

# DOMITIAN AND THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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Of the numerous perplexities surrounding the Epistle to the Hebrews, this treatment deals with a singular topic: Hebrews emerges out of the historical context of the persecution which characterized the closing years of the reign of Domitian (A. D. 81-96).<sup>1</sup> One of the major difficulties in studying the reign of Domitian centers around the senatorial historiography which depicted him as a "monster of cruelty and wickedness."<sup>2</sup> Later Christian writers picked up the theme; and since some Christians lost their lives during his reign, he was doomed as the "Second Persecutor." However, only two things deeply scored what would have been an otherwise good reign—his extreme personal cruelty and a homicidal purge which involved some Christians in Rome. For the most part, modern historians rate him above average as an administrator.<sup>3</sup> If he could be faulted as a ruler in any one respect, it lay in his tendency to forsake the republican tendencies which characterized the Julio-Claudian dynasty and advocating in all his actions the absolute nature of his power and the sacredness of his person, thus becoming "an autocrat of the Hellenistic type."<sup>4</sup>

Roman historians were free in their negative comments touching his personality. Dio Cassius begins his description of Domitian's reign by describing him as "bold and quick to anger. . . treacherous and secretive" (67. 1. 1). His cruelty was evidenced in the numerous associates who fell into disgrace and the grave during his rule, a number so large that Dio remarked that it would be "impossible to discover the total number of those who were executed by Domitian" (67. 11. 3). Domitian coupled his tendency toward cruelty with an "inflated sense of

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<sup>1</sup>The classical sources for the reign of Domitian are Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 67; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*; Tacitus, *Agricola*. The most extensive modern study is S. Gsell, *Essai sur le regne de l'Empereur Domitien* (Paris, 1894). There is also a thorough presentation in *PW* 6: cols 2541-2596.

<sup>2</sup>E. T. Salmon, *A History of the Roman World from 30 B.C. to A.D. 138* (6th ed.; London: Methuen, 1970) 226.

<sup>3</sup>Typical is R. M. Haywood, *Ancient Rome* (New York: McKay, 1967) 450-452; see also J. P. V. D. Balsdon, "The Roman Empire in the First Century," *PCB*, 610e.

<sup>4</sup>M. Rotovtzeff, *Rome* (2nd corrected impression; New York/London: Oxford University, Galaxy book, 1967) 206-207. E. Stauffer (*Christ and the Caesars: Historical Sketches* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955] 158-159) claimed that "He did not wish to be a citizen among his fellow citizens, but a superhuman being playing his sacrilegious game with human destiny."

dignity" and tactlessness."<sup>5</sup> As is usual among such personalities, his cruelty led him to be "suspicious of all mankind" (Dio 67. 14. 4).<sup>6</sup>

Domitian was an extremely adulterous man. Suetonius wrote that "he was extremely lustful, and called his sexual activities 'bed-wrestling,' as though it were a kind of sport" (Suetonius *Dof.* 22). At one time he put his wife, Domitia, aside. During the separation he brought to his bed his niece, Julia; even after he was reconciled to Domitia he continued to live with Julia as husband with wife (Dio 66. 2. 2). In his early days he had many illicit affairs with married women; in fact, he had persuaded Domitia to divorce her husband for his sake (Suetonius *Dom.* 1. 1. 3). Yet Dio suggested that this was not his worst fault—"he desired to be flattered" (67. 4. 2). In order to gain the plaudits of Rome's inhabitants he put on numerous entertainment extravaganzas, even when he lacked the funds to pay for them. In order to gain such, he resorted to murder or forcing subservient peoples in the Empire to pay more taxes (Dio 67. 4. 4-6).

