued that they [Clemens and Domitilla] were both Christians (or Christian sympathizers), others that they favoured Judaism. In neither case is the evidence convincing” (see also p. 115). This third point of view expresses caution in the face of conflicting evidence and some historians are reluctant to make firm conclusions because they correctly believe that sufficient evidence is unavailable.

Before discussing whether or not there was a persecution by Domitian, it is worth noting several of Lampe’s observations (2003). His comments are valuable because on this subject his investigation is more extensive and detailed than those of other recent scholars, and he has provided more in-depth discussion of several important issues. On the subject of Domitilla’s religion, Lampe (2003, p. 201) believes:

it was more probable that Dio found information identifying Flavia Domitilla as a “Christian” and changed this to a woman “inclined towards Jewish practices”. This is more likely than that Bruttius, who was a non-Christian author (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3. 18. 4), changed “sympathizers with Judaism” to “Christian” (p. 201).

Why does Lampe believe this is the case? Lampe continues his explanation as follows:

The reasons are as follows: First, Dio continuously avoids mentioning the Christians, although he might know of their existence. Second, to designate Christians as Jews is possible into the time of Dio, even though the pagans, at least since the persecution by Nero, know to distinguish Christianity as an independent entity from Judaism. Not only Suetonius in *Claudius* 25 (“edict of Claudius”) and Lucian but also Christian texts show that pagans often did not hesitate to categorize Christians as “Jewish” (for example, Acts 16:20f.; the *Acts of Peter* chap.22, from the second half of the second century; still even in *Ps. Clem.* H.4.7.2).

... A third finding also possesses some weight as evidence: If Domitilla, accused of ... (godlessness) was a *Christian*, we would be able to find parallel cases. If she sympathized with Judaism, no such parallels would occur (p. 201).

The parallels that Lampe finds are as follows:

a. Domitilla as *a Christian* would correspond to Christians of Asia Minor in the Apocalypse of John who, at the same time, near the end of the reign of Domitian, *refuse to acknowledge Domitian's divinity and are prepared to suffer persecution for this* [italics added] (pp. 201-202).

b. Christians were repeated [*sic*], accused of atheism, particularly Roman Christians. Justin's *Apology* gives abundant evidence that Roman Christians were charged with "godlessness" (p. 202).

c. Such parallel material cannot be found for those sympathizing with Judaism. It is attested that Jews were accused of atheism. By contrast, there is no known case in which the charge of atheism had been leveled against a *Godfearer* because of his inclination to "Jewish customs" (pp. 201-202).

Lampe concludes:

all three reasons attest that Dio changed the Christianity of Domitilla to an "inclination to Jewish customs" and not that Bruttius might have changed Domitilla's sympathy towards Judaism into "Christianamesse" (p. 203).

Although the various points of view expressed above attempt to resolve a number of difficulties, these views remain opinions. Therefore, in the absence of firm evidence or additional sources, it seems wise to accept what appears to be known.

Clemens and his wife Domitilla were not Christians; rather sympathy towards Judaism is present and there appears to be no valid reason to change that observation. It is possible, however, that Domitilla may have become a Christian at some stage.

Was Jewish proselytizing an issue?

Prior to the reign of Domitian action had been taken against the Jews (Whittaker, 1984, pp. 85-91; Schurer, 1986, Vol. III, Part I, pp. 150-176, as per note 1; Stern, 1980, Vols. I and II; Wiefel, 1991; and Westenholz, 1995, pp. 79-83 provides extensive detail and primary source material; Borg, 1972-1973, pp. 208-214 and Schäfer, 1997, pp. 106-118 includes a brief summary of the main disturbances). The reasons for these actions are varied and reported differently by the ancient

sources. Clearly, action had been taken on occasions to curb Jewish attempts to gain followers, but conversion to Judaism had never been banned. Modern historians have commented on Rome's response to Jewish proselytizing as it affected the Domitian era and a brief summary of some of the views will be helpful.

Smallwood (1976, pp. 205-208, 276) believed that proselytism in Rome was not new during the time of Tiberius and that many citizens, disaffected by the State cult, turned to other religions like Judaism. She believed that the majority were probably 'Judaizers', i.e., loose adherents rather than fully committed followers, and, as noted above, some of these are believed to be tax evaders during the reign of Domitian. Two methods were employed to remove Jews from Rome, noted Smallwood; conscription and expulsion.

Earlier, in Chapter 2 (p. 36), it was noted that Gager (1985) believed that in the early First Century Judaism had made significant progress in its attempt to gain acceptance within Roman society. Commenting specifically on Domitian's reign (p. 87), Gager stated "there is again ample evidence for the appeal of Judaism among non-Jews". Noting Cassius Dio's report about Glabrio, Clemens, his wife and many others, Gager adds:

Epictetus' comments on the widespread appeal of Judaism throughout the empire; the evidence of Juvenal and Martial as to the success of Jewish proselytism; and Domitian's vigorous assaults on Romans who *followed the Jewish way of life without formally professing Judaism* [italics added] (p. 87).

Jones believes that active Jewish proselytizing aroused the emperor's anger (1992, p. 118. Sandmel, 1969; Dunn, 1992; and Lieu, 1996 are helpful regarding proselytes; Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, pp. 329-331 also briefly summarize the discussion). Feldman (1993, p. 332) added that the destruction of the Temple by the

Romans in 70 C.E. did not adversely affect Jewish attempts at proselytizing. Rather this movement was successful in official circles in Rome especially under Domitian (pp. 288-341 and pp. 342-382 are useful on the subject of proselytism). Feldman (1993) also comments on the position of Romans who allegedly “drifted into Jewish ways”:

It is hardly likely that a consul would have practiced Judaism fully as a proselyte and have avoided participating in the state religious celebrations that were so integrally a part of the Roman Empire. The key word here, moreover, is *drifted* ... a metaphor that applies to a ship. It can hardly refer to conversion, which is an absolute step; it almost surely refers to step-by-step adoption of one practice of Judaism after another (p. 347).

Barclay (1996, pp. 306-319) also notes the interest in Judaism and he believed that the Jewish community in Rome ranged across the social strata (see also Segal, 1986, pp. 98-102). Leon (1995) summarized the situation by stating that:

The occasional repressive measures adopted by the emperors against the Jews were to some extent due to their success at winning converts and the fear, as expressed by Seneca and Juvenal, that the adoption of these un-Roman rites was undermining the traditional customs of Rome (p. 252; see also Jeffers, 1991, pp. 27-28).

As noted earlier in Chapter 2 (p. 36), Goodman (1989 a & b, 1992, 1994) has written extensively on the subject of Jewish proselytism and has expressed some doubt about the usual assessments of Jewish proselytizing. His views cover a wide range of aspects and it is unnecessary to highlight all his points of view, but brief comment on some of his observations will indicate the basis of his skepticism.

Goodman (1989b, p. 176 note 11; see also 1992, pp. 53- 54) notes that “in the diaspora Jews were not much concerned whether outsiders joined them or not. This lack of concern is reflected in the vagueness of Jewish terminology about the status of gentiles who accreted to their community”. This is not to say, however, that the

Jews doubted that “their role as religious mentors of the gentile world” (1994, pp. 60- 61), but that does not necessarily suggest that they were driven to enlarge their community by attracting gentiles. Goodman briefly notes some Old Testament references that indicated that God’s chosen people were to have an impact on all nations. This fact is significant because the book of *Genesis* contains God’s promise to Abraham that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). Similarly, *Isaiah* contains references to Israel being “light” to the nations (42:6, 49:6, 60:3; cf. *Luke 2:32*). Biblical references to proselytizing, both Christian and Jewish can also be found in the New Testament (*Matt 23:15; Acts 2:10,6:5, 13:43,25:5*; Goodman, 1992, pp. 60-63 commented on *Matt 23:15*).

Goodman (1989b, pp. 181, 184) believes that the idea of a proselytizing mission was never formulated and never “became a general rabbinic doctrine”. He adds (p. 185), “it is only in the third century that we can be certain that some rabbis began assuming the desirability of a mission to proselytise”

Having noted some interest in Judaism by non-Jews after A.D. 70, Goodman (1992, p. 55) states that this interest might have led the Jews to take a more active interest in the boundaries of their community. Here Goodman differentiates between “passive acceptance” of proselytes ... [and] active mission” by the Jews to gain converts. The developing Christian church, which began as a missionary movement, may also have highlighted the need to separate from this new community, and “a more mundane reason may have been the need to establish who was liable to pay the *Fiscus Judaicus* to the Roman state” (1989b, p. 184).

Goodman (1992, p. 55) further notes that if a “massive surge of proselytes to Judaism” had occurred, it seems curious “that no ancient Jewish writer claimed that

such widespread conversion had taken place". This appears to be an important consideration; however ancient history contains many significant events and situations that have not been given ample explanation. The lack of early Roman investigation into the belief structure of the Christians is one such example.

Goodman (1994, pp. 87-88) notes there is "some evidence of a Jewish mission to win gentile sympathizers in the first century", but, "this partial mission to win gentile adherents to the Jewish cult is far from the universal proselytizing mission" that is often portrayed. Although he initially noted that "references to proselytes are very rare in the first century – Josephus never used the term" (1989a, p. 42), he later (1992, pp. 53-78; 1994, pp. 63-65, 68) amended his comments by recording references in Josephus. Goodman (1989a, p. 43) also notes that "neither Roman nor Greek pagans before A.D. 96 seem to have been fully aware of the Jewish concept of a proselyte".

After examining the traditional views about alleged Jewish proselytizing in the First Century, Goodman (1992, p. 74) concludes that the Jews "lacked an incentive for proselytizing" and that such initiatives did not begin until the Second and Third Centuries. In a later, more comprehensive work (1994), Goodman discusses proselytizing in the religious history of the Roman Empire at length, and this work is essential reading for any consideration of Jewish attitudes towards their neighbours.

What can be concluded about Jewish proselytizing? The Jewish religion was legal and it is certain that many Romans, disillusioned with the traditional Roman religion, turned to Judaism either as proselytes or as "sympathizers"/"God-fearers" (Feldman, 1993, pp. 288-338 examines proselytes including their motives for conversion and their status; pp. 342-369 analyzes "sympathizers"). While some

Romans may have been motivated by tax evasion it is more likely that Judaism appealed to many citizens (Feldman, 1993, pp. 201-232 examines this subject and relates it to 'The Cardinal Virtues'; wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice). As time progressed, many Roman citizens also found aspects of Christianity appealing and far more attractive than the existing religious system. Goodman's skepticism remains helpful regarding a number of aspects about how Judaism operated within Roman society.

The Imperial Cult and the Christians

If there were any substance in this issue it would have surely placed the genuine monotheistic Christians in a potentially difficult position. If they were identified and challenged about worshipping the gods of the state, which included the emperor, then they had to worship as expected or face opposition. To do less than that would have left them open to a charge of treason and the penalty for that was death as Dio indicated (*Roman History* 67. 14.1-3; Cuss, 1974 considered the Imperial cult and the New Testament, and pp. 145-158 summarizes persecution related to the cult; D. Jones, 1980, pp. 1029-1035 is helpful on Nero and Domitian; Shelton, 1998, pp. 286-388 noted three references to Tiberius which commented on his decline of deification: SEG 11.923; Tacitus, *Annals* 4.37,38; Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 26; Winter in Gill and Gempf, 1994, considered this topic including how it related to the apostle Paul; Novak, 2001, pp. 267-272 provides ancient texts and brief notes).

Harris (1979, p. 21) adds that Millar had emphasized an important consideration regarding the context of *Revelation*. It related to the fact that the integration of Caesar worship with the local deities would have made the position of the Christians, particularly in Asia Minor, rather tenuous especially where the devotion to the local

gods and goddesses was intense. He noted that of the cities addressed in the *Revelation*, this integration had been characteristic of Ephesus, Pergamum, Smyrna and Sardis. (Caird, 1966, p. 163; Reicke, 1968, p. 279 and Thompson, 1986, pp. 156, 158-159 are helpful regarding statues of the emperors, including Domitian, which were used to promote the emperor cult).

