

Did Domitian Persecute Christians?

An Investigation



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Preface

Did the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81 – 96) persecute Christians? The answer has some bearing on the date of writing of the book of Revelation. This, in turn, has a direct bearing on the interpretation of the Apocalypse. To answer the question requires an investigation of many ancient sources. Arthur M. Ogden and Ferrell Jenkins have examined these materials, but have reached different conclusions. You now have the opportunity to study their findings and proceed with your own investigation.

Arthur Ogden published a small tract, *The Domitian Persecution*, in which he stated that he had changed his mind about the persecution. Earlier he had thought that Domitian had persecuted Christians, but, on the basis of further study, had changed his mind. Connie W. Adams, editor of *Searching the Scriptures*, suggested an exchange on the issue between Arthur Ogden and Ferrell Jenkins to be published in his paper. The articles appeared in the June and July, 1989 (Volume XXX, Numbers 6 and 7), issues of that journal. The articles are published in this form with the kind permission of the editor.

Arthur Ogden and Ferrell Jenkins have been friends since college days at Florida Christian College (now Florida College) in the early 1950's. Both men have devoted a considerable amount of time and study to the book of Revelation.

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The photograph of the coin bearing the head of Domitian is published through the courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

The Domitian Persecution

By Arthur M. Ogden

Elsewhere in this issue of Searching the Scriptures you will find an article by Ferrell Jenkins in response to this article. I ask that you read and carefully consider the material he has submitted.

I am sure this study of THE DOMITIAN PERSECUTION comes as a surprise, especially since Domitian has been billed as a great persecutor of Christians, both in print and in the pulpit, by students of the book of Revelation. This has been proclaimed as a proven fact and for someone now to question whether it ever occurred must be surprising.

Two facts shall evolve from this study to seize your interest. First, you will learn there is no evidence, from sources contemporary with Domitian, documenting a persecution directed by him in any way against Christians much less that he slew many thousands, bathing the empire in their blood, as taught by many zealous students of the book of Revelation today. Second, you will learn that the strongest case that can be made for a Domitian persecution is that there MAY have been one.

My Position

My position in this exchange should not be misunderstood. It is not my place to prove that Domitian did not persecute Christians. The obligation of proof is upon those who advocate the Great Domitian Persecution. I readily admit that he MAY have persecuted some Christians, however, neither you nor I have the right to charge him with slaying many thousands and bathing the empire in their blood upon the premise of what he MAY have done. It is admitted that the silence of history does not prove Domitian did not persecute Christians but, at the same time, it must be recognized that the silence of history does not prove he persecuted them either. We have no right to build a case against him without evidence.

When discussing what MAY have been, we must be careful not to presumptuously assert as fact what MAY have occurred. One can readily relate to this problem by considering the headline of a recent newspaper article. The headline stated, "BLACK HOLES MAY

FORM CORE OF 2 NEIGHBORING GALAXIES.” This statement necessarily implies three things: (1) That scientists do not know whether black holes form the core for the neighboring galaxies; (2) that scientists only deem their conclusions theoretically possible while at the same time admitting (3) the possibility there is another plausible explanation. However, if the word MAY is dropped from the headline, that which was stated as a possibility has been made a fact. This is precisely what has been done in reference to Domitian. Men have looked at Domitian’s nature, his self-deification and the recorded cruelty directed toward those who opposed him and have concluded that, since Christians would surely have been in conflict with all of this, he must have persecuted them. Without question, the time would have been ripe for a persecution during the last two years of his reign, but this does not mean a persecution took place. The strongest case that can be made for a persecution without presumption is to say there MAY have been one. Recognizing this problem many historians simply say, “Domitian MAY have persecuted Christians.”¹

The Evidence

I have observed the statement more than once in publications and in the pulpit that persecution against Christians reached its zenith during Domitian’s reign. Until three years ago, I never questioned this. As far as I was concerned it was true but I tell you now, without fear of contradiction, this statement is false. Even IF Domitian was guilty of persecuting Christians the statement is false. The persecution against Christians reached its height under Diocletian (284-305 AD) two hundred years later.

Note carefully the following statements often quoted which are also false. “Domitian instituted a persecution against Christians on the charge of atheism, that is perhaps, refusal to participate in emperor worship. It was short, but extremely violent. Many thousands were slain in Rome and Italy, among them Flavius Clemens, a cousin of the Emperor, and his wife, Flavia Domitilla banished.”² While Seutonius, the Roman historian, has recorded the death of Clemens and the banishment of Domitilla by Domitian, he does not record that they suffered because they were Christians, nor does he record the death of any others because of their being Christians. The quoted statement is without historical substance.

“Domitian (c. 81-96) is the emperor who has gone down in history as the one who bathed the empire in the blood of the Christians.”³ While it is true historians centuries after the fact have billed Domitian

as a bloody persecutor of Christians, there is no evidence from the historians contemporary with his reign that would convict him of directing a persecution against them.

“There was no persecution before, or after him to compare to that of his reign.... Nero’s persecution was confined mainly to Rome, while Domitian’s persecution was expanded to the whole of Asia Minor.”⁴ There is no historical evidence of any truth in these statements.

In fact there is no literary record to substantiate a persecution of any kind by Domitian against Christians.⁵ Neither Tacitus, Suetonius nor Pliny, all of whom resided in Rome (Tacitus and Pliny were members of the Roman Senate during Domitian’s reign),⁶ leave any record of any kind of campaign against Christians. This would appear strange since Tacitus and Suetonius both left a record of Nero’s persecution against Christians. Would not a persecution directed against Christians of the magnitude described above demand a place in the historical records of these and other writers? And why was Pliny, who was a member of the Senate during the reign of Domitian,⁷ ignorant of the precise crimes Christians were guilty of and how they were to be convicted and punished since such trials of Christians would have taken place in the Senate? He wrote Trajan, his emperor, “I have never taken part in trials (cognitiones) of Christians; consequently I do not know the precedents regarding the question of punishment or the nature of the inquisition.”⁸ How could a man of his political background have been so ignorant of what to do to Christians if there had been a sustained persecution directed against them during the reign of Domitian?