When Titus, his brother and immediate predecessor to the throne, lay dying, he confessed that he had made but one mistake—surrendering the throne of the Romans to a man like Domitian (Dio 66. 26. 3-4). And if, as Suetonius suggested, Domitian vacillated back and forth between virtues and vices, gradually the latter become more numerous than the former, and he emerged "rapacious through need and cruel through fear" (*inopia rapax, metu saevus*; *Dom.* 3.2). As his reign neared its end, he purged large numbers of Romans, and among some were Christians. About this time a Christian leader, still unknown, wrote a letter to Roman Christians whose purpose was "to bestir to activity a church stunned by the opposition with which is [was] faced."<sup>7</sup>

Scholars are by no means in unanimous agreement that Domitian did indeed persecute Christians; and even among those who make such a concession, there is again division whether the Emperor deliberately directed a pogrom at the Christians. This observation by F. W. Beare sums up the conclusions of many: "There is no solid evidence that

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<sup>5</sup>Salmon, *History of the Roman World* 226.

<sup>6</sup>His suspicious nature has also been noted by E. R. Hardy. "Domitian," *Dictionary of the Bible*, rev.ed. 220 and J. W. C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church to A. D. 590* (4th ed.) London: Methuen, 1963) 31.

<sup>7</sup>D. W. Riddle, "Hebrews, First Clement, and the Persecution of Domitian," *JBL* 43 (1924) 339.

<sup>8</sup>F. W. Beare, "Persecution," *IDB* 2.737. Among those who feel that clear proof is lacking for a Domitianic persecution are Wand, *History of the Early Church* 31; R. M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Thrust of the Christian Movement into the Roman World* (New York/Evanston/London: Harper & Row, ca. 1970) 79; B. W. Henderson, *Five Roman Emperors: Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Nerva, Trajan, A.D. 69-117* (Cambridge: University, 1927; reprinted, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969) 45; E. Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* (Berlin, 1923 3.558).

Christians suffered persecution by the Roman state under . . . Domitian. It is possible that some of the victims of the terror under Domitian were Christians, but there is nothing to show that they suffered for their faith." This statement calls forth two comments. First, the Domitianic persecutions are thought to have embraced both Rome and the province of Asia, the latter situation addressed by the Book of Revelation. This study in hand is essentially confined to Rome, and there it is true that the persecution "does not appear to have amounted to very much."<sup>9</sup> This is certainly the testimony of the contemporary scriptural accounts; for only in Rev 2:13 is there any reference to a martyr (Gr., *martyrs*); none exists for any deaths in Rome, save Hebrews. The second comment has to do with the nature of a persecution. For instance, G. Krodel has written, "Neither Nero nor Domitian had any intention of destroying the Christian religion, and we have no direct proof that Christians were singled out by Domitian for special persecution."<sup>10</sup> This may be true; but when a religious community experiences the loss of a member through a purge, whether that purge be specifically directed at the particular group or not, there is a feeling of apprehension that grasps the hearts of the community, for the fate of one could become the fate of all. The bloodbath which Nero inaugurated in A. D. 64 could very well flow again; and it may already have in the death of Clemens and the exiling of his wife Domitilla. After all, as Krodel noted, first-century Christianity's image had produced in the minds of its contemporaries a picture that "was anything but good. For its name had become associated with sinister activities."

The persecution motif is quite strong in several books of the NT—Revelation, I Peter, Hebrews and the Synoptic "little apocalypse." Heb 10:32-34 relates an earlier persecution which the Roman church had experienced during the reign of Nero, but "the storm had died down, and the Christians had to face only unpopularity and contempt, though there was still the possibility that the active violence of the government and the mob would be revived."<sup>12</sup> The Christians lived in a matrix of

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<sup>9</sup>W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell) 217.

<sup>10</sup>G. Krodel, "Persecution and Toleration of Christianity until Hadrian," *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (ed. S. Benko and J. O'Rourke; Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1971) 260. This position was earlier advocated by G. Edmondson, *The Church in Rome in the First Century* (London, 1913) 168.

<sup>11</sup>Krodel, "Persecution and Toleration," 260.

<sup>12</sup>T. H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (MNTC; New York/London: Harper, 1933) xvii.

potential persecutions.<sup>13</sup> Any incident could spark a conflagration. The Luke-Acts narrative underscored Christian loyalty to Roman rule. Paul admonished every reader to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1). There can be little question but that first-century Christians were well aware of their precarious posture—as religionists in their relationship to Jews, as political figures in their relationship to Rome. While the Neronian persecution had been confined to Rome, it would not be difficult indeed to project that experience to any city in the Empire, such as the riot at Ephesus suggests (Act 19:21-41), or the turmoil in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27-40).