Price (1984) notes:

For Christians ... the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross had in principle totally superseded the Jewish sacrifices and the only possible sacrifice was the repetition of this ultimate sacrifice in the form of the eucharist. This resulted in real problems for Christians in contact with pagan sacrifices. *They were happy to pray for the state but not to sacrifice for, let alone to, the emperor.* It was this rejection of the contemporary sacrificial system which was one of the major reasons behind the persecution of the Christians. In the persecutions of the Christians the cult of the emperor was less important than the cult of the gods. Emperors and others were mostly concerned to enforce sacrifices to the gods. These sacrifices might be made on behalf of the emperor, but it was only exceptionally that sacrifices to the emperor were demanded [*italics added*] (p. 221; see p. 168 below).

Price (1984) also believes:

the importance of the imperial cult for early Christianity should not be inflated. The greater issue revolves around Christians' relation to adherents of traditional religious cults rather than their relation to the cult of the emperor (p. 164; see also Price, pp. 15, 125. *Acts 17:16-34, 19:23-41* refer to the apostle Paul's reaction to traditional religious cults in Athens and Ephesus).

Thompson (1990) concludes:

For the most part, the emperor in the imperial cult was subordinated to the gods, so that the imperial cult could be assimilated to the cult of the gods. *For Christians, however, who did not accept the traditional Greek gods and saw them as antithetical to their own religious claims, the imperial cult was rejected as a correlate to the rejection of traditional cults.* The forms of traditional Greek religion were central, the imperial cult was secondary to that [*italics added*] (p. 164).

Already Jones (1992, p. 115) has noted the lack of evidence of any persecution of Roman Christians, particularly from impartial, independent sources. Jeffers (2002,

pp. 123-140) reviewed the literature about the Imperial cult and concluded that Paul's writings in the New Testament, particularly as they related to power relations, can be interpreted as a response to the threat of the imperial cult (Horsley, 1997, pp. 10-86 and pp. 88-137 also considers the Imperial cult, together with patron-client networks, as they related to Paul's mission and theology). In his study into social life in Roman Asia Minor, Harland (2003, pp. 239-263) examines the literature about Imperial cults, persecution and Christian documents that discussed persecution, and concluded (pp. 239, 241, 264) that "scholars have often overplayed the significance of imperial cults for early Christianity (as well as Judaism)". Harland believes:

disloyalty to empire (which many see as corresponding to nonparticipation in imperial cults) was neither the basis for persecutions against Christians by inhabitants, nor the reason for convictions on those few occasions when such things reached the attention of the Roman authorities (p. 240).

Harland (2003, pp. 241-243) considers how significant the imperial cults were for Judaism and Christianity, and he believes firstly, that "cultic honors for the emperor were not an imposed feature of cultural life in Roman Asia" (p. 242).

Secondly, Harland (p. 243) believes that:

in contrast to a popular tradition within scholarship, we find that imperial cults in Roman Asia were not solely political phenomena devoid of religious dimensions. If imperial cults were indeed merely political then we could understand the Christians' nonparticipation as the equivalent of disloyalty or treason, in which case this would be the central cause of the persecution of Christians.

Thirdly, Harland (p. 243) accepts that Imperial cults were thoroughly "integrated within religious life at various levels of civic and provincial society". Harland (p. 243) concludes that the issue of Imperial cults "is broader than, though inclusive of imperial cults [and] is also a key to understanding sporadic outbreaks of persecution against Christians in Asia Minor". Was the same true at Rome?

Harland does not provide a view (see also p. 119ff regarding Imperial cults).

Because of the close yet uneasy relationship between the Jews and the Christians, the issue of religious exemption from emperor worship is obviously significant, given the occasional confusion in pagan circles about the differences between these two groups. In Williams' opinion (1990) knowledge of the social, religious and political environment of Domitianic Rome could assist the debate, and one of her main concerns was to determine the motives of the emperor. Noting the minimal evidence available, Williams began by asking whether the whole subject of Domitian, the Jews and the Judaizers was a matter of the tax, or treason, or the divinity of the emperor, or perhaps an example of social unrest between the monotheists and the polytheists.

Williams (1990, pp. 206-211) believes that Judaism would have been a satisfactory charge for an emperor who appears to have had a dislike to it. Also to be noted is the fact that delators exploited charges of Judaism under Domitian, and exposing Judaism in the very heart of the Imperial house was bound to increase Domitian's resentment (see also Knudsen, 2001, p. 155). Tacitus described the spread of Judaism as a disease [*Annals* 2.85]. It is possible, adds Williams (p. 208) that the possible conversion of Clemens and Domitilla to Judaism was a subsidiary charge to that of *maiestas* (see also Knudsen, 2001, p. 346, note 148; p. 370, note 98). Not only that, the treason trials involved people from the section of society that "Domitian most feared and whose behaviour, as Suetonius and others clearly shows, he most closely monitored and insisted upon regulating" (Williams, 1990, p. 209). Williams is also in no doubt that the delators were instrumental in the downfall of

people like Clemens and Domitilla (pp. 207, 209-210; Knudsen, 2001, p. 370, note 99).

However, a helpful note of caution has been offered. In her conclusion, Williams (1990) notes:

... the Christian and Jewish evidence with its persistent *allusions* to the threats of persecution by an evil Roman emperor and its *tales* of aristocratic Roman martyrs to Judaism is broadly in agreement [italics added] (p. 210).

On the matter of historical accuracy, Williams adds:

Of course we should not take the details too literally – the purpose of this material was anything but historical – but the broad tradition of a hostile emperor threatening the Jews and making martyrs of their illustrious converts can surely stand. The tradition may have come embellished and distorted with time but it did not spring from nowhere and is surely too strong and too prevalent simply to be tossed aside. The classical writers, it is true, do not give more than the merest hint of action against the Jews themselves but that is hardly surprising given their Romanocentric outlook (pp. 210-211).

Similarly, Southern (1997) notes:

The sources which condemn Domitian as persecutor are none of them contemporary with him, nor is there any pagan attestation of such persecution, two factors which lend themselves to the suspicion of fabrication. The *tales* can be dismissed as inventions of Christian martyrology and it should be remembered with what zeal martyrdom was sought and revered – the ultimate validation of faith [italics added] (p. 115).

Southern's advice is important and should remind historians to be cautious when assessing ancient documents particularly those written well after the events being discussed.

It can be concluded that if and when the Christians took a public stand for their faith (and many did), their loyalty to Rome, to the emperor, and Rome's gods would come under close scrutiny. If the local situation was such that the authorities were motivated to act against the Christians, opposition could have led to serious action being taken against them.

The correspondence between Pliny and Trajan

Not long after the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96), Governor Pliny (the Younger) corresponded with the Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117) about his treatment of the Christians (*Letters 10.96 and 97*. Suggested dates for these letters are: c. A.D. 109-113, 117).

A brief comment on this event is necessary because it indicates how the Roman Governor Pliny and the Emperor Trajan regarded the Christians, and what actions were taken against them in the years following the downfall of Domitian. This discussion is placed here because of the close proximity between Domitian and Trajan and also because Pliny noted aspects of worship and the person of the Emperor. The secondary literature is extensive (Ramsay, 1895, pp. 196-225; Kidd, 1922, pp. 234-238; Sherwin-White, 1966, pp. 691-710, 772-787; Frend, 1965, pp. 55-57; 1967, pp. 162-3; T. Barnes, 1968, pp. 36-37; 1971, pp. 143-163; A. Barnes, 1971, pp. 152-153; Cuss, 1974, pp. 146-148; Benko, 1984, pp. 4-14; Wilken, 1984, pp. 1-30; Downing, 1988, pp. 105-123; Goodman, 1989, p. 44; Thompson, 1990, pp. 130-132; Williams, 1990, pp. 139-144; Wright, 1992, pp. 348-350; Sanders, 1993, pp. 202-203; Sordi, 1994, pp. 59-65; Boyarin, 1999, p. 28; Holmes, 1999, p. 11; Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, pp. 323-324; McKechnie, 2001, pp. 110-116; Novak, 2001, pp. 47-54; Rutledge, 2001, pp. 72-73,75; Harland, 2003, pp. 170-173, 244-247). Pliny's letter to the emperor was lengthy and contained not only his actions but also requested advice about how to proceed with such cases.

Pliny wrote: "I have never been present at an examination of Christians" (*Letters 96.10.1*). Harland (2003) notes:

Pliny's lack of familiarity with how to approach prosecutions against Christians suggests that he, at least, did not know of an earlier, official persecution of

Christians on which to base his actions. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that much of Pliny's career during the principates of Domitian was spent in Rome; he first served as quaestor conveying messages from Domitian to the Senate, then as tribune of the people, and then as praetor. No doubt he would have known of official actions taken by Domitian against Christians, either at Rome or in the provinces, if they had occurred (p. 186).

Commenting on the fact that trials of Christians had taken place, Frend (1967, p. 165) asked an important and obvious question, "Why? Hardly because the religion had been specifically proscribed, because in that case Pliny would not have needed to consult Trajan at all".

Pliny's next concern was "I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed" (*Letters 10.96.1*). Pliny also referred to 'the grounds of age' because governors did have some degree of flexibility when sentencing young people (*Letters 10.96.2*).

Pliny then turned to a key question: "whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name" that warranted action (*Letters 10.96.2*). The 'name' referred to the membership of a superstition and that was sufficient to secure a conviction (*1 Pet 4:15f*). The 'crimes' referred to the actions that the Christians were rumored to be involved in (e.g., incest, infanticide and cannibalism; noted in Minucius Felix, *Octavius 9-10* and Tertullian, *Apology 8*). Pliny wrote, "this is the line I have taken", and he outlined the action he had already taken (*Letters 10.96.2*). Pliny also noted that he did not pursue the accused by referring to "all persons brought before me" (*Letters 96.10.3*). He did not "seek out" the Christians and Trajan had not given him instructions to take this action. These accusations clearly came from the provincials.

Johnson (1988, p. 418; also Rutledge, 2001, p. 72) believed that Pliny's account implied hostility against the Christians by non-Christians. Johnson (1988, p. 418) added that "the fact that additional, anonymous accusations of Christianity were brought forward suddenly during the course of Pliny's investigation could suggest that this hostility was widespread and serious".

Pliny distinguished between three categories of persons charged. There were those who admitted being Christians; those who denied the charge; and those who said that they had given it up. The procedure of repeating the questions with threats of punishment appeared in other trials and was designed to make sure that the accused were fully aware of the consequences. Christians who were not prepared to deny their faith were sent off for execution, and Pliny's justification was that "their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished" (*Letters 10.96.3*). According to Pliny, these characteristics alone justified the capital sentences. Pliny continued by noting that "there have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens, I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial" (*Letters 10.96.4*. In *Acts 25:11* the apostle Paul, a Roman citizen, appealed to Caesar). Those who denied the charges were subjected to a test by Governor Pliny before they could be dismissed. These individuals were released:

when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods), and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do (*Letters 10.96.5*. Trajan did not object to this procedure in his reply to Pliny, *Letters 10.97.1*. See also Price, 1984, pp. 221-222).

This sacrifice test was used to verify the sincerity of those who denied they were or ever had been Christians, and Trajan's statue was included probably as a sign of respect and allegiance. Frend (1967) adds:

that even if 'sacrilege' or 'atheism' were not specifically mentioned ... they were certainly in his [i.e. Pliny's] mind and in the minds of those who denounced the Christians, for otherwise the sacrifice test he imposed would have had no meaning (p. 195).