The Earliest Historical Record

The earliest historical record of a persecution under Domitian by either secular or church historian is 75 years after the fact.⁹ In order to date the record that soon after Domitian’s reign, we must give credibility to Melito and Hegesippus, the two sources cited by Eusebius in his “Ecclesiastical History.” Using these two men as sources, Eusebius (264- 340 AD) said of Domitian, “He was the second that raised a persecution against us.”¹⁰ He said this at least 200 years after the reign of Domitian. While Eusebius speaks of “martyrdoms” during the reign of Domitian,¹¹ he does not cite a single case of a Christian dying as a result of such a persecution. This is remarkable since Origen (185-254 AD) relates that only a few, “whose number could be easily enumerated,”¹² had died for the sake of Christianity up to his time. He recorded this a good 50 years before Eusebius penned his

history. Surely, if their number could be easily enumerated, Eusebius could have named one Christian who died for the cause of Christ under Domitian. His failure to name Christian martyrs tends to argue against a persecution under Domitian.

The Roman History of Cassius Dio, composed between the years 210 and 229 AD,¹³ is often relied upon as a source for documenting a persecution by Domitian against Christians. He wrote, “And the same year Domitian slew among many others Flavius Clemens the consul, though he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor. The complaint brought against them both was that of atheism, under which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were killed and the remainder were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria....”¹⁴

Before we get too excited about the content of this statement we would be wise to consider that the part of Dio’s history which describes Domitian’s reign is preserved for us only in what at best can be described as “a fairly reliable” abridgement made by Xiphilinus, a monk of the eleventh century.¹⁵ There are no early reproductions of this part of Dio’s history to draw on. It should also be observed that even if we give this portion of the record credibility, Dio does not mention any persecution of Christians. While it is true Christians could have been charged as atheist, it is also true that the Jews and others who refused Domitian’s self-proclaimed deity would have likewise been so charged.¹⁶ In this specific case, those charged with atheism are said to be following Jewish ways. While Christians MAY be associated with the Jews to some degree, it is not necessary to conclude that Christians are the subjects of the persecution described in Dio’s history. They MAY be but, at the same time, they MAY NOT be the subjects of the persecution described. Again, **we cannot charge Domitian upon the basis of what MAY have been.**

Tertullian, 160-220 AD, is drawn upon by Eusebius to prove a persecution by Domitian against Christians,¹⁷ yet in none of his statement does Tertullian accuse Domitian of killing Christians. The source for Tertullian’s statement is unknown though many scholars believe he drew from Melito as did Eusebius.¹⁸ If this is true, Melito again is the earliest source we have for a Domitian persecution. He lived approximately 75 years after the reign of Domitian.

In an attempt to find evidence of a persecution by Domitian from contemporary sources, some have gone so far as to argue that Clement of Rome in his first epistle, addressed to the Corinthians, makes reference to a persecution under Domitian when he spoke of “sudden

and repeated calamities and adversities” which had come upon the Roman church.¹⁹ This conclusion is totally unreasonable because (1) no one knows who Clement of Rome was or when he lived, and (2) no one knows the identity of the “sudden and repeated calamities and adversities.” Reasoning on the matter usually runs this way. “The sudden and repeated calamities and adversities evidently refer to persecution under Domitian, therefore, since the epistle makes reference to the persecutions of Domitian, it must have been written following the last two years of Domitian’s reign. Since the book was written following Domitian’s reign, Clement of Rome must have been contemporary with Domitian.” Such reasoning staggers the imagination. There is no evidence that Clement of Rome was contemporary with Domitian or that he made reference to a persecution during his reign.²⁰

In speaking of the evidence for a Domitian persecution, T.D. Barnes said, “No writer of the fifth or any subsequent century can be shown to have drawn on reliable evidence for the period before 250....”²¹ Elmer T. Merrill said, “It should be further observed that neither in Suetonius, nor in Dio, nor in any other of the pagan writers who touch upon the subject, is there the slightest intimation that Domitian’s bloody jealousy was directed against any but the leading aristocrats whom he supposed he had reason to fear, or that it ravaged at all outside the narrow circle of the Court and the Parliament. There is no indication of its extension into the provinces, or among the commonalty even in Rome. And if there had been such extension, it is altogether probable that some echo of it would be heard. There is absolute silence.”²²

Conclusion

In view of this total lack of concrete evidence to support the so-called Domitian Persecution, we must ask, “how could scholarly men conscientiously teach a Domitian Persecution?” The answer probably lies in the fact that sincere men honestly believed the Bible identified Domitian as a persecutor, therefore, they felt justified in proclaiming him as such.²³ If they were wrong in their biblical interpretation, however, they would likewise be wrong in their historical conclusions. The fact that history does not substantiate their biblical claims shows that their interpretation of scripture is in error. Neither Daniel (chapter 7) nor Revelation (chapters 13 & 17), the texts usually used to support the Domitian theory,²⁴ specifically identify with Domitian though many modern day biblical students teach that they do. This flaw in biblical interpretation apparently has led to a flaw in historical interpretation as well.

Whether Domitian persecuted Christians or not does not matter to this biblical student nor does it affect his understanding of the books of Daniel and Revelation. If Domitian persecuted Christians, so be it, but let it be stated for what it really was. Let us prove by concrete evidence what took place and let us not assume anything. Many have been greatly overstating the case against Domitian and this needs to be rectified.

Footnotes

¹Albino Gargetti, *A History of the Roman Empire*, p. 285; Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life In Ancient Rome*, p. 137.

²Henry H. Halley, *Bible Handbook*, p. 860.

³Ray Summers, *Worthy Is The Lamb*, p. 83.