The incidents recorded in both Suetonius and Dio provide the context for the persecutions mentioned after the revolt by Antonius (Suetonius *Dom.* 10: 2-4; Dio 67. 14-15). Philosophers were exiled, friends were put to death; so many were murdered that later Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3. 17) wrote, "At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were executed without a fair trial, and countless other eminent men were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally, [Domitian] showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God. In fact, he was the second to organize persecutions against us. . . ." It is this citation from Eusebius which first tied Domitian to persecutions. Since then attempts have been made to give his claims more substance. Such conclusive proof has not been difficult. Shirley Jackson Case, for instance, observed that Josephus demonstrated through a comparison of similar passages in *Ant.* and *J.W.* how even the Jews were "much less at ease in the time of Domitian than even in the early years immediately following their subjugation by Titus."<sup>14</sup> But perhaps the strongest evidence for persecution of Christians during Domitian's reign appears in the correspondence of Pliny the Younger with Trajan. Pliny referred to numerous Christians who had surrendered their religion a score of years earlier due to pressure; this may be taken as strong literary evidence to support the charge against Domitian as a persecutor,<sup>15</sup> for it would place the time in his reign.

There are several additional reasons why Domitian could have prompted the persecutions against the adherents of the new faith.

<sup>13</sup>For the reasons for the persecutions, see L. P. Wilkinson, *The Roman Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1974) 197-198; R. H. Barrow, *The Romans* (Chicago: Aldine, 1964) 175-184; L. P. Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church* (4th ed.; New York: Nelson, 1942) 57-60.

<sup>14</sup>S. J. Case, "Josephus' Anticipation of a Domitianic Persecution," *JBL* 44 (1925) 13. In addition to ancient sources listed above, mention of the persecutions is made in Lactantius 3; Tertullian *Apol.* 5; Orosius 7. 10; Suplicius Severus *Chron.* 2. 31; Eusebius *Chron. ad Jerome* 3; and Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.* 8. 25.

<sup>15</sup>Wand, *History of the Early Church* 31.

Without question was the emergence of the imperial cult, a condition arising when Domitian required that he be addressed as Lord and God (*dominus et deus; desotes kai theos*). The Romans never persecuted people for their religious opinions except when they practiced outrageous morality. Their usual charge against the Church was the refusal of the Christians to take the oath of loyalty to the emperor as "Lord and God." Christians were vulnerable because they were not a national group as were the Jews. Further, "it was plain to most Romans that they were not to be regarded as real Jews of a special type, but as an uncertified association. . . owing allegiance to some other king or Lord called Jesus."<sup>16</sup> On the one hand they could ascribe to no one else the very titles which Domitian claimed for himself; on the other he could tolerate no one who failed to make such an ascription.<sup>17</sup> Save for aborted attempts by Caligula and Nero, the emperors had traditionally discouraged their subjects from offering them divine honors; but Domitian took the opposite track, and suspected of treachery those who looked askance at his cult. Loving to have such titular adulations heaped upon him, "the circus became a temple, the people's festivals became worship of the emperor, and the festival meal became the Holy Meal of the Lord."<sup>18</sup>

Closely related to the *dominus-et-deus* development as a cause for Domitian's persecution was the charge that the Christians were atheists (*atheotes*). What was an "atheist?" Several definitions have been proffered, but insofar as Domitian himself was concerned atheism probably meant the neglect of the state religion, "and Christians could very well be accused of that."<sup>19</sup> As Krodel has so judiciously noted, such a political understanding made atheism an "obnoxious standoffishness, and lack of patriotism, evidenced by the Christians' refusal to participate in the imperial cult."<sup>20</sup> The charge of atheism thus *ipso facto* made one guilty of high treason because the attitude was a crime, not simply against the emperor as a man, but against his divinity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup>J. Moffatt, *The First Five Centuries of the Church* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1938) 40-41.