Pliny's words "I understand" (*Letters 10.96. 5*) indicates that he had no personal knowledge and was probably taking the word of an adviser. Pliny's letter went on to identify "others, whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously, and some of them even twenty years ago" (*Letters 10.96.6*. If the date of writing this letter is A.D. 109-113, as suggested on p. 166 above, then "twenty years ago" refers to Domitian's reign). These apostates fulfilled the previously mentioned requirements regarding the offerings, cult images and cursing Christ (*Letters 10.96.6*); and they stated that worship (elements of which Pliny described for Trajan) was "the sum total of their guilt or error" (*Letters 10.96.7*).

The fact that Pliny also commented that Christian food (*Letters 10.96.7*) was harmless suggests that rumors may have already been circulating about this subject. Wilken (1984) noted:

If such rumors had not been circulating it is doubtful that Christian apologists would have repeated the accusations. *On the other hand, it must be noted – indeed emphasized – that the accusations of promiscuity and ritual murder appear only in Christian authors. They are not present in the writings of pagan critics of Christianity* [italics added] (p. 121).

In order to get to the truth, Pliny had two women tortured and his assessment was that he had found "nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant

lengths" (*Letters 10.96. 8*). 'Superstition' was the word used earlier by Tacitus and Suetonius as a critical descriptor of religious activity that was not approved of by the Roman establishment (Tacitus, *Annals 15.44*; Suetonius, *Nero 16.2*).

Pliny also consulted Trajan about how to proceed with these people "especially in view of the number of persons endangered; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult" (*Letters 10.96.9*). Pliny concluded his letter with the hopeful statement that "it is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent" (*Letters 10.96.10.*).

In his brief reply, Trajan confirmed that Pliny had "followed the right course of procedure", and he added: "for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula" (*Letters 10.97. 1*). However, Trajan did have two criticisms of Pliny's actions. Firstly, he wrote that the Christians "must not be hunted out", and secondly, he added that "pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation". Trajan provided Pliny with reasons for his comments; "they create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age" (*Letters 10.97. 2*; cf. *Letters 55*). There can be no doubt that Trajan and Pliny regarded the current age as superior to that of Domitian.

Pliny's actions and Trajan's reply indicate that the name 'Christian' was sufficient for a trial and a verdict. Clearly, what mattered to Pliny "was not what Christians did so much as whether they admitted publicly to being Christians, and public apostasy brought immediate acquittal" (Goodman, 1989, p. 44; see also

Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, p. 324). As T.D. Barnes (1968, p. 37) confirms, “what is illegal is being a Christian: the crime is erased by a change of heart”. The effect of the ‘name’ was obviously very significant because when Pliny examined their practices he reported no specific actions that required prosecution (see also Sordi, 1994, pp. 59-65, in particular p. 62 regarding this aspect).

In his account of these events, Eusebius noted the context by stating that:

So great was the intensification of the persecution directed against us in many parts of the world at that time, that Pliny the Younger, one of the most distinguished governors, was alarmed by the numbers of martyrs and sent a report to the emperor about the numbers of those who were being put to death for the faith (*H.E.III,33*; Eusebius recorded that he had taken this story from Tertullian’s Latin *Defence*, 2).

In the previous section, Eusebius wrote that after Nero and Domitian, “there is a firm tradition that persecution broke out against us sporadically in one city at a time as a result of popular risings” (*H.E.III, 32*). Quoting from Hegesippus, Eusebius noted accusations against a number of Christians.

Commenting on the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan, Sanders (1993) notes that about the same time as this incident was occurring:

Ignatius was on his way to martyrdom in Rome and Rabbi Eliezer was arrested in Galilee on suspicion of being a Christian. These three pieces of evidence, incidentally, are sufficient to show that persecution of Christians was imperial policy (p. 202; see also McKecanie, 2001, p. 113; Harland, 2003, pp. 188-193; Wedderburn, 2004, pp. 168-169, 174-176, 181-184).

And yet, as noted earlier in this chapter, if Christianity had been officially proscribed, Pliny would have had no need to consult Trajan. Is there a conflict of views here? Possibly, although different attitudes to law and order in the various provinces may have created different ways of dealing with the Christians. Governors less willing to engage in time-consuming correspondence with the emperor, or those

more willing to quickly get rid of troublesome religious leaders may have just sent them off to be dealt with in Rome.

Stegemann and Stegemann (1999) note:

it is clear that in the urban regions of the Roman empire ...as religious and social outsiders believers in Christ experienced *discrimination* on the part of the pagan population and also increasing *criminalization* on the part of Rome (pp. 317-318; author's emphasis).

There is another aspect that is worth noting. In an earlier letter to Trajan, Pliny had asked for advice about organizing a company of firefighters in Nicomedia (*Letters 10.33*). Trajan's reply, while directed at Pliny's question, made this significant comment: "If people assemble for a common purpose, whatever name we give them and for whatever reason, they soon turn into a political club" (*Letters 10.34*). Could it be that this comment included and extended to religious groups like the Christians? It would certainly seem so.

It is clear that Christianity was regarded as an illegal infectious superstition that required prosecution and any Christians who were not prepared to deny their faith were executed.

Was there a persecution by Domitian?

In an early article, Last (1937) quoted the Oxford Dictionary definition of 'persecution' and then added:

for persecution to occur there must be an attack on a religious belief *as such*; and the reason for this requirement is presumably the need to exclude from the right to be described as persecution cases where common criminals in jeopardy plead their religion as justification, and claim that their crime was a duty imposed upon them by their creed (p. 82).

That definition had an obvious religious focus, however more recently, the definition of 'persecute' has been broadened to include the words "on the grounds of political,

religious, or other beliefs regarded as unacceptable” (The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1993, Vol. 2, p. 2169).

The 1937 article by Last also provided a brief summary of comments made by Pollock (1882), which divided persecutions into four classes. Pollock focused on the motives of the persecutors and he identified the classes, as ‘theological’, ‘tribal’, ‘political’ and ‘social’. He believed that Rome’s policy towards the Christians could best be described as ‘tribal’ and ‘social’. By ‘tribal’ he meant that the group attacks its own members because their practices are thought to alienate the accepted supernatural powers. By ‘social’ he meant the Common Law requirement to be a good citizen. Because the Christians had not decently observed the elements of religion as practiced by the society, they were clearly anti-social (1937, pp. 82-84. Stegemann and Stegemann, 1999, pp. 317-318 also discussed the term ‘persecution’).

Was there a persecution during the reign of Domitian? As noted above (p. 134), Dio twice used the words “many others” (*Roman History* 67.14.1-3), but there is no indication of how large the number might have been. Domitian’s actions in this case may have been minor and sporadic, and not connected to any significant action against a certain group. In addition to the ancient sources which implied persecution (pp. 133 ff above), later writers (in addition to those mentioned in pp. 195-200 below) also believed in the persecution tradition. Augustine named Domitian as a persecutor by stating in his *City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*) (commenced A.D. 413; the completed work appeared in A.D. 426) that Domitian was the second of ten persecutors (*Book 18, chap.52*). He further added:

Those who live piously in Christ suffer persecution ... the church, as she bears fruit and increases throughout the whole world, can suffer persecutions from

kings among some nations ... it seems to me to me that no limit can be set to the number of persecutions which the church must endure for her training (*Book 18, chaps 51, 52*).

Martin Luther also promoted the well-established negative image of Domitian. In three passages (1521, c.1518, 1527-1530) he wrote that: "God overthrows unbelieving kings and lords" (like Domitian); he pointed out that there were Christians in Rome under Nero and Domitian (who obviously did not need Papal sovereignty); and, in an explanatory note, it is stated that, according to "church tradition", Dionysius (*Acts 17:34*) was "a martyr burned at the stake in the persecutions of Domitian" (Vol. 13, p. 68; Vol. 14, p. 333; Vol. 17, p. 187, note 8). Similarly, Foxe (1516-1587) strongly condemned Roman Catholic teaching but continued to promote the established view that Domitian was the second of ten persecutors. He also identified Flavius Clemens and his daughter as victims of the emperor's persecution (n.d., pp. 99-304 discussed the persecutions; pp. 104-108 described Domitian's reign). Gibbon (1776-1788/1887 supported the idea of ten persecutions against the Church.

Several later historians are also in no doubt that there *was a Domitianic persecution*. Lightfoot (1885, Part II, Vol.1, p. 375); Ramsay (1885, p. 259); Scannell (1909/2003/2004); Kidd (1922, Vol.1, pp. 71-77); Keresztes (1973, p. 27); Lane Fox (1986, p. 433); Sordi (1988, p. 45); Navarra (1992, p. 245) and Wiseman (1996, pp. 19-24) identify Domitian as a persecutor. They based their assessments on negative aspects about the emperor's character and the persecution accounts in the ancient Roman sources. As Sordi (1988, p. 45) confidently wrote, "the reality of a persecution was well known to all Christian commentators" (see also Keresztes 1973, p. 27).

However, many scholars have expressed doubts about the accounts provided by the ancient Roman historians, and they believe that there was *no persecution* by Domitian. Smallwood (1956, p. 1ff and 1976, pp. 352, 378ff), Waters , pp. 74-75), Frend (1967, pp. 157-159), Reicke (1969, p. 302), Thompson (1982, p. 331), Wright (1992, p. 356, note 51), Feldman (1993, pp. 100, 332, 347), Southern (1997, p. 115), and Harland (2003, pp. 13, 185-186, 188-189) find no substantial evidence of a Domitianic persecution. In his book about Domitian, Jones (1992) has been skeptical of the Christian tradition that portrayed Domitian as the second persecutor, after Nero, of the early church. He also briefly noted the growth of the tradition from Eusebius to later historians and wrote, “from a frail, almost non-existent basis, it gradually developed and grew large” (p. 114). To illustrate the degree to which the tradition was given support, Jones (1992, p. 115) added that although there are no references to Christianity in the accounts by Suetonius and Dio, Christian apologists sought to identify Flavius Clemens, the consul of 95 A.D. with Clement, the bishop of Rome at this time. Jones (1992, p. 115, note 100) added that Keresztes (1973, p. 8, note 22) provided examples of such apologists; Keresztes identified Volkmar (1856) and Erbes (1878). Keresztes (1973, p. 8, note 22) further added that “Eusebius makes a clear distinction between these two men and most of the modern writers have strongly argued against this once fashionable identification”. Jones noted that after the ‘evidence’ of Eusebius, *I Clement*, Tertullian, and *Revelation*:

the legend grew apace. In the *Acta* of Saints Nereus and Achilleus, Domitilla was not only Clemens’s niece, but also niece to the father of Bishop Clement (author of *I Clement*) and had also been assigned a mother, Plautilla. By the time of Orosius, the assessment of Domitian by Melito and Tertullian had been substantially ‘modified’: Domitian ‘issued edicts for a general and cruel persecution’ (7.10) (p. 116)

Jones (1992, pp. 114, 116) finally noted the work of Baronius who first linked the execution of Flavius Clemens to a general persecution of the church, and he also first raised the possibility of two Domitianic victims named Domitilla (4.586). Jones' assessment was not meant to be exhaustive; his book is about the emperor's reign as a whole and is not limited to religious aspects. Jones treats these subjects briefly, and many other writers, such as those noted by Knudsen (1945; see pp. 118-121 above), are not included in Jones' book.

Pleket (1961), Reicke (1969), and Jeffers (1991, p. 91) believe that Domitian was ruthless, but only towards those who opposed him. Feldman (1993) and Southern (1997), believe that Domitian was only acting against Jewish tax evaders and not against any Christians. Robinson (1976, p. 232) noted that although Eusebius wrote about a persecution of Christians by Domitian, "he does not mention the *death* of a single Christian" (author's emphasis).

The tradition of Domitian as a persecutor is a late one. Although Tertullian and Lactantius referred to Domitian as a persecutor (p. 142 above), it was Eusebius who influentially promoted the tradition (pp. 143-147 above), and this belief was further developed by later church historians. Even though the traditional view has persisted, modern skepticism continues to promote discussion in an attempt to dispel the prevalent distortions.