⁴Ken Butterworth & John Shaver, *The Bible Way* (March-April 1983), p. 4.

⁵James Moffett, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. 5, p. 311. Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, revision by Walter M Dunnett, pp.10-11; Stewart Perowne, *Caesars And Saints*, pp. 83-84.

⁶Elmer T. Merrill, *Essays In Early Christian History*, p. 150.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁸F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 423.

⁹Merrill, p. 161.

¹⁰Eusebius, *Church History*, III, Chapter 17.

¹¹*Ibid.*, III, Chapter 18.

¹²Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III:8.

¹³Leon Hardy Canfield, *The Early Persecutions of The Christians*, p. 166.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 166; Merrill, p. 152.

¹⁶Merrill, pp. 155-157.

¹⁷Eusebius, III, Chapter 22.

¹⁸T. D. Barnes, *Early Christianity And The Roman Empire*, p.32, Merrill, p. 163.

¹⁹Clement of Rome, *First Letter To The Corinthians*, 1:1; Cf. *Apocalypse of John* by Beckwith, p. 204.

²⁰Merrill, pp. 160-161, 207-241.

²¹Barnes, p. 32.

²²Merrill, p. 157.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 158-159; Canfield, p. 162.

²⁴Jim McGuiggan, *Book of Daniel*, pp. 108-109; *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 184-185.

The Domitianic Persecution — A Response

By Ferrell Jenkins

“The persecution of Domitian burned itself ineradicably into the memory of history; it may be doubted by the critic, but not by the historian....So strong and early a tradition as that which constitutes Domitian the second great persecutor cannot be discredited without wrecking the foundations of ancient history. Those who discredit it must, to be consistent, resolve to dismiss nine-tenths of what appears in books as ancient history, including most that is interesting and valuable.”¹

Ogden Demands Too Much

In the article by my long-time friend and brother, Art Ogden, demand is constantly made for evidence “contemporary” with Domitian which states that the emperor persecuted Christians. To ask for this is to request too much. Unbelievers make much of the fact that we have very few references to Jesus and the church from sources outside the New Testament. From the first century we have only a few references in Josephus (written more than 60 years after the event), Tacitus (more than 50 years after the event mentioned), and possibly Suetonius (about 70 years after the event he describes).²

The earliest evidence for a Neronian persecution of Christians in A.D. 64 comes from the writings of Tacitus (A.D. 115), *more than 50 years after the event!* Art accepts this testimony, but rejects similar evidence regarding Domitian. And in the case of Nero he has *no evidence of any persecution of Christians in Asia Minor*. If Art were in the affirmative in this exchange he would have to affirm a Neronian persecution in the same way I seek to establish a persecution under Domitian.

Art rejects the testimony of pagan historians and the so-called “Church Fathers” who wrote 75 or more years after the reign of Domitian. When one rejects the testimony of these writers regarding the Domitianic persecution he will soon find himself way out on a limb which is about to be sawed off.

When browsing through the writings of the Christians of the second century and afterwards I feel uncomfortable. I don’t like what I read,

and would not want to be identified with one of those churches. One can see that many departures from the apostolic practices were already under way. Having said this, we must express our debt to these men. It is they who provide our earliest references to the New Testament books. The *patristic* evidence is frequently earlier than the *manuscript* evidence. Unless their testimony contradicts the internal evidence we have no valid reason for rejecting it.³

The Book of Revelation

Let us use the book of Revelation as an example. The post-apostolic writers provide information not contained in Revelation. In addition to details about the Domitianic persecution they tell the *date of composition* and the *specific identification of the author*.

Let not one say “But I have the book of Revelation itself”. The earliest historical allusion to the book is in the writings of Justin Martyr who died in A.D. 165.⁴ According to Art, that would be 100 years after Revelation was written! The earliest fragments of papyrus manuscripts of the book date from the third century (P¹⁶, P⁴⁷, P⁶⁵). The first complete manuscript is Codex Sinaiticus of the fourth century. The earliest reference to Revelation as “Scripture” is quoted from the Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul to the churches of Asia Minor and Phrygia. But for this we must depend on Eusebius.⁵ Earlier writers such as Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen show an acquaintance with the Apocalypse.⁶

Overstatement of the Persecution

The persecution by Domitian has been exaggerated in numerous sources, and it is appropriate for Art to warn us about this. In material which was originally written in graduate school nearly a quarter of a century ago, I cited Summer’s statement that Domitian was the emperor “who bathed the empire in the blood of the Christians.”⁷ I would not use this statement today. We need not, however, swing from the extreme of overstatement to the opposite extreme of denial of persecution.

The Case for the Domitianic Persecution

1. The Book of Revelation. John was on the island of Patmos “because of (Greek: *dia*) the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). He was a “fellow-partaker in the tribulation” with those in the seven churches of Asia. Antipas had been killed at Pergamum

(Rev. 2:13). He was called the Lord's faithful *witness* (Greek: *martus*, from which the English word "martyr" comes).

Aside from the internal evidence which I believe sustains the conclusion that Revelation was written during or shortly after the reign of Domitian, we have the testimony of the Fathers.⁸ Irenaeus (flourished c.175 - 190), as a boy in Smyrna, listened to Polycarp who had been a disciple of John. He states that the "apocalyptic vision...was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign."⁹ Adela Collins says that "the fact that he dated the book as he did, in spite of the difficulty about the apostle's age, implies that he had independent and strong evidence for the date."¹⁰ His independent evidence may well have been from the Christians of Asia Minor who knew about these things. Why would he misrepresent the matter?

Be assured that if Art had evidence like this for the Neronian date of Revelation he would be quoting it. In fact, the first source I have located which dated the Apocalypse to the time of Nero was a heading in the Syriac Version of A.D. 508. That's about 440 years after the book was written!¹¹

2. Pliny. When Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan, about A.D. 111, for advice on how to conduct the trials for Christians in Bithynia, he stated that some Christians had quit their practice three years earlier; other many years earlier; "and a few as much as twenty-five years ago."¹² Pliny's statement suggests that their defection came about A.D. 86 during the reign of Domitian.