<sup>17</sup>For a very concrete example, see Dio 67. 13. 4.

<sup>18</sup>Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* 155. This quotation is taken from a lengthy discourse (pp. 153-159) in which Stauffer cites numerous examples from historians and poets how Domitian loved to have heaped upon him all sorts of titles. For the chronological development of the "dominus et deus" movement, see Stauffer 160; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution* 213; and M. P. Charlesworth, "The Flavian Dynasty," *CAH* 11.42.

<sup>19</sup>S. Benko, "The History of the Early Roman Empire," in *Catacombs and Colosseum* 67.

<sup>20</sup>G. Krodel, "Persecution and Toleration," 260; F. V. Filson has a similar position in *New Testament History: The Story of the Emerging Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 298.

<sup>21</sup>PW 6 col. 2578.

A third probable cause for Domitian's persecutions was financial stringency. It is interesting to note that the tax on the Jews is mentioned in connection with his fiscal policy which left much to be desired. Since A.D. 70 the Jews had been required to pay the temple tax that had formerly supported the center in Jerusalem to Rome—a two-drachma tax levelled by Vespasian, the receipts going to the upkeep of Jupiter-worship in lieu of their own temple. There were always those who endeavored to evade the tax: some retained their Jewish origins a secret to avoid the tax, and others lived as Jews without professing Judaism. Domitian simply attempted to close the loophole.

Through these three probable causes, the Christians of Rome and the empire were visible targets for Domitian's persecutions. The Epistle to the Hebrews was thus written to a group of Christians who were threatened by persecution. *Auctor* urged his readers to move beyond "elemental principles," and start digging into more relevant, significant aspects of their faith, for they were living in a precarious state. No law had yet been passed against them, no systematic policy of extermination was employed by the magistrates; had such been the case they would have been better prepared. But because of innumerable subtleties, they never knew when they would be next. Thus was inaugurated a period described by Donald W. Riddle as "one of the most poignant of the periods of crisis in early Christianity," which "furnished the immediate occasion for certain books of the New Testament."<sup>23</sup> And since *Auctor* could not be personally present with the Roman community, he undertook a letter addressed to a most relevant exigency.

Domitian's persecution against the Christians is based epigraphically on materials recorded by Suetonius (*Dom.* 10) and Dio (67. 14. 1-3) which chronicle the deaths of Clemens and Glabrio and the exiling of Clemens' wife, Flavia Domitilla, to the island of Pandateria. The question surrounding them is simple: Were they Christians? It has been suggested that they were Jewish converts and that Domitilla is not to be identified with the Christian of the same name which appears on the walls of the catacombs.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Africa has set forth the theory that later Christians appropriated Clemens and Domitilla as martyrs and saints; however he feels that it is more likely that the pair "was

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<sup>22</sup>For explanation of the tax by Roman historians, see Suetonius *Dom.* 12. 1-2. Among modern historians see Henderson, *Five Roman Emperors* 44-45; R. M. Grant, "Domitian," *IBD* 1. 863; Black, "Development of Judaism," 606b; A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Religion in the Apostolic Age* (New York: Scribner's 1900) 630.

<sup>23</sup>Riddle, "Hebrews, 1st Clement and the persecution of Domitian," 330.

<sup>24</sup>*PW* 6. cols. 2536-2539.

interested in Judaism, which was in ill repute in the Flavian era."<sup>25</sup> Harold Mattingly, on the other hand, claimed that Domitilla was "certainly" a Christian, and that Clemens was one also. Noting that Clemens was executed for being an atheist and also described as a man *contemptissimae inertiae*, he pointed out that both were "very suitable charges against a Christian."<sup>26</sup>