Conclusion

This chapter has noted that the ancient accounts of the alleged persecution are not in agreement. Given that fact, caution is required when attempting to determine a definitive point of view. Modern studies have continued to highlight the doubt that surrounds Domitian's treatment of Clemens and Domitilla. An interest in Judaism

seems likely and probable, and although there is no firm evidence to suggest any Christian influence, it is possible that Domitilla was or became a Christian. Although Eusebius promoted the negative point of view about Domitian, there is no firm evidence to prove that there was any organised persecution against either Judaism or Christianity. Rather, it is more likely that action was taken against a few individuals when their behaviour came to the attention of the emperor. The reason for this action may simply have been that Domitian was a strong upholder of the State religion, and that when some wealthy prominent Romans were apparently attracted to aspects of Judaism, the emperor made an example of their disloyalty to Rome.

Domitian's recognition as 'Lord ' was probably nothing more than the Emperor recognizing that such an attitude could be used effectively as a uniting factor within the Empire. The Imperial cult would certainly have affected the Christians if circumstances required them to show allegiance to the Empire and the Emperor, however evidence of Domitian treating Christians harshly over this particular issue is late (Eusebius, *H.E.III.13-20, 32*) and is not found in any pagan documents which discuss the reign of Domitian.

Pliny wrote as an official eyewitness (c. A.D. 109-113, 117) and his close proximity to the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96) makes him a valuable source. His evidence deserves more notice than accounts written outside the timeframe of the described events. However, it should also be acknowledged that although Pliny was familiar with Christianity, there is no mention of this group in any of his other letters and his knowledge of this movement appears to be limited and possibly derived from other sources (Wilken, 1984, p. 16).

Early Christian writers appear to have accepted what appears to have been genuine (the evidence of the early Roman historians) without much critical assessment, and continued the idea that Domitian was a persecutor of the Christians. Eusebius promoted the idea that Domitian was a persecutor and his views matched those of the early Roman historians. As long as that traditional view persists, the negative portrait of Domitian will continue. This chapter has shown however, that the development of the negative Domitianic tradition is one manufactured over a long period of time from very little evidence. The conclusion to be drawn from this chapter regarding Domitian is that he did not make Christianity a proscribed religion and he did not persecute the Christians under any such rubric.

Chapter Seven

Archaeological findings related to the alleged persecution

Introduction

In any discussion of early Christian persecution, there is often an attempt to use archaeology to support facts about certain individuals or circumstances, and for some time this historical tradition, especially amongst Christian writers, has persisted, almost without critical comment. Now, with the benefit of further research and investigation, archaeological aspects related to the era of the alleged persecution can offer material that relates to the time and rule of Domitian.

This chapter is important for two reasons. Firstly, although archaeologists have provided various points of view and observations, some historians have considered this material of negligible importance and have not included these findings in their historical works. Secondly, some aspects of recent scholarship, for example identifying and dating the catacomb of Domitilla and the importance of certain funerary inscriptions, need to be integrated into the discussion. An examination of Priscilla's catacomb will be included in this chapter because Priscilla has been connected archaeologically to Glabrio, and Glabrio is connected to Clemens and Domitilla by Suetonius and Dio (see pp. 133-134 above).

Physical remains are important because they provide evidence of past civilizations and the development of archaeology into a more professional field of study, as opposed to 'just digging holes', has brought with it a wide range of new procedures and methods of assessment. The days of excavating trenches without some degree of clear historical intent and careful planning have largely been

dismissed (see Grant, 1995, pp. 36, 119-120; Harland, 2003, pp. 14-18, 158-160 on the use and abuse of archaeology). Many of the early archaeological accounts about dating and identifying the catacombs have now been amended in the light of more recent research, and, as the work continues new points of view emerge. This chapter will focus on the comments and observations of archaeologists and historians and will show that research over the last six decades has superseded many of the points of view from the mid-nineteenth century onwards about the catacombs and the key characters mentioned in those early accounts. This chapter will conclude that; as far as archaeological evidence is concerned, current research suggests that the dating and identification of the key individuals cannot accurately be related to Domitian's reign.

Early historical accounts about the catacombs

The term 'catacomb' is derived from the Roman toponym *catacumbas* and referred to an area of the Via Appia characterized by hollows and sandstone cavities. From the third century onwards one of the most important underground cemeteries was laid out in this area and was famous during the early medieval period for visitors. During the medieval period, most of the catacombs were abandoned and the bodies of martyrs buried there were moved to churches within the city. During the Renaissance, visitors continued to travel to the area and their presence is marked by graffiti. During the second half of the fifteenth century, academics sponsored cultural visits to the area.

The first person to approach the cemeteries in a scholarly manner was Onofrio Panvinio in the middle of the sixteenth century when he led a group that took a scientific interest in the catacombs. At the end of the sixteenth century Antonio Bosio (1575-1629) laid the foundations of Christian archaeology by developing a

methodology for the study of underground Christian Rome (Rutgers, 2000, pp. 15-25).

In a section on the discovery of the catacombs, Rutgers (2000, pp. 9-41) comments on the intellectual and religious climate in sixteenth century Europe. Noting the Catholic-Protestant controversy of that era, Rutgers notes that Protestant theologians began to disagree with Roman Catholic history including accounts regarding the catacombs (pp. 10-15, 36-41). As Kerkeslager (2000) stated:

until the 1970s research on the catacombs was motivated by the distorting lenses of apologetic interest in legitimating or denying the claim that Roman Catholicism epitomized and embodied the traditions of the earliest Christian communities of Rome (p. 1; see also Snyder, 2003, pp. 10-11).

In the mid-nineteenth century, Giuseppe Marchi renewed attention to the analysis of the monuments and in 1851 Pope Pius IX established the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra. Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894), now regarded as the founder of the modern science of Christian archaeology, resumed the work commenced by Bosio. His knowledge of historical, literary, hagiographic, epigraphic, and art-historical issues allowed him to produce a more complete picture of the monuments (Rutgers, 2000, pp. 29-36). The account of the Roman catacombs by de Rossi (published in three volumes in 1864, 1867 and 1877) was rewritten and greatly enlarged (with his consent) in a new edition compiled by Spencer and Brownlow (1879). These early pioneers in the field of Roman burial archaeology investigated a wide range of issues which continue to engage modern scholars. Since that time the amount of work and research on the catacombs has increased significantly with many scholars now working in this field. (Nicolai, Bisconti and Mazzoleni, 1999, pp. 9-13; Snyder, 2003, pp. 1-21 provide a summary of the history and methodology of early Christian archaeology; Osborne, 1985, pp. 278-328;

Rutgers, 1992, 1995, and 2000, pp. 9-41; Frend, 1996, and Lampe, 2003 also provide historical details about early Jewish and Christian archaeology).

Attempts to identify and date the catacombs: 1879-1922.

Giovanni de Rossi (1879) attempted to identify and date the catacombs and his account is in two parts: Part One discusses the history of the catacombs and Part Two examines Christian art. In Part One, the “Social and Political Position of the First Roman Christians” is included (Book II, Chap. III), and the “Catacombs of the First Century” is also examined (Book III, Chap. I).

According to de Rossi, the cemetery of St. Domitilla at Tor Marancia belonged to “this Domitilla ... the niece of Vespasian, who was banished to the island of Ponza” (Book III, Chap. I, p. 120. See pp. 104-106 above for details regarding the identification of Domitilla; for ‘Pontia’ see Eusebius *H.E.3.18* on pp. 106, 109 above). Lightfoot (1877, pp. 257-258; 1885, Part II, Vol. I, p. 357) supported the research by de Rossi and added that “the evidence of the catacombs in the *Coemeterium Domitillae* suggests that other members of the imperial family [i.e. apart from Clemens and Domitilla] likewise became Christians” On the identity of the named individuals, Lightfoot added:

It matters little for our purpose, whether the *Flaviae Domitillae* of this inscription is identified with the wife of Clemens or with her mother, the daughter of Vespasian. The name *Flavia Domitilla* was inherited from her grandmother, the wife of Vespasian (1877, p. 258, note 2).

Gibbon (1776-1788/1887, p. 239) and Withrow (1888, p. 57) identified Flavia Domitilla and her husband Clemens as examples of ‘martyrs for the faith’, and Withrow added that:

... The niece of Domitilla, also of the same name, suffered exile for her faith, A.D.97. She gave the land for the Catacombs which still bears her name.

According to Lanciani (1892/1967, pp. 6, 335-338) “Clemens and Domitilla were manifestly Christians” and he also provided a summary of the Domitillae and the catacomb that bears their name (see also Ramsay, 1895, p. 261; Harnack, 1908, p. 46). Kidd (1922/1976, p. 73) wrote that the fact that Clemens, his wife Domitilla and Glabrio suffered as Christians is “confirmed by archeology”. According to de Rossi, the earliest parts of the cemetery of Domitilla can be dated to the First Century (Book III, Chap. I, pp. 110, 120-121) and this view was supported by Lightfoot (1885, Part II, Vol. I, pp. 356-357; 1887, pp. 257-258); Withrow (1888, pp. 55, 57); Ramsay (1895, p. 261) and Kidd (1922/1976, p. 73). Lanciani (1892/1967, p. 336) did not identify a date for the catacombs but recognized the action taken by Domitian against Clemens and Domitilla.

The cemetery of Priscilla is important because of its early Christian connection and its possible association to an Acilius Glabrio (Glabrio’s connection to Clemens and Domitilla is noted on pp. 133-135, 151-155 above). According to de Rossi (1879, pp. 112, 115, 157; see also Withrow, 1888, pp. 73, 198), Priscilla’s cemetery was dug in the property of the family of Pudens who was converted by the apostles (*2 Tim 4:21* mentions a Pudens). Glabrio is not mentioned by de Rossi. Lanciani (1892/1967, pp. 3-9) summarised the details about the Acilii Glabrones and he identified the connection between the catacomb of Priscilla and Glabrio via four inscriptions found in the cemetery area. Lanciani (p. 6) was in no doubt that Glabrio was a Christian; a view supported by Kidd (1922/1976, p. 73, note 7. See Carletti, 1982, pp. 10-11 for details of the inscriptions and a photo of one inscription). Ramsay (1895, p. 262) also acknowledged the work done by Rossi. After stating that it was difficult, based on Dio’s account, to separate Glabrio’s offence from that of

Clemens and the others (pp. 261-262), he noted a group of catacombs beside the Via Salaria where:

fragmentary inscriptions found here hardly leave room for doubt that the family was that of the Acilii Glabriones. Who then was buried in the chapel? Surely we may, with Dion, connect the charge against Acilius with that against Clemens and Domitilla (pp. 262-263).

Earlier (p. 152), it was noted that Harnack believed that Clemens and Domitilla were 'certainly' Christians, whereas Glabrio was 'perhaps' a Christian. On the subject of Glabrio, Harnack (1908, p. 46) added, "there is a burial-niche of the Acilii in the catacombs, but the connection with Acilius Glabrio is uncertain".

Modern attempts to date the catacombs: 1956-2003

In the last six decades, a number of historians have shown a degree of scepticism regarding the dating of the catacombs. The acceptance of *the First Century* as the date for Domitilla's catacomb is no longer widely accepted. For example, Hertling and Kirschbaum (1956/1960, p. 34) believe that the walls of the Domitilla cemetery "belong to *the first half of the second century*" [italics added].

Hertling and Kirschbaum (1956/1960, pp. 38-39) have also provided a summary which connects a Priscilla and an Acilius Glabrio, however they state that the account by Dio about Glabrio is not specific enough for them to maintain that he was a Christian. After a brief note about the cemetery, Hertling and Kirschbaum concluded:

It cannot be denied that all of these conjectures [about the inscriptions and the progressive development of the catacomb] are based on rather slim foundations. We have the lion-slaying consul of the year 91, who may have been Christian. His descendants are buried above or near a crypt which later formed part of a Christian cemetery. Some of these descendants were themselves Christians. The cemetery was named after a Priscilla. And ... there were in the *second century* a number of Priscillas in the family of the Glabrios. These various details do not add up to a categorical proof, but it would be foolish to attribute them all to mere

chance [italics added] (p. 40).