Albert Bell, who seeks to defend a date for Revelation in A.D. 68, points out that Pliny's statement that he had never been present for the trials of any Christians implies, "of course, that there had been such trials. And the only time in Pliny's life that they are likely to have occurred is under Domitian."¹³

3. Melito. Melito, bishop of the church in Sardis, wrote an apology to the emperor Marcus Aurelius about A.D. 175. Eusebius quotes from his work as follows: "Nero, and Domitian, alone, stimulated by certain malicious persons, showed a disposition to slander our faith...."¹⁴

4. Tertullian. Tertullian was trained as an attorney in Carthage, North Africa. In his *Apology* to Septimius Severus, written about A.D. 197, he said "*Consult your histories.* There you will find that Nero was the first to *rage with the imperial sword* against this school in the very hour of its rise in Rome". He continued, "Domitian too, who was a good deal of a Nero in *cruelty, attempted* it...soon *stopped*...restored those he had *banished*. Such are ever our *persecu-*

tors...” [Emphasis mine,FJ]. The emperor was expected to find this information is *his histories*. Eusebius quotes Tertullian to the effect that the apostle John returned from exile on Patmos and abode at Ephesus till the reign of Trajan.¹⁵

5. Eusebius. Our most systematic church historian of the early centuries was Eusebius of Caesarea. Best known of his works is *Ecclesiastical History* (Church History) which was published about A.D. 325. Eusebius stated that Domitian was “the second that raised a persecution against us”¹⁶ He says, “In this persecution, it is handed down by tradition, that the apostle and evangelist John, who was yet living, in consequence of his testimony to the divine word, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos.” He quotes Irenaeus, but says that “even historians that are very far from befriending our religion, have not hesitated to record this persecution and its martyrdoms in their histories.” He says that Domitian persecuted some “for professing Christ,” and names Flavia Domitilla.¹⁷ Whether Eusebius got this information from Dio Cassius, Bruttius or some other historian he does not say here.

Space does not permit a discussion of the identity of Flavia Domitilla or Flavius Clemens, the issue of *atheotes*, and the confusion of Jews and Christians by the Roman leaders. My question is this: If these people were not Christians, why would the Christians, such as Eusebius, want to claim them?

6. Hegesippus. Hegesippus may rightly be called the Father of Church History. He lived near the time of the apostles (between c. A.D. 117 - A.D. 189). His works are now preserved for us in Eusebius who states that Hegesippus compiled in five books “the plain tradition of the apostolic doctrine.”¹⁸

Hegesippus tells of some relatives of our Lord who were brought to Domitian. He asked if they were of “David’s race, and they confessed that they were.” When he learned that they had little money and property, he then asked “respecting Christ and his kingdom.” They told the emperor that it was not a temporal or earthly kingdom. “Upon which, Domitian despising them, made no reply; but treating them with contempt, as simpletons, commanded them to be dismissed, and by a decree ordered the persecution to cease.”¹⁹

Conclusion

This evidence of a persecution by Domitian seems, to me, too strong to reject. I wish to close this reply with the comment of the Italian scholar Marta Sordi.

“The reality of a persecution was well known to all the Christian commentators, from the Shepherd of Hermas to Melito, from Hegesippus to Tertullian, and is confirmed not only by contemporary Christian sources, from Clement’s First Epistle to the Revelation of St. John, but also, as we have seen, by the pagan writers Pliny and Bruttius. In order to prove that the persecution never actually happened (and I do not personally believe this is possible), each reference would have to be explained away separately. . . . But even if it were feasible to find a convincing explanation for each reference, I still maintain that the mere fact of there being so many individual reports of the persecutions having taken place, makes it unreasonable to harbour any serious doubts on the subject.”²⁰

Works Cited

¹W.M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1954) 259.

²Ferrell Jenkins, *Introduction to Christian Evidences* (Fairmount: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1981) 119-121; F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

³Jenkins, *Introduction* 74-84.

⁴*Dialogue With Trypho*, 81.

⁵*Ecclesiastical History*, V.1.

⁶Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 427-431.

⁷Ray Summers, *Worthy is the Lamb* (Nashville: Broadman, 1951) 83; Ferrell Jenkins, *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Temple Terrace: Florida College Bookstore, 1983) 23. The general approach presented in these works is still held to be valid.

⁸For a more detailed evaluation of the internal evidence see Jenkins, *Studies*, and Jenkins, *Emperor Worship in the Book of Revelation* (Tampa: privately published, 1988).

⁹*Against Heresies*, V.xxx.3.

¹⁰Adela Yarbro Collins, “Dating the Apocalypse of John,” *Biblical Research* 26 (1981) 33-45.

¹¹Bruce M. Metzger, “Versions, Ancient,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (New York: Abingdon, 1962) IV: 754. Arthur M. Ogden incorrectly dates this to the second century. See *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets* (Louisville: Ogden Publications, 1985) 15-16.

¹²*Pliny Letters*, X.xcvi.

¹³Albert A. Bell, “The Date of John’s Apocalypse: The Evidence of Some Roman Historians Reconsidered,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979) 96. A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 7-2, points out that Merrill (*Essays*, ch. 6) “failed to notice the implication.” So did Ogden, who cited Merrill.

¹⁴*Ecclesiastical History*, IV.xxvi.

¹⁵*Ecclesiastical History*, III.xx; III.xxiii.

¹⁶*Ecclesiastical History*, III.xvii.

¹⁷*Ecclesiastical History*, III.xviii.

¹⁸*Ecclesiastical History*, IV.viii.

¹⁹*Ecclesiastical History*, III.xix.

²⁰Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986) 45.

The Domitian Persecution (No. 2)

By Arthur M. Ogden

Ferrell Jenkins, whom I love dearly in the Lord and whose scholarship I respect highly, has responded to my presentation on the supposed Domitian persecution. I appreciate his skilled defense of his position and his brotherly spirit. He did an excellent job of presenting his evidence. I believe, however, that a careful reading of my previous offering is sufficient to serve as an answer to his response. In that article I anticipated the case to be made for a Domitian persecution. I showed why it is weak, and I also showed that in order to prove a Domitian persecution one must appeal to the book of Revelation.

Evidence Not Rejected

Ferrell did a good job of showing the contribution made to our understanding of the early years of Christianity by the evidence sifted from early pagan sources and the “Church Fathers.” Yet, we both understand that many things found in these sources are contradictory and others are false. He accepts these no more than I. The evidence must be sifted and questions asked: What is fact? What is fiction? What is opinion?

Somehow Ferrell concluded from my article that I reject the patristic evidence. Reread my article and see if I rejected the evidence. I simply questioned whether the evidence is strong enough, in the absence of corroborating contemporary sources, to convict Domitian of directing a persecution against Christians of the magnitude described by many historians and Revelation commentators. I readily admit that Domitian *MAY* have persecuted some Christians. I reach this conclusion by considering the kind of evidence presented by Ferrell. If I totally rejected that evidence, I could not say there *MAY* have been a persecution.

The Case is Overstated

Ferrell readily admitted that the case for a Domitian persecution has been overstated. No longer will he say “Domitian bathed the empire in the blood of the Christians.” What will he say? His evidence from

“Christian” sources, except for his use of Revelation, reveals that Melito (175 AD), Hegesippus (117-189 AD), Tertullian (197 AD) and Eusebius (325 AD) said there was persecution, but the sum total of their evidence reveals two banishments (the apostle John and Domitilla), and an inquiry of some relatives of the Lord. No deaths are presented. Though Edward Gibbon accepted all of this evidence, plus accepting Flavius Clemens (husband to Domitilla) as a martyred Christian, did not think this ordeal deserved the right to be called a persecution.¹

Just how strong is the evidence from “Christian” sources? Ferrell thinks it is “too strong to reject.” I think it is too weak to build a case upon. The case for John’s banishment to Patmos during Domitian’s reign is weak because it contradicts the internal evidence of the book of Revelation,² and the evidence that Domitilla was banished by Domitian because she was a Christian is weak because no one knows whether or not she was a Christian at the time of her exile. Even if she was, our earliest information about her banishment indicates that she was banished for political reasons rather than religious.³ All of this boils down to there being too little evidence to convict. Domitian may have persecuted some Christians but the evidence from “Christian” sources does not prove it, certainly not to the proportions claimed by so many today.

The Contemporary Evidence

The impression is left that Tacitus, writing 50 years after (115 AD), was not contemporary with Nero any more than Hegesippus and Melito, writing 75 years after, were contemporary with Domitian. Contemporary means “Living, occurring, or existing at the same period of time; contemporaneous” (Webster). Tacitus (55-120 AD), Suetonius (69?-140 AD), and Pliny (61-113? AD) were Roman writers who left at least a partial record of the history of Domitian’s reign. Though only a lad of 9 to 12 years of age, Tacitus leaves a record of Nero’s persecution as does his contemporary Suetonius, yet neither of them, though men of age and maturity and in a position to have witnessed it, tell anything about efforts on Domitian’s part to persecute Christians. They are as silent as the tomb. Could a persecution of the magnitude often pictured have gone unnoticed by them?

Ferrell thinks that Pliny’s letter to Trajan (111 AD) implies an earlier policy of the Empire toward Christianity. He has concluded, since some Christians defected 25 years previous to their inquest before Pliny (*i.e.*, 86 AD), that they ceased to be Christians because

Domitian persecuted them, yet no one charges Domitian with persecuting Christians before the last two years of his reign (95-96 AD). Their defection, therefore, had nothing to do with persecution. It is then reasoned, since Pliny states he had never been present for trials of Christians, that this implies there had been such trials under Domitian. It is assumed there were earlier trials of Christians and then assumed that those trials were conducted during the reign of Domitian. This is assuming too much.

Ferrell says if I were affirming the Neronian persecution I would seek to establish it the same way he establishes the Domitian persecution. He is mistaken. Tacitus was contemporary with Nero and the people of his reign. He revealed the Neronian persecution. Suetonius also recorded it. Be assured that if Ferrell had evidence like this for the Domitian persecution, he would have used it.

The Book of Revelation

Without the book of Revelation there is practically no case that can be made for a Domitian persecution. We probably would never have heard of it if the Apocalypse had not been written. The book of Revelation indicates some kind of persecution in progress in Asia while the book was being witnessed by John. This is not a problem with the early date. It matters not how far reaching Nero's persecution was because the scriptures reveal Jewish persecution of saints in every place Jews resided and also some Gentile persecution. I maintain the primary persecutors in Revelation are Jewish and that the Roman conflict with the saints is secondary covering 200 years from the time of Trajan until it ended. The advocates of the late date will not accept this explanation of the persecution depicted in Revelation, so in order to substantiate their position, they MUST have a Domitian persecution. The early date is too early to satisfy their view of the Apocalypse, and the reign of Trajan too late.

Ferrell has written, "The book of Revelation is the most thoroughly Jewish in its language and imagery of any New Testament book."⁴ To me it is amazing that the most thoroughly Jewish book of the N.T. describes what has been concluded is a thoroughly Gentile persecution of a predominately Gentile church. I rather think the most thoroughly Jewish book of the N.T. was designed to reveal God's judgment upon the Jews, the primary persecutors of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments ages.