Smallwood (1956) wrote:

the archaeological evidence from the Roman catacombs which was cited confidently in the past for regarding Glabrio and Domitilla as Christians must now be discounted, since *it has been conclusively shown to be of second and third centuries* [italics added] (p. 8; 1976, p. 382).

Frend noted (1967, p. 161) that earlier conclusions were reached when “archaeology was in its infancy” and he remained skeptical about the evidence. He believes that it is now evident that Christian burials in the *Coemeterium Domitillae* did not start until the *mid-second century at the earliest*. Citing evidence from de Rossi’s excavations, Frend notes that although there is no doubt that the catacomb of Domitilla was constructed on her land for her freedmen, there is no evidence that the remains actually belonged to Domitilla. He also believes that it was unlikely that Domitilla would have used the same area as that granted to her freedmen. On that aspect, Reicke (1968) added that the inscriptions:

show that Domitilla had numerous clients and gave away several parcels of property ... to serve as *burial places for deceased members of her household* (*Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*, VI. 8942 and 16246); there the Christian catacombs of Domitilla gradually developed [italics added] (p. 296; also pp. 298-299).

Stevenson (1978) believes that:

The naming of a catacomb after Domitilla proves nothing more than that the Christians *about A.D. 150* had begun to construct this vast catacomb under land that had at one time belonged to Domitilla, as surface inscriptions show, and which was already by that date the site of an extensive surface cemetery... [italics added].

Regarding Priscilla, Stevenson (1978) adds that:

The inscriptions that identify this crypt are however much later than the reign of Domitian, and are, religiously speaking, neutral, apart from *one Christian inscription of the third century* [italics added] (p. 28).

In a number of articles between 1975 and 1992, Pergola (a Rome based archaeologist) wrote about the archaeological interpretations surrounding the catacomb of Domitilla. (Nicolai, Bisconti and Mazzoleni, 1999, p. 200 provide bibliographic details of articles by Pergola and others). In an article published in 1978, Pergola investigated the alleged persecution of the Christians by Domitian. On the subject of dating, Pergola clearly does not agree with the many recent authors who believe that the First Century dating is now obsolete because he noted (p. 413) that four inscriptions *from the end of the First Century A.D.* provide the most important archaeological evidence linked to Flavia Domitilla. (Latin inscriptions on pp. 413-415; Jeffers, 1991, pp. 51-54 provided the inscriptions in English). These inscriptions are funerary plaques, which refer to four grants of plots of land given by Flavia Domitilla to individuals for the construction of family tombs (“funerary colleges”, p. 415). Pergola concluded (p. 413) that the date could be identified from the year of Domitian’s action against certain individuals and Domitilla’s exile from Rome in A.D. 95. Noting that it was common in Rome to preserve the memory of the benefactor, Pergola (p. 416) remained confident that Domitilla did give land to individuals including some who were, or later became, Christians. After a century of using the available surface land for burials, cemeteries were then constructed underground. Pergola (p. 419) summarised the modern scholarship (up to 1978), and noted that most authors who considered this subject did not consider the archaeology to be of any significant importance (Sordi, 1994, pp. 44, 50 supports Pergola).

Views regarding the dating of the catacombs continue to vary. For example, in a brief guide to Priscilla’s catacomb, Carletti (1982) provided details of liturgical documents and also a burial inscription, which demonstrated that Priscilla belonged

to the senatorial family of the Acilius. Carletti (p. 9) also believed that “the name of Priscilla must refer, if not to the foundress of the cemetery on the Salaria (Via Salaria), at least to the one who donated the land”. Likening the catacombs of Priscilla to those of Domitilla, Carletti added that:

The land then became the property of the Christian community [as a result of a series of donations], and *beginning at the middle of the second century* it became the big Christian cemetery of the Ardeatine, which took the name of Domitilla from the original owners, as happened on the Salaria for Priscilla [italics added] (p. 11).

In 2003, Snyder commented on work done by early archaeologists and noted:

Since the catacombs have not served as public edifices, we have not generally considered them as legitimate elements of early Christian architecture. However, the contribution of the catacombs to martyria and covered cemeteries ought to be examined briefly. The older “Roman school” (that is, Wilpert [1909; date added]) thought the origin of the catacombs paralleled that of the *tituli* of Rome, that is, wealthy first – and second-century Roman Christians donated (gave over the title of) their estates or burial land to the early Church. The burial nuclei would be renamed, according to this perception, after the donor. So, for example, the Catacomb of Domitilla refers to Flavia Domitilla, granddaughter of the Emperor Vespasian. The nucleus for the immense catacomb network named after her is the Flavian Gallery.

Styger showed that *first-century and early –second-century dates for the catacombs were impossible*. In his *Die römischen Katakomben* [dated 1933; date added] he presented a list of catacombs that are certainly *second century*. Most scholars today would shift these to the *third century*, while others would also want to include more recent finds [italics added] (pp. 156-157; also noted by Freund, 1996, pp. 247, 370).

On the subject of the catacomb of Domitilla, he added:

Domitilla takes its name from the granddaughter of the Emperor Vespasian and the wife of Titus Flavius Clemens (consul in A.D. 95). There were conflicts with the Emperor Domitian, and tradition has it that one of Domitilla’s household assassinated the emperor. Christian tradition has it that the couple was Christian. There is good reason to believe that the land where the catacomb of Domitilla is located was indeed property belonging to the Flavian family. Consequently the nucleus of the Christian catacomb, a gallery originating about *the middle of the third century*, has been called the *hypogeum* of the Flavians. As Testini [1966] shows, this area and the area of the Flavi Aureli, which contains inscriptions from the Flavian family, had an earlier pre-Christian history.

... so the earliest Christian materials do actually come from the so-called hypogeum of the Flavians, where frescoes of Daniel in the Lion’s Den and Noah

in the Ark have been found [italics added] (pp. 161-162).

Fasola's guide to 'Domitilla's Catacomb and the Basilica of the Martyrs Nereus and Achilleus', revised by Pergola (1986), favoured a first century dating for the pagan burials found on the surface of the Tor Marancia region (p. 11), but added that different sections of the catacombs require later datings ranging from the second half of the 2nd Century to the 5th Century (pp. 12-14).

Although Jones (1992, p. 115) made brief mention of some possible archaeological 'evidence', his opinion is that the "relevant Christian cemeteries bearing the names of Domitilla and Acilius Glabrio could well be assigned to the *end of the second century*" [italics added].

Jeffers (1991) has written in some detail about the catacomb of Domitilla (p. 48ff) and he began his study by quoting four *first-century inscriptions* found at or near the site. These inscriptions are believed to be four independent grants of burial land in the estate. Noting earlier work done by Pergola and Styger, Jeffers (p. 53) stated, "they maintain that all four inscriptions refer to the same Flavia Domitilla, grand-daughter of Vespasian, niece of Domitian, and wife of Flavius Clemens". Jeffers (pp. 53-54) acknowledged the apparent pagan nature of the inscriptions and this would seem to conflict with the belief that Domitilla was a Christian. However, as Jeffers has observed" (p. 54), "Domitilla may have granted land to pagans in her household, even though she was a convert to Judaism or Christianity, or she may have made these grants prior to her conversion". A further inscription, dated to *the fourth century*, shows that Constantinian Christians called the site the Catacomb of Domitilla and this would "suggest that early Roman Christians associated Domitilla with this site, and perhaps with Christianity" (p. 59).

Jeffers has also considered the important issue of confiscation (pp. 60-62). Dio Cassius recorded that people were deprived of their property and banished; and Domitilla was banished to Pandateria (*Roman History* 67.14). The question then arises: was the property eventually restored to her? Dio wrote that Nerva restored those banished by Domitian (*Roman History* 68.1), and it may be assumed that Domitilla returned to her property, possessions and household. Pergola (1978) thought this unlikely and believed that due to the conspiracy, possibly involving Domitilla, Nerva would have been obliged to restore the land to the Imperial control; p. 422). One of Domitilla's stewards was involved in the conspiracy to kill Domitian, and the new administration may have been unwilling to fully restore her, especially to land owned by the Imperial family (Jeffers, 1991, p. 61). Jeffers further added (p. 61) that if Domitilla's land had not been regarded as entirely private property and not returned, that may account for the *second century* developments on the Domitilla cemetery land. It could also explain the large number of *second century* burial lands to dependents of the imperial household throughout the area of the Domitilla estate. If the land did not remain at the disposal of one person, various groups within the imperial household could use it. Murison (1999, p. 259) suggested that Dio's use of the word "merely" (*Roman History*, 67.14.2) "suggests that she was relegated without loss of property".

Although Jeffers did not focus specifically on Priscilla's catacomb, he noted that catacombs were named after the original owner of the property and he named Priscilla as an example. He further added (p. 50), "the Domitilla and Priscilla catacombs probably are the earliest, dating to *the end of the first or beginning of the second century*" [italics added].

More recently, Rutgers (2000) noted:

The catacomb derives its present name from an inscription that documents that in antiquity the area where the catacomb developed belonged to the Domitilla family. *It is conceivable – although in no way certain – that in due course some members of this Domitilla family converted to Christianity and these people then put their lands at the disposal of Rome's early Christian community so that these grounds could be used for funerary purposes. It should be stressed that this explanation is just a hypothesis.*

... In its earliest phases, the catacomb consisted of seven separate hypogea ... these hypogea came into existence in the course of *the second and third centuries*. They are all of pagan origin. [italics added] (pp. 130-131).

Rutgers also commented on the aspect of dating the catacombs and his views are worth noting given the confusion that has occurred over the centuries. Rutgers added:

... for a long time scholars did not succeed in dating the catacombs because they did not really bother to investigate the question of the dating of the catacombs in any systematic fashion. Most scholars simply supposed that the catacombs in which the early Christian community of Rome laid to rest its dead had originated at the same time that this community had first come into being, namely in the course of the *first century A.D.* Such scholars hardly ever used archaeological evidence to support their contentions, but instead almost always arrived at an early dating of the catacombs by means of inference. Pointing out that the early Christian community of Rome had been obliged to bury its dead somewhere and being unable to locate early Christian cemeteries other than the catacombs, such scholars concluded that from the earliest beginnings of Christianity, Christians in Rome had invented catacombs for the internment of their co-religionists. Can such a conclusion be justified on the basis of the archaeological finds from the catacombs? [italics added] (p. 47).

After noting the differences between catacomb archaeology and other kinds of archaeology (pp. 48-49), Rutgers added (p. 50), "although it is true that the catacombs are replete with archaeological finds, it is also true that *their value in terms of dating and chronology is, in many cases, extremely limited*" [italics added].

Rutgers explained:

There are two reasons why this is the case. First of all, many finds are not found *in situ* (in their original location) but rather derive from a disturbed archaeological context. This is due to the fact that the catacombs have been open to visitors (including grave-robbers) for centuries.

... A second complicating factor that often prevents us from arriving at a sound

chronology for the catacombs is that those archaeological materials that do still remain *in situ* are often hard to date. It is true, for example, that the inscriptions one encounters almost everywhere in the catacombs can be dated on the basis of the names that occur in them or by studying the linguistic characteristics of the languages used in them, yet *datings of this kind are not very precise* [italics added] (p. 50).

Commenting on the development of the early Christian catacombs, Rutgers concluded (p. 53), “all archaeological materials that have been found in the catacombs date to the *late second century A.D. at the earliest*” (italics added). Most recently, Lampe (2003, p. 19 ff) conducted a topographical investigation, drawing on archaeological material, literary sources including hagiographical local tradition, and he noted (p. 20) that “unfortunately the literary material dates to the fifth century at the earliest, and, because of its *legendary form*, it does not arouse much confidence” [italics added]. Commenting on early archaeological views about dating the catacombs, Lampe added:

P. Styger’s stereotypical settings of the catacomb nuclei in the *middle* of the second century have been surpassed. Today (except perhaps for a graffito under S. Sebastiano ...) scholars can find nothing Christian in Rome’s catacombs that can with any certainty be dated *before* the time around 200 C.E. [author’s emphasis] (p. 25, note 19).

On the subject of the Domitilla catacomb, Lampe noted that the area grew from several original nuclei. The first:

The so-called Hypogeum of the Flavians – a connection to the Flavians is unprovable – was laid out as a gallery with niches for sarcophagi towards *the end of the second century*.

... Christians were brought into the private hypogeum – possibly as freedmen of the pagan lords who owned the piece of ground. Through inheritances to the *liberti* the graveyard might have passed into Christian hands sometime in *the third century*. The other possibility is that noble members of the pagan family themselves had found their way to Christendom.

The second nucleus, the pagan “Ampliatius Hypogeum”, did not come into Christian possession before the last quarter of the third century. Christians, however, used the private hypogeum of the “Buon Pastore” in the *first decades of the third century* already. The so-called Aurelii region, galleries with cubacula,

which respected the borders of a small surface, was already laid out at the *beginning of the third century* by a Christian group with a large membership [italics added] (p. 32).

As noted earlier in this chapter (p. 187 ff), the work of De Rossi has been influential. Commenting on the current relevance of his work, Lampe added:

De Rossi's old and, for the tourists, often repeated hypothesis has not been able to withstand the light of critical archaeological investigation. He had wanted to see in the area of the Domitilla catacomb the grave sites of the Christian Flavians of the first century. What supported the hypothesis? An inscription from the surface zone of the Domitilla catacomb called "Tor Marancia" proclaimed that here a Flavia Domitilla owned real estate and of that property had placed an area of 35x 40 feet at the disposal of a man named P. Calvisius Philotas for funeral purposes (CIL 6:16246: "ex indulgentia Flaviae Domitillae"). This lady cannot be brought into connection with the Christian nuclei of the Domitilla catacomb for the following reasons. (a) Her inscription was found somewhere on the "Tor Marancia" estate. Should she really once have possessed land immediately above the first catacomb nuclei, it by no means follows that there was a connection to the Christians. The "Hypogeum of the Flavians" as well as the "Ampliatius hypogeum" (just as the "hypogeum of the sarcophagi" that was destroyed by the building of the basilica) are of pagan origin. (b) There is nothing to prove that the Fl. Domitilla of the inscription had anything to do with the Christian lady of the same name. This is pure conjecture. (c) The inscription, like the other grave inscriptions on the surface, shows no Christian traces (p. 33).

In his summary and conclusions, Lampe noted,

... with very few exceptions, no Christian inscriptions, sculptures, mosaics, or sarcophagi are found in *the first two centuries*. The reason for this is that many Christians apparently had little means to afford them [italics added] (pp. 140-141, 204).

Another reason for this 'archaeological silence' is the fact that:

... the Christians of Rome first began to bury their dead in underground cemeteries about 200 C.E. Such catacombs easily preserved archaeological material. Surface monuments, by contrast, suffered much more damage during the centuries, so that therefore the silence of the first two centuries is understandable.

Many monuments, particularly graves, in the first and second century were not distinguished as Christian by their builders because of the legal uncertainty. Therefore, it is possible that we could possess Christian monuments of which we are unaware (p. 141).

Modern scholarship has shown that recent scepticism about early archaeological findings that allegedly related to the reign of Domitian is well founded. Although consensus has not been achieved, as Rutgers and Lampe have shown the earlier dating of archaeological finds is now regarded as being incorrect, and more recent estimates date the catacombs to a period much later than Domitian's reign. Firm conclusions cannot be made with any certainty due to the lack of further reliable evidence.

Conclusion

Although Pergola (1978) was critical about the approach some historians took towards archaeology (p. 186 above), this chapter has shown that archaeologists have made and continue to make significant contributions. In fact, recent works (pp. 188-191 above) have advanced the study and interest in the catacombs. However, using archaeology to prove conclusively that Domitilla and others were Christians is obviously a difficult assignment because problems remain involving the dating of physical evidence to Domitian's reign.

As noted above (p. 191), this chapter has also highlighted the fact that confusing legends surrounding Domitilla and her family persist. That subject and its effect on the reign of Domitian will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight

Domitilla's martyrdom and the development of the Domitianic tradition

Introduction

As noted in previous chapters, the traditional portrait of Domitian has been one of cruelty, terror, fear and persecution. Non-Christian Roman writers originated this image and the Christians took that picture and developed it considerably. However, in more recent times, the approach of many modern historians has challenged that traditional view. Words like 'legend', 'myth', 'stories', and 'tales' have now entered the discussion about Domitian and alternative points of view, quite different from earlier interpretations, have correctly challenged past histories (see Finley, 1975; Woodman, 1988; Cameron, 1989 and 1991; Gill and Wiseman, 1993; Bowersock, 1994; and Morley, 2000 for comments about truth and accuracy in ancient historical accounts).

This chapter will determine how and why this traditional portrait developed given the limited amount of non-Christian primary source material and how this view has been challenged. Earlier comments by Jones (1992; see pp. 175-176 above) will be added to and this chapter will be valuable for two reasons. Firstly, this subject has not been included in any significant detail in the recent works about Domitian. Secondly, because Domitilla has been referred to as a Christian, a martyr and a saint, centuries after her death, it is relevant to examine the development of martyrology and hagiography where fact often gave way to fiction and led to ongoing negativity within the Domitianic tradition. As noted above (pp. 177-178) there is no substance in the repetition that Domitian was a persecutor. Rather than proving the case

conclusively, some historians have implied that Domitian was a persecutor of people alleged to be Christians. This chapter will conclude that because Domitilla's legend goes well beyond the First Century and because she has been specially venerated by the Church at Rome, her status has determined that whoever acted against her (i.e. the emperor Domitian) must be a persecutor and therefore deserving of ongoing condemnation in the historical record. What is already obvious is that early Christian writings promoted the portrayal of 'bad' (evil pagan) emperors like Nero and Domitian engaged in a spiritual war with 'good' (holy) Christians (pp. 87-88 above), for example, Domitilla. That view is still prevalent even though many of the martyr documents are not regarded as being truly authentic, and this fact establishes the strength of ancient martyrology and hagiography.

Domitilla as Martyr and Saint - an overview of the Domitianic persecution tradition

In a 1945 article, Knudsen provided an overview of the historical tradition that progressively developed about Flavia Domitilla. After briefly noting comments by Suetonius, Cassius Dio, Melito, Tertullian, Sulpicius Severus and Eusebius, Knudsen summarized attempts to explain Domitilla's role in the persecution story. He noted (p. 18) that Orosius fixed the "fact" of a Domitianic persecution in the medieval mind, and "his work became the accepted history of the world for a thousand years". Knudsen added that although the Middle Ages contributed nothing to the historical knowledge of Domitilla, something was added to the story. The legendary *Acts of Nereus and Achilles* related that these two eunuchs were Domitilla's chamberlains who were martyred for their Christian faith (further details on pp. 198-200 below). According to Knudsen (pp. 18-19), the Lutheran historian Matthias Flaccius did not accept the traditional Roman Catholic concept of history and provided his own view

of the available sources. Making independent use of the sources, Flaccius identified Nereus and Achilles as martyrs and he mentioned Domitilla in his work, but did not refer to her as a martyr. Rome's response to Flaccius' history was to instruct Cardinal Caesar Baronius to provide a Roman Catholic response, and his influential twelve-volume work (*Annales Ecclesiastici*; written c. 1588-1607), along with Flaccius' critical account "remained unchallenged for more than a century"(p. 20). Baronius accepted the "fact" that Domitian was a persecutor, and, for the first time, the execution of Flavius Clemens was described as a political event (p. 19). To overcome the problem of the status of Domitilla, Baronius solved the problem by writing about two Domitilla's; one the wife of Clemens and the other his niece (p. 20). Knudsen (p. 20) stated, "while the seventeenth century did not produce a new and more critical church history, it did give us the first real pioneering work in critical research". In 1699, Gottfried Arnold published a church history, which retained Flavius Clemens in the story of the Domitianic persecution, but he refused to follow the lead of Baronius when he included only one Domitilla (pp. 20-21). Laier, in 1753, Johann Lorenz von Mosheim reconsidered the 'persecution', and although he retained the position of Flavius Clemens, he took a more critical attitude towards the story of the two Domitillas. He stated that Domitilla was either the wife or niece of Clemens (p. 21). In 1776, Edward Gibbon also wrote at length about the Roman Empire and he discussed the confusion of the two Domitillas, which he believed was due to misunderstanding about the islands to which Domitilla was supposed to have been banished. Gibbon accepted the concept of a persecution by Domitian (pp. 21-22). In 1824, Leopold von Ranke provided a re-evaluation of the idea of a 'persecution' and in the following year Johann Neander added to the debate.

Like Gibbon, Neander believed that the idea of Dio's charge of 'atheism' being applied as an accusation of Christianity was a convincing argument, however he avoided using the word 'persecution', and he did not mention Clemens or Domitilla (pp. 22-23). In 1852/3, Ferdinand Baur challenged the views of the Domitianic persecution. He also did not mention Domitilla and was critical of the connection with Clemens with a persecution. Quoting Baur, Knudsen showed how the historian took a sceptical view of existing histories (pp. 23-24). In 1855, R. Lipsius suggested that Flavius Clemens should be identical with Bishop Clement and that several German scholars adopted that suggestion. That idea tended to set Domitilla in the background until Rossi's archaeological discoveries in 1865 again gave her prominence as the founder of a cemetery in the catacombs (pp. 24-25; p.187 ff below). Knudsen gave special place and mention to Bishop Lightfoot, who in his work on *First Clement* (1885), concentrated on detailed literary evidence. Having described Lightfoot's work as "basic yet today" [i.e., 1945], Knudsen briefly outlined Lightfoot's work (pp. 25-27). Lightfoot accepted the recent work of de Rossi, and relied on Dio's account to prove his assertions. Lightfoot's reliance on Dio was noted by Knudsen when he added, "the problem of giving primary rating to a source more than one hundred years removed from the actual event is, after all, a delicate one, and Lightfoot does not seem to sense this fully"(p. 25). Lightfoot also accepted Dio over Eusebius regarding the two Domitillas, and he decided that Bishop Clement was not Flavius Clemens but a member of his household. Knudsen noted that this view is not generally accepted (p. 26).

In 1913, Leon Canfield and George Edmundson added to the debate. Of particular interest is the fact that Canfield dismissed Bruttius as a source; questioned

the use of 'late' sources like Dio and even Suetonius; and came to the conclusion that "there is no ground for assuming that Clemens was even a Christian, much less a Christian martyr" (p. 27). Knudsen added, "Domitilla's Christianity is not questioned by Canfield" (p. 27). Finally, Knudsen commented on the work of Elmer Merrill. Merrill's work, published in 1924, concluded that Domitian was not directly opposed to Christianity. He did however, accept that Domitilla was probably a Christian, but "the fact did not appear at the trial and could not have been the basis of the charge" (p. 28). Knudsen's concluded:

Domitilla was the wife of Flavius Clemens, the Consul, who was slain for political reasons by the emperor Domitian. There is no reason to believe that he was a Christian. At the same time Domitilla was exiled, and there is no adequate reason for the belief that her exile had anything to do with her faith. But Domitilla was undoubtedly a Christian and her exile was remembered by the Christians. Two and a quarter centuries later Eusebius, using a very doubtful source, states that she was banished as a testimony to Christ. There is a possibility that Eusebius based his conclusion on Dio's assertion that she and Clemens had drifted into Jewish ways, but since Dio is more than a century removed from the scene, he may have been influenced by tradition (pp. 28-29).