Efforts are made to prove the date of the Apocalypse by calling upon Irenaeus (130-200 AD) who states that the "apocalyptic vision... was

seen...towards the end of Domitian's reign." The impression is left that Irenaeus got this information from Polycarp, though he did not indicate the source of his statement. The uninspired statement of Irenaeus' opinion about dating the book is of no more strength than my own uninspired statement. Ferrell thinks I would like such a statement to establish the early date but, if that were the strongest case for it, I would reject it. Like the evidence from the Syriac Version,⁵ which Ferrell mistakenly thinks I use to establish the early date of Revelation, this kind of evidence only indicates that early church fathers also had opinions about the date of the book's composition.

The Early Date

Restraining the urge to present a counter argument for the early date is difficult, however, I must forego because our discussion concerns the question of whether Domitian was a persecutor of Christians and not the date of the Apocalypse. If Ferrell wishes an exchange upon that topic, let him read my commentary on Revelation (1985), *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets*, and answer my arguments. This book has been in print for three and one half years and to date, though the first printing is nearly depleted, not one person having read the book and holding to the late date has offered to refute my scriptural arguments. I have received nothing but commendation for the work.

A Challenge to Ferrell

It would be of help if Ferrell would describe for us exactly what he deems the Domitian persecution to have been. To help him with this task, I challenge him to tell us if the statements quoted in my previous article from (1) Halley, (2) Butterworth and Shaver are true statements? (3) Is the description given by Weldon Warnock in *Revelation: Message From Patmos* (page 10) a true description of the Domitian persecution? (4) Do you really believe that "Domitian attempted to crush Christianity"?⁶ (5) Do you believe he developed a new policy toward Christianity? (6) Do you believe that the number of Christians slain by Domitian was in the thousands, hundreds, fifties, teens or single digits? (7) Can you identify just one Christian who died as a result of a persecution instigated by Domitian? (8) Can you prove beyond all shadow of doubt that he persecuted anyone simply because they were Christians? A forthright answer with historical evidence to substantiate the claim would be in order.

Footnotes

¹Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 278.

²The internal evidence from the book of Revelation which makes this argument weak is the evidence within the book demanding the book be written before 70 AD. See my arguments in *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets*, pp. 17-23.

³Elmer T. Merrill, *Essays In Christian History*, pp. 149-150.

⁴Ferrell Jenkins, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, p. 22.

⁵*The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets* is CORRECT in stating the Syriac Version dates back to the 2nd century (pp. 15-16). However, Ferrell is probably correct also in stating that the earliest manuscript of that version, carrying the 68 AD date, is dated in 508 AD. Thanks to Ferrell for pointing out this error.

⁶Ferrell Jenkins, *Emperor Worship in the Book of Revelation*, p. 4. I highly recommend this much needed work on Emperor Worship. Apart from the author's speculation on the date and interpretation of Revelation, it is an excellent work.

The Domitianic Persecution — A Response (No. 2)

Ferrell Jenkins

Not only did I get the impression from Art's first article that he rejected the evidence from the "Church Fathers," but I still have that impression despite his disavowal. Art wants to know "What is fact? What is fiction? What is opinion?," and I want to know the same thing! In my previous article I set forth "The Case for the Domitianic Persecution." Since I admitted that the case for the Domitianic persecution has been overstated, Art wants to know what I will say now? Let's summarize again.

Summary of the Patristic Evidence

1. The Book of Revelation. John was on Patmos because of his preaching of the word (1:9). Antipas had already been martyred (2:13). The patristic evidence says that John was exiled under Domitian, released upon the death of the emperor, and then wrote the book of Revelation. Adela Collins says the fact that Irenaeus "dated the book as he did, in spite of the difficulty about the apostle's age, implies that he had independent and strong evidence for the date."¹ Colin Hemer says "if John suffered exile in Domitian's reign, and the emperor was remembered as a persecutor, it is easy to account for the growth of the tradition."² Art is of the *opinion* that all of these early writers just gave their *opinion* and that it was wrong. If Nero, or one of the other emperors, or the Jews were responsible for the exiling of John and the death of Antipas, why didn't the early writers just say so? Why did they incorrectly attribute these things to Domitian? Why couldn't just one writer before the sixth century have a different opinion?

2. Pliny. In A.D. 111 Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan for advice on how to conduct the trials for Christian in Bithynia. He stated that he had never been present for any of these trials. Even Albert Bell, who dates the book of Revelation to the reign of Galba (A.D. 68/69), points out that this implies, "of course, that there had been such trials.

And the only time in Pliny's life that they are likely to have occurred is under Domitian."³

Art thinks we have *assumed* that the earlier persecution mentioned by Pliny was conducted under Domitian, but that's what the evidence says. The only emperor between Trajan (A.D. 98-117) and Domitian (A.D. 81-96) was Nerva (A.D. 96-98), and I am unaware of any accusations of persecution against Nerva. In fact, he is the emperor who *recalled* the exiles.⁴

3. Melito. Melito, in his apology to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, singled out Nero and Domitian as showing "a disposition to slander our faith..."⁵ Why would Melito make such a blunder in writing to the emperor of Rome?

4. Tertullian. Tertullian, in his *Apology* to Septimius Severus, even called upon the emperor to "Consult your histories." He stated that Nero was the first to "rage with the imperial sword" against Christians. He stated that "Domitian too, who was a good deal of a Nero in cruelty, attempted it" but "soon stopped...restored those he had banished. Such are ever our persecutors..."⁶ Why would Tertullian, trained as an attorney, challenge the emperor to consult his histories about something that did not happen?

5. Eusebius. This church historian quoted several earlier writers to the effect that Domitian was a persecutor of Christians. He says that Domitian persecuted some "for professing Christ," and names Flavia Domitilla. Art states that no one knows whether Domitilla was a Christian at the time of her exile. In this he follows the *opinion* of Merrill. The Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White reminds us that "Eusebius is not lightly to be set aside when he names a particular person..."⁷ My question was, and is: "If these people were not Christians, why would the Christians, such as Eusebius, want to claim them?"

6. Hegesippus. This church historian recites the story of Jewish disciples of the Lord who were brought before Domitian. He states that the emperor dismissed these individuals and "by a decree ordered the persecution to cease."⁸

Who is Contemporary?