Knudsen (p. 29) also credited Canfield who noted the fact that Tertullian is the "first source for the persecution" ... before Dio wrote his account ... no early source "connects Domitian with a persecution" ... "Suetonius certainly does not" ... Melito wrote "that Domitian slandered the Christians". Knudsen's work (1945, pp. 17-32), although broad as a brief overview, did not include all the work done by scholars about the account of Clemens and Domitilla. For example, de Rossi (1879, p. 84) referred to the fact "of Clemens' martyrdom and Domitilla's banishment", and on the subject of martyrdom stated (p. 120):

St. Jerome [*Ep ad Eustoch*, p. 86] tells us that in his days this island [Ponza] was frequented by pious Christian pilgrims, "who delighted to visit with devotions the cells in which *Flavia Domitilla had suffered a lifelong martyrdom*". Whether she really shed her blood at the last for her faith is *uncertain*, the Acts of SS. Nereus and Achilleus being of *doubtful authenticity*. They state, however, that she and

one of her female companions were buried in a sarcophagus at Terracina, but that her chamberlains (who are said to have been baptized by St. Peter) suffered death by the sword, and were buried in a cemetery about a mile and a half out of Rome, on the Via Ardeatina, in a farm belonging to their mistress. The farm, now known by the name of Tor Marancia, is situated just at this distance from Rome, and on the road named; and an inscription which has been found there shows clearly that it once belonged to this very person, Flavia Domitilla [italics added] (pp. 120-121; Hertling and Kirschbaum, 1956/1960, p. 36 and Keresztes, 1973, p. 18 described the *Acts of Nereus and Achilleus* as a late legend. Pergola, 1978, p. 411 defined this account as romanticized and of little historical value. Lampe, 2003, p. 134, note 30 described the tradition about Nereus and Achilleus as “nothing more than colourful legend”).

Knudsen added:

Though fifth century Christian writers of history do not mention her as a martyr, the church included her in the martyrologies, and the legends elaborate upon tradition [italics added] (p. 29).

Delaney (1980, p. 183) records Domitilla as both saint and martyr. Fasola (1986) provided a brief history which traced the development of the Domitilla legend and of particular importance is the overview of the early church martyrology:

One of the numerous *fantastic tales about the Roman martyrs*, dating from the Vth and VIth centuries, told her life, together with Nereus', Achilleus', Petronilla's, and several other saints'. In fact, the hagiographers of that time had the custom of mixing together the events of the lives of the martyrs, whose tombs were near each other, or had the same *dies natalis*, or some common memory whatsoever.

... Domitilla... and the two martyrs soldiers became two eunuchs of hers ... convinced their mistress to keep herself maiden, by means of whimsical and interminable speeches. She accepted, and was consecrated by Pope Clement. As a consequence, *the maiden and her slaves were exiled in the island of Ponza, and, later on, were martyred in Terracina.*

Was this only fanciful, or was the legend based on some real facts, like other *passiones*? ... some events ... have a correspondence in other historical sources. Yet, one must point out the peculiarity of a legend which developed around a name, which does not appear in the list of the martyrs worshipped by the Church of Rome. The actual feast, on May 12th, is not older than the IXth century: it was introduced in the liturgical books for the influence of Florus of Lyon's martyrology, who added it to his list. This was probably only the consequence of a mistake, and the confusion with one *Flavi (us)* in the Hieronymite martyrology. ... Yet, notwithstanding the absence of the liturgical commemoration, Domitilla had left a deeply rooted popular memory: *her martyrdom probably impressed strongly the early church.* By the end of the IVth century, the pilgrims who landed in the island of Ponza, could still visit the *cellulae*, where she suffered her

longum martyrium. This is mentioned by St. Jerome, in his tale of Paula's travel to the East: seeing the *cellulae*, the Roman dame, whose faith was deeply rooted, wished even more strongly to reach the sainter places of Palestine; the winds and speed of the ship looked to slow her (*Ep.* 108, 7) [italics added] (pp. 5-6).

Saxer (1992, p. 246) notes that "Domitilla was a *martyr* of Terracina ... [and was] included in Florus's martyrology, 7 May"; Livingstone referred to Domitilla as a "Christian *martyr*"; and Kirsch (1911/2003/2004, Sts. Nereus and Achilleus, Domitilla and Pancratius) adds that "the commemoration of these four Roman *saints* is made by the Church on 12 May, in common, and all four are named in the Proper of the Mass as *martyrs*" [italics added].

Definitions: martyr, martyrology and Roman martyrology

The word 'martyr' originally meant 'witness' (e.g. *Mark 14:63; Acts 6:13, 7:58; Hebrews 10:28*. Kittel and Friedrich, 1988, pp. 564-570; Rordorf, 1992, pp. 531-532; Livingstone, 1997, p. 1046; Hassatt, 1910/2003/2004, Martyr), however by the time of some of the later New Testament writings, the word had taken on the added meaning of 'blood-witness' (e.g. *1 Tim 6:13; Revelation 6:9, 12:17, 19:10*). In the Second Century the idea of 'evangelistic witness' continued but with the original meaning came the addition of 'witness under threat', or 'witness that could lead to death' (Kittel and Friedrich, 1988, p. 569; Bowersock, 1995, pp. 75-76. Pobe, 1985, pp. 1-12 summarizes various forms of persecution mentioned in the Pauline literature). Allied to the concept of 'witness under threat' was the importance of confession of the faith. Martyrs also became known as 'confessors' because when tested they confessed that Christ was their Lord and Saviour (*Rom 10:9; Matt 19:32*), and not the Roman emperor or any other human authority. As Kittel and Friedrich

(1988, p. 569) noted “Clement of Alexandria says that *martyres* are perfect in confession (*Stromateis* 4.21.133.1)”.

Martyrology means an official register or catalogue of martyrs and saints arranged according to the order of their feast (Saxer, 1992, pp. 536-537; Livingstone, 1997, p. 1047; Delahaye, 1910/ 2003/2004, Martyrology). Roman martyrology (*Martyrologium Romanum*) is “the official martyrology of the Roman Catholic Church [and was] compiled by a commission of ten scholars, among them Cardinal Baronius” (Livingstone, 1997, p. 1410; see also Saxer, 1992, p. 537; Delahaye, 1910/2003/2004).

Even though many words and expressions such as “doubtful authenticity”, “legend” and “fantastic tales” have been used to describe the Domitilla legend, it still persists. Why is that so? A brief examination of the growth of martyrology and hagiography will provide answers to that question.

The growth of martyrology and hagiography.

In addition to the early works examined above that specifically named Domitian, there is a significant body of work that does not name the emperor but which has added substantially to the vigorous and ongoing tradition surrounding persecutions, martyrs, and saints. Any discussion of persecution, irrespective of race or religion, inevitably raises the issue of martyrs and this topic has been reconsidered in recent times (for example, Pabee, 1985, Droge and Tabor, 1992; Bowersock, 1994, 1995; Stark, 1996, pp. 163-189; Boyarin, 1999). Persecution and martyrdom obviously predate Christianity by many centuries and the fact that individuals and nations suffered for their faith and beliefs is well established in the historical record. One of the early well-known individuals martyred for his belief was Socrates, and Aune

(1988, p. 123), stated that “the exemplary death of Socrates had a powerful impact on ancient martyr literature, both Greco-Roman and Christian”. The nation Israel serves as a notable example of a nation that endured persecution and frequent martyrdoms because of its faith and beliefs.

Christianity and Judaism are clearly linked through the life and example of Jesus and Christians accepted that Jesus’ words in *Mark 10:45* (“to give His life a ransom for many”) are a direct confirmation of *Isaiah 53:2-12* (in particular vv. 10-12). Christianity affirms that Jesus was the first ‘Christian’ martyr and many others followed him. Pobe (1985, pp. 107-118) provided a chapter on Paul’s dramatic metaphorical language to the churches to encourage them to stand firm in the face of opposition and danger.

For the early Christians, the model was always Jesus. Following the New Testament examples of Stephen and James (*Acts 6:8 - 7:60, 12:2*) and the early Church tradition regarding Peter and Paul (Eusebius, *H.E. 2.25*), the words of Ignatius of Antioch are helpful. In his letter to the Christians at Rome he wrote, “to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of earth’s widest bounds” (6.1. Staniforth, 1968, p. 105; see also Wright, 1992, pp. 350-351). Tertullian added that martyrdom, as the baptism of blood, wiped away all post-baptismal sin (*Apology 50.16*; c. A.D. 197); and, later he wrote that martyrdom was the only form of death worthy of a Christian (*De Fuga In Persecutione, 9*; c. A.D. 207). Those quotes indicate that martyrdom was not something to be avoided; rather it was something to be desired and perhaps actively pursued.

An important early church identity, who was both apologist and martyr, was Justin Martyr. Justin wrote in Greek and his works embraced a wide variety of

topics, such as pagan philosophy, Judaism, heretical Christianity and the life, faith and worship of Second Century Christianity. Justin's trial and execution is contained within *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* and his *First and Second Apologies* have survived. In his translation of the *First Apology* (c. A.D. 151-155), Barnard (1997, p. 6) noted that Justin believed people should not be punished for a name ... Christians experienced unreasonable hatred ... Christians are not *atheists, or immoral, or disloyal*. It is uncertain whether Justin was referring here to specific charges or public attitude. Barnard (1997, p. 8) added that Justin concluded this letter "by appending Hadrian's letter to Minucius Fundanus, the proconsul of Asia, in which the emperor directed that Christians should only be punished after a proper legal trial". In his translation of the *Second Apology*, Barnard (1997, p. 10) stated that Justin added further details about the Christian way of life including the observation that "the way in which Christians regard death is a crowning proof of the truth of their religion and the falsity of the slanders reported about them" (Lampe, 2003, pp. 100-103 provided further details about Justin).

Commenting about martyrdom in the late Second Century, Bowersock (1995, p. 3) noted, "this phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom was by no means an eccentricity of the period: it continued for more than a century". Individuals like Tertullian may have applauded martyrdom as suicide; however this view was by no means unanimous. In his *Second Apology*, Justin made this important statement:

But lest anyone say, "Go then all of you and commit suicide, and pass even now to God, and do not trouble us" – I will tell you why we do not do so, but how, when examined, we make our confession without fear. We have been taught that God did not make the world aimlessly, but for the sake of the human race; and we have stated that He rejoices in those who imitate His nature, and is displeased with those who embrace what is worthless either in word or deed. If, then, we all commit suicide, we will become the cause, as far as in us lies, why no one should be born, or instructed in the divine teachings, or even why the human race should

not exist; and if we so act, we ourselves will be acting in opposition to the will of God (4).

Commenting on this text, L. Barnard (1997, p. 189) noted, “fanatical zeal for martyrdom was censured by many of the Church Fathers”. Bowersock (1995, p. 62) added that Christian theologians in the pre-Augustinian period “publicly and repeatedly condemned voluntary martyrdom”, and he further noted (p. 73), “it was not until Augustine that the Church had a clear, forceful, and definitive injunction against suicide” (Augustine, *De Civ Dei* i.19 described the case of Lucretia and i.20 stated that Christians have no authority to commit suicide in any circumstance).

In his extensive study in Patrology, Quasten (1950, p. 176) noted that the documents that describe the sufferings of the martyrs could be divided into three groups: official court proceedings, reports of eyewitnesses or contemporaries, and legends that were composed for the purpose of edification (see also Potter, 1999, pp. 147-150 for a description of six kinds of martyr literature). Quasten added that the third group was, in some cases, “a fantastic admixture of some truth with *purely imaginary material*. *Others are simply fiction with no historical foundation whatever*” [italics added] (p. 176; pp. 176-185 identified examples and commented on the three groups of literature).

An example of documents that describe the suffering of the martyrs is the collection now known as *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. In this compilation, Musurillo (1972) has provided twenty-eight texts that the author regards as either reliable or important. Although not all these documents are considered as factual, and many may have been used as propaganda, they do provide important substance about the life and times of the early church. Musurillo (1972) noted that Harnack:

suggested that the Acts of the Christian martyrs were ultimately to be conceived

as a continuation of the apostolic witness of the New Testament, to demonstrate the power of Jesus living, speaking, and dying in the martyr (pp. lvi- lvii).

In his work about the expansion of Christianity, Harnack (1908) also noted that in sections of *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, some of the spectators suddenly decided to become Christians themselves and this was due to the overwhelming impression that the martyrs provided in their trial or execution. As Harnack added (Vol.1, pp. 210f, 367f, 492f) persecution served as an excellent means of promoting expansion. Tertullian appeared to get it right; “the blood of Christians is seed” (*Apology 50.13*). Lampe (2003, p. 322) expressed doubts “concerning the historical value of the extant *Acts*”, and added that changes to the text may have been made; corruptions may have occurred; and, it may be “possible to view the entire *Acts* as a *fiction of the second or third century*” [italics added].

There can be little doubt that early Christian martyrs suffered because some Roman officials were determined to enforce the traditional worship of the emperors and to put an end to what was seen as a dangerous new cult. Assessments of the martyrs varied. Some, like Tertullian, obviously saw them as true Christians, but later historians were not always so generous in their comments. For example, in his history of the Roman Empire, Gibbon (1776-1788/1887, p. 251) noted, “the assurance of a lasting reputation upon earth, a motive so congenial to the vanity of human nature, often served to animate the courage of the martyrs”.

As for the authenticity of these early records, Droge and Tabor (1992) noted that it couldn't be determined with any degree of certainty whether or not the stories that Eusebius and other Christian writers related about the martyrs can be regarded as historical. However, they came to the conclusion (p. 155) that the accounts of the deaths of Christian martyrs “are probably no more or less historical than Plato's

description of Socrates or Cicero's account of the death of Cato, or even the Johannine version of the death of Jesus".

Bowersock (1994) noted:

The martyrs narratives were to provide the basis for an *abundant production of instructive fiction in the centuries ahead*, although the earliest martyr acts, based as they were on carefully maintained protocols of interrogation, had rather more historical veracity than was to be characteristic of the genre later [italics added] (p. 141).

On the subject of pagan literature and its effect on the Christians, Bowersock (1994) added:

The great novelists evidently appealed to Christians as much as pagans. They lost none of their appeal, even in late antiquity. If after the fourth century there were few (or none) to practice this craft any more ... the Christians made these pagan works their own by *piling fiction upon fiction* ... for a long period there were no new novelists; because the hagiographers took their place. But the extant novels continued to be read and prized [italics added] (pp. 141-142). Bowersock disagreed with MacMullen (1986, p. 342) who asserted that Christianity put an end to a taste for novels.

In his following book about *Martyrdom and Rome*, Bowersock (1995) provided this important quote:

The personal sufferings of martyrs and saints created a wholly new literature that was as exciting to read as it was edifying. *This literature passed back and forth easily across the frontier between fiction and history, and it acquired its impact from the apparent historicity of its details* [italics added] (p. 24).

Later, Bowersock added:

The written record for the early martyrdoms can thus be seen in these areas to incorporate a substantial amount of authentic material that places the martyrdoms securely in the context of the Roman empire. These texts, that responded to the needs of the readers in such a way as fiction did, are precious repositories of authentic historical material. *As both martyrology and hagiography developed in the centuries after Constantine, the historical content of such narratives shrank perceptibly, although it never disappeared altogether* ... [italics added] (p. 38).

Writing about the saints was designed to promote the remembrance and imitation of the lives of inspirational Christians, and the early martyrs were the first of the saints. To perpetuate their memory special days were commemorated, events were held at identifiable tombs, and narratives of their lives were read and celebrated. The proliferation of legendary 'acts' in apocryphal literature indicates the popularity of this kind of literature. Accounts have been classified into three groups: 'acta' or 'gesta' [accounts of trials and condemnations]; 'passiones' or 'martyria' [descriptions of the martyr's life and death]; and 'martyr's legends' [legendary stories and narratives of later times] (see Ferguson, 1990, p. 408; Noble and Head, 1995, p. xviii). These early documents that described the 'acts' of the martyrs provided the origins of later hagiography.

It is generally agreed that in the fourth century, with imperial support, the church began to take stock of its early heroes and martyrs (Smalley, 1974, pp. 48-49; Noble and Head, 1995, p. xviii; Cameron, 1991, pp. 120-154; Ferguson, 1990, p. 409) and one result was the compilation of abridged lives of the saints. The importance of these writings cannot be minimized. As Gregory of Tours wrote:

I have recently discovered information about those who have been raised to heaven by the merit of their blessed conduct here below, and I thought that their way of life, which is known to us through reliable sources, could strengthen the church ... because the life of the saints ... encourages the minds of listeners to follow their example (From *Life of the Fathers* ; quoted in Noble and Head, 1995, p. xvii. Croke and Emmett, 1983 are helpful on historiography for the period c. A.D. 250-650).

The accuracy of medieval hagiography deserves comment. In a helpful

Introduction, Noble and Head (1995) noted that:

The records of the saints were a template of Christian virtue, a map of the path to salvation ... medieval hagiography was also prone to the use of stereotypic forms ... the primary aim of the authors was not to compose a biographical

record of the saint, but rather to portray the subject as an exemplar of Christian virtue ...stories, themes, and motifs were repeated from the life of one saint to another, each hagiographer adapting a traditional pool of material to the needs of the narrative at hand. Hagiographers even went so far as to repeat phrases and whole passages verbatim from earlier works ... hagiography was a genre that 'aims precisely at blurring the individual's traits and transforming his or her lifetime into a fragment of eternity'. The models of sanctity changed considerably over time, as each new author used and thus *altered extant tradition* [italics added] (p. xviii. MacMullen, 1997, pp. 1-6 and the accompanying notes added to this important aspect. Novak, 2001, pp. 1-9 referred to MacMullen and added helpful comments about historical method).

It has also been suggested that monasticism became an alternative to martyrdom and that their communities became centres for hagiography (Frend, 1967, p. 404; Noble and Head, 1995, p. xxiv). Quoting from the Seventh-Century romance entitled *Barlaam and Joasaph*, Frend (1967) stated:

'Monasticism', we are told, 'arose from men's desire to become martyrs in will, that they might not miss the glory of them who were made perfect by blood'. The monk, like the martyr, was the 'athlete' and 'soldier of Christ' (p. 404).

It is little surprise then that over the course of the Fourth Century the cult of the martyrs went from being a series of fragmented stories to one involving a developed, organized calendar of events, which was duly celebrated annually through festivals, feasts and visits to shrines. Although this chapter has focused primarily on written evidence, it was noted earlier (p. 199) that pilgrimages to places of martyrdom were very important. Snyder (2003, p. 125) adds that "the first edifices of Christianity were *martyria*, or places for the faithful to eat with the special dead. These *martyria* were then expanded by Constantine to form church buildings as we know them" (see also pp. 164, 173).

Brown (1981, pp. 3, 5-6, 50) noted that by the mid-Fifth century, the cult of the saints had impacted powerfully on the Mediterranean and by the end of the Sixth Century, the graves of the saints had become centres of ecclesiastical life. "In

popular estimate”, added Frend (1967, p. 404), “the age of martyrs became the heroic age, venerated in legend, unrepeatable in fact”.

In the Middle Ages (c. 800 –1200 A.D.), Christian history became the most distinctive and influential product of mediaeval historiography because it was “all essentially propagandistic in the sense that they (religious, ecclesiastical and lay histories) were composed to defend and publicize a cause” (Krieger, 1989, p. 21; Smalley, 1974, provided an overview of the Middle Ages including the importance of the Roman and Jewish-Christian legacy).

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Domitilla’s ‘fame’ was not limited to the First Century when certain events allegedly took place and she eventually came to be recognized as a Christian, a martyr, and a saint. Those facts are established in the Christian record as is the reality that Domitian came to be regarded as a persecutor of the Roman Christians. The above overview (pp. 195-200) indicates that the ancient tradition of Domitian as an evil person (pp. 111-113 above) and a persecutor of the Christian church (pp. 86-88,142-147 above) has persisted over the centuries and today many histories repeat that view.

Earlier (pp. 76, 101) it was noted that the early church had a ‘persecution mentality’, which included an expectation that Christians would suffer at the hands of pagan rulers and officials, and the general populace if they chose to make an issue about the presence of ‘superstitious’ Christians in their midst. That view which originated from the words of Jesus in the First Century gospels (see pp. 78-79 above) was applied to evil emperors like Nero and Domitian without substantial evidence and accepted as truth. The fact that Domitian is still regarded as a persecutor

indicates that the views of the pagan Roman historians (pp. 105-111 above) are still regarded by some historians as the best evidence. It also means that the Christian 'persecution mentality', together with the well established tradition that surrounds Domitilla, remains strong and persists today.

Chapter Nine

Summary of Findings

The primary aim of this thesis has been to consider whether the traditional perspective of Domitian's alleged persecution of the Roman Christians remains valid or whether revisionist views can provide a more reasonable opinion of the emperor's actions. This thesis has shown that recent revisionist impressions have presented several alternative points of view which have offered a more balanced credible account of Domitian's rule.

It is clear that evidence of persecution of early Christian groups or individuals by Roman authorities was limited to two periods. The first was in A.D. 64 at Rome, when an unidentified number of Christians were condemned by Nero following a fire that devastated much of the capital city. Although this incident was an isolated one and not related in any observable way to the later account of Domitian's reign, Nero's reign did establish the image of a 'bad emperor' who was prepared to take action against a religious group.

The second period was after Domitian's rule (c. A.D. 112) during Pliny's governorship in Pontus-Bithynia, when Christians were identified, prosecuted and an unknown number were executed. Pliny's detailed account provides the first substantial record about imperial action taken against the Christians; however this account and the emperor's response do not indicate any action having been taken in recent decades against the Christians in Rome.

The alleged persecution of Roman Christians during Domitian's reign cannot be supported from the primary source documents or from later secondary sources. The

negative assessments of Domitian's rule are due to early Roman literary sources which portrayed the emperor as a wicked person. Clearly, Domitian's reputation suffered at the hands of these Roman writers and regrettably we have nothing from Domitian himself to explain or defend his rule. Although the New Testament does not identify Domitian, later Christian writers took those negative views and promoted the idea that Domitian was a persecutor of the Roman Christians. The emperor was depicted as 'a bad emperor' and 'another Nero'. Those Roman historians and Christian writers have not substantiated their assessments with sound proof; rather the Domitianic persecution account has become one of legend rather than fact.

The various literary non-Christian and Christian accounts of Domitian's reign have demonstrated a significant amount of bias and it has not been difficult to note an obvious 'anti-Domitian agenda' in many of the sources. Any attempt to determine the dividing line between verifiable history and legend remains difficult; many documents were undoubtedly faulty, and many are clearly a mixture of fact and fiction. Many documents were written some considerable time after the alleged persecution event and the likelihood of distortion and inaccuracy cannot be dismissed lightly. Also the fact that many early accounts make no mention of Domitian at all has contributed to the tradition and has also added confusion to many accounts of the emperor's reign.

Identification of the key individuals in the alleged persecution as Christian has proved to be difficult and inconclusive. It seems obvious that if they were Christians, the Christian writers of the day would have left clear accounts to support the facts and prove that Domitian was a persecutor. That has not occurred which must cast

doubt on any alleged persecution. One key person, Domitilla, did however, achieve status as a martyr and her story has survived. Within the Christian story, the lives of the martyrs quickly became important as examples of the faith, yet these accounts also were subject to fabrication and must be treated accordingly.

Early attempts to use archeology to prove that certain Christian individuals were involved in the alleged persecution have, in recent times, found to be faulty and in need of correction. Improved assessments of dating techniques have effectively placed the key individuals outside the persecution timeframe that could have involved Domitian.

Revisionist historians have sought to rehabilitate Domitian's place in history and their efforts have provided a credible alternative to long standing accounts from traditionalist historians. It is extremely likely that Domitian was not as bad as he has been portrayed and that he did not persecute Roman Christians at any time during his troubled rule.

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