It was pointed out in my first article that the earliest evidence for a Neronian persecution of Christians in A.D. 64 comes from the writings of Tacitus (A.D. 115), *more than 50 years after the event!* Art thinks that Tacitus, a lad of 9 years of age, and Suetonius, born about 5 years after the persecution, were *contemporary* with Nero. He rejects

the evidence of Pliny, Melito, Tertullian, Eusebius, and Hegesippus regarding the persecution under Domitian as not being contemporary. President Franklin D. Roosevelt died when I was 9 years old (if my encyclopedic sources can be trusted) and I have *never* thought of him as my contemporary.

Argument From Silence

The argument from silence is appealed to by Art. He wonders why Tacitus and Suetonius tell nothing of “efforts on Domitian’s part to persecute Christians. They are silent as the tomb. Could a persecution of the magnitude often pictured have gone unnoticed by them?” The answer: “Yes, they could have failed to mention such.” We pointed out in the beginning of our first article that unbelievers often make much of the fact that we have only a few early references to Christ and the church outside the New Testament. A. J. Hoover, a reputable historian, comments on this insistence for evidence that does not exist: “Unbelievers have a bad habit of demanding perfect evidence for various aspects of the Christian faith. For example, in this matter they wonder why we have no record of the report that, presumably, Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judaea, sent to Rome concerning the trial and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. We simply remind them that no official record has been preserved of any report which Pilate, or any other Roman governor of Judaea, sent to Rome about anything!”⁹

The first known historical allusion to the book of Revelation is in the writings of Justin Martyr who died in A.D. 165. The earliest manuscript fragments are from the third century. Yet, Art believes the book belongs to the seventh decade of the first century. He was curiously silent about my comments on the *date of composition* and the *specific identification* of the author of Revelation. These things we know because of the testimony of the “Church Fathers.” I think the reader can see why I thought Art rejected the evidence from patristics.

Must “Late Daters” Have a Domitianic Persecution?

Art thinks that those who believe Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian “MUST have a Domitian persecution.” Let’s set the record straight. My own view is that John received the Revelation while on Patmos during the reign of Domitian. John was returned from exile upon the death of Domitian (A.D. 96). I don’t know whether the Seven Churches received the book before or after the death of Domitian. The book itself mentions only the exile of John and the death of Antipas as having taken place at the time of writing.

Revelation was written to explain “the things which must shortly take place” (1:1). The emperors of Rome continued periodically to persecute Christians until early in the fourth century.¹⁰

My view of Revelation does NOT necessitate a persecution of Christians by Domitian. The evidence which I presented in my first article does lead me to believe that such persecution took place.

Art’s Defense of the Early Date

We are informed that *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets* has been in print for nearly four years and that no one has answered the arguments. Portions of my *Studies in the Book of Revelation* have been in print since 1973. In the “Introduction” I examined the major arguments for the early date presented by James M. Macdonald, *The Life and Writings of St. John* (1877). This was the source followed by Foy E. Wallace, which in turn was followed generally by Art. Numerous commentators have replied to these same arguments in the past. I have no inclination, and less time, to enter into an exchange with every person who advances these views. In fact, I urge students to read all the views and draw their own conclusion. That’s what the readers will have to do with this exchange.

A Challenge Answered

My friend wants me to describe exactly what I deem the Domitianic persecution to have been. Colin Hemer’s book, which was developed from his PhD thesis at Manchester, deals with these matters. He suggests that “persecution” is not “a simply defined term, to be discovered by clear criteria, but that complex pressures existed in the historical situation, and might be activated by authorities not necessarily predisposed to ‘persecute’, but adopting policies which impinged on a vulnerable group....I want to stress the severity of the trial present and impending, and not to deny it the title ‘persecution’ from the Christian viewpoint, whatever the official view.”¹¹ This very point may well account for the fact that the “Church Fathers” mentioned the persecution and that the Roman writers did not. Bell says that the total number of Christians brought before the imperial courts must have been “insignificant from the Roman point of view, but to the small fellowship of Christians the sudden loss of even three or four prominent members would be a staggering blow.”¹²

Here are my answers to Art’s questions. (1,2) I think Halley was incorrect about the number; Butterworth is wrong about the severity. (3) Warnock’s correctness depends on what he means by “wide-

spread.” (4) Domitian did attempt to “crush Christianity” through the persecution of John and others mentioned in my first article.¹³ (5) Hemer says “No Domitianic edict against Christianity is extant.”¹⁴ But see the case built by Hemer and by Jenkins who presents Revelation as a “polemic against the Imperial cult” in *Emperor Worship*. (6) I only know what has been presented in the evidence cited. The total number persecuted or slain remains a conjecture. Persecution may exist without killing. (7) I think Antipas belongs in this category. (8) The evidence for a persecution by Domitian seems, to me, too strong to reject.

A Friendly Challenge Returned

It is easy to ask for specific names of people killed and then incorrectly to conclude in the absence or scarcity of such that no persecution took place. I would like for Art to (1) name a single person of Asia Minor who was killed because he was a Christian as a result of either the Neronian or Jewish persecution during the years A.D. 60 to 70. (2) If the New Testament canon was closed by A.D. 70, why didn't the “Church Fathers” know this? (3) Why were they of the “opinion” that John was exiled by Domitian and that he lived until the time of Trajan? (4) Why were they of the “opinion” that Domitian was the second to raise a persecution against the church? (5) Since the “Church Fathers” left volumes upon volumes (far more than the Roman historians), and since they differed on many things, why wasn't a single one of them during the first five centuries of the “opinion” that Revelation was written during the reign of Nero? (6) Why do you consider the pagans, Tacitus and Suetonius, good historians when failing to mention Christians, but consider the Christians, Hegesippus and Eusebius, as bad historians when they mention what the Romans did to the Christians?

Conclusion

With the modern Italian scholar Marta Sordi “I still maintain that the mere fact of there being so many individual reports of the persecutions having taken place, makes it unreasonable to harbour any serious doubts on the subject.”¹⁵ I wish to close with the words of the nineteenth century scholar, Sir William Ramsay: “The persecution of Domitian burned itself ineradicably into the memory of history; it may be doubted by the critic, but not by the historian. . . . So strong and early a tradition as that which constitutes Domitian the second great persecutor cannot be discredited without wrecking the foundations of

ancient history. Those who discredit it must, to be consistent, resolve to dismiss nine-tenths of what appears in books as ancient history, including most that is interesting and valuable.”¹⁶

Works Cited

¹Collins 34.

²Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 1986) 222.

³Bell 96.

⁴*Ecclesiastical History*, III.xx. **Note:** This entire paragraph, which was in my manuscript sent to Art and to the editor of *Searching The Scriptures*, was omitted from the published account in the journal. It was likely an oversight by the typesetter.

⁵*Ecclesiastical History*, IV.xxvi.

⁶*Apology*, V.3,4; *Ecclesiastical History*, III.xx.

⁷A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) 695.

⁸*Ecclesiastical History*, III.xix.

⁹Arlie J. Hoover, “Jesus and the Historians,” *Firm Foundation*, April 29, 1980, 278.

¹⁰See G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (London: Duckworth, 1955) 167.

¹¹Hemer 213-214. Consider the comment by Edward Gibbon in this light.

¹²Bell 96.

¹³This statement was made by Donald L. Jones, “Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult,” in *Aufstieg un Niedergang der Romischen Welt* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 1033. I have found his essay most helpful.

¹⁴Hemer 216.

¹⁵Sordi 45.

¹⁶Ramsay 259.

Rebuttal

By Arthur M. Ogden

Due to limited space, I cannot respond to everything presented in Ferrell's previous article. The 12 questions asked must be by-passed due to space and being unable to introduce new material needed in response.

Ferrell has ably presented the case for a Domitian persecution. The evidence is before us. We must weigh it for value. If we grant validity to all of his evidence, this is the sum total of what he has proven: two banishments, an inquiry, and one death (Antipas, Rev. 2:13). Realizing the difficulty, Ferrell summonsed Colin Hemer to define persecution so that it will include what he has tried to prove. Surely you can see by now the weakness of the case for a Domitian persecution.

Ferrell wants us to fear questioning the patristic evidence. He quotes Ramsay to the effect that if we do not accept this weak evidence, to be consistent, we must be ready to reject 9/10 of all we call ancient history. Ferrell does not believe this himself for, as I have pointed out already, there are many things revealed by the "Church Fathers" which he questions and often rejects. In fact, two of Ferrell's quoted sources contradicted each other on who "recalled the exiles," Domitian or Nerva? Tertullian said it was Domitian. Eusebius said it was Nerva. Ferrell chose to believe Eusebius. I wonder how he made his decision?

It should further be observed that not all who hold to the same general interpretation of Revelation as Ferrell place the same degree of confidence in the statement of Irenaeus. Jim McGuiggan, whose *Commentary on Revelation* ranks #1 among Revelation commentaries in sales at the Religious Supply Center, dates the Apocalypse during the last years of Vespasian's reign. Many brethren with sound Bible background are now agreeing with McGuiggan. Wonder if these brethren have ever heard of Irenaeus?

Ferrell needs more than an implication from Pliny's letter to prove a Domitian persecution. He needs a necessary implication. He overlooks the obvious, namely, that Pliny's letter (111 AD) implies trials of Christians under Trajan (98-117 AD). This is the most reasonable implication since Trajan was a persecutor. Pliny was appointed governor of Bithynia in 111 AD, the thirteenth year of Trajan's reign.

To use the Book of Revelation, whose date of writing and application is debatable, to prove Domitian was a persecutor, to me, is unrea-

sonable. It assumes a thing as proven which is yet to be proven. If Ferrell is wrong about the Apocalypse, he is likewise wrong about Domitian, and vice versa, despite his disavowal.

I admitted in my first article that historical silence does not prove Domitian was not a persecutor. I realize that history does not record all events. This is why we say there MAY have been persecution during Domitian's reign. At the same time, it must be recognized that historical silence does not prove persecution either. I doubt seriously that history would have recorded a persecution of the size indicated by Ferrell's evidence, however, I believe history would have recorded a persecution of the size and intensity implied by Ferrell and taught by others.

Ferrell thinks he answered the arguments for the early dating of Revelation in his *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (1973). Sorry, but my main arguments were not dealt with in his work and those he dealt with, which were used by Macdonald and Wallace, he did not answer. He only stated them and showed why he and others do not accept them. I would welcome the opportunity for just one hour to present my case for the early date of Revelation before Ferrell and all others who are interested and, then, let them take all the time they need to see if they can destroy it. Take me up. I challenge you.

I stated in my first article that the strongest case that can be made for a Domitian persecution is that there MAY have been one. This is still the case. Ferrell has admitted that much of what has been said about a Domitian persecution is false, that it has been overstated, that no edict against Christianity during Domitian's reign is extant, and that he does not know how many, if any, were killed by Domitian. He even said, "Persecution may exist without killing." What has he proven? He has merely proven that there MAY have been a persecution. What have I proven? I have merely proven that there MAY NOT have been persecution under Domitian. My point in all of this is very simple. Let us stop this non-sense of declaring Domitian as the great(est) persecutor of all times. If you believe the evidence presented by Ferrell, then teach what that evidence says. As far as the Book of Revelation is concerned, there is another view of the Apocalypse that does not depend upon Domitian as one of its chief characters. Read and study *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets*.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the EDITOR of *Searching the Scriptures* for suggesting and planning this exchange and to my dear friend Ferrell Jenkins for his honorable part in this discussion. Their interest in truth and fair play is evident. I love them for this and because they are my brethren.