The Italian archaeologist, Rudolpho Lanciani, took note of the Flavian tomb mentioned above. While later Christian burials were in catacombs, those of the first century were above ground. The cemetery of members of Domitian's family, such as Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla, being above ground, "reveals a bold example of publicity." There was no question in Lanciani's mind but that Clemens and his wife were Christians, and he cited a tombstone discovered in 1864 in the Villa Patrizi which stated that none might be buried in the tomb to which it was attached except those who belonged to the creed (*pertinentes ad religionem*) of the founder.<sup>27</sup>

Let us trenchantly examine the three persons listed by later historians as Domitian martyrs: Clemens, Domitilla and Glabrio. As late as the fourth century their names were not found in the compilation of Roman martyrology. Clemens, along with Sabinus, his older brother and the father of Julia, was one of two sons of Vespasian's older brother who perished in A.D. 69 in the last struggle between the troops of Vespasian and those of Vitellius on the Capitol. Suetonius (*Dom.* 15. 1) describes him as *contemptissimae inertiae* (of most contemptible laziness). He was Consul in the year A.D. 95. The custom near the end of Domitian's reign seems to have been that "ordinary" Consuls should hold office until the middle of April. Clemens was probably executed in May, 95.<sup>28</sup> If he were a Christian,<sup>29</sup> and Christians had little interest in the affairs of a world which they believed evanescent, Clemens would not be too enthralled with being a Consul. Further, as Consul he would be in an impossible position. His first official act would be to offer vows and sacrifices to various and numerous deities, including Domitian. "Thenceforward at every turn he would be met by

<sup>25</sup>T. W. Africa, *The Immense Majesty: A History of Rome and the Roman Republic* (New York: Crowell, 1974) 238, n.

<sup>26</sup>H. Mattingly, *Christianity in the Roman Empire* (New York: Norton, 1967) 35

<sup>27</sup>R. Lanciani, *Pagan and Christian Rome* (first published 1892; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967) 315-316.

<sup>28</sup>Gsell, *Domitien* 59; D. McFayden, "The Occasion of the Domitianic Persecution," *AJT* 24 (1920) 64.

<sup>29</sup>"It is possible, if not probable, that Clemens was a Christian"; so Filson, *New Testament History* 298; also Charlesworth, *CAH* 11. 31-32; C. F. Robinson, *Apollo History of Rome: from 753 B.C. to A.D. 410* (New York: Crowell, Apollo Books, 1965) 328.

obligations connected with state worship and particularly with the imperial cult<sup>30</sup>—a posture which would be impossible for one who conceived of Christ alone as *dominus et deus*. If this slothful cousin of Domitian could not escape the emperor's sword, then no one could feel safe; hence his murder sealed the subsequent fate of Domitian a year later.<sup>31</sup>

Historians are better inclined to accept Domitilla as a Christian<sup>32</sup>. The strongest support lies in the cemetery which a woman of that name later gave to the Roman Christian community. This burying-place later became a favorite place for Christians. Domitian did not put her to death, but exiled her to the island of Pandateria—just as John was exiled to Patmos during Domitian's reign. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3. 18) dates this exile in Domitian's fifteenth year, which would be A.D. 96.

Interestingly enough, those historians who question Clemens' Christianity are most certain that Glabrio was a Christian. Bernard W. Henderson urged that the "nineteenth-century finds in the Catacombs of Rome make it almost certain beyond doubt that Glabrio's 'atheism' was in fact Christianity." He further pointed out how the crypt of the Acilian family in the first-century cemetery of Priscilla on the Via Salaria Nova claims Acilius Glabrio for the new religion, just as the cemetery of Domitilla at the Tor Maronica on the Via Ardeatina "reinforces the tradition that makes Domitilla a Christian."<sup>33</sup> Glabrio had served as Consul with Trajan in A.D. 91. The martyrdoms of Clemens and Glabrio are consistent with Domitian's character—fearful, apprehensive, distrustful of men in high positions about him.

We now turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews to ascertain if there is any internal evidence to support the claim that it was written around the persecutions of Domitian. Again, we shall cut the Gordian knot, and consider Hebrews written as a message by an absent church leader to be read to either a local church or leaders of a church located in Rome for the purpose of admonishing the readers to stand fast as persecution again raises its head.<sup>34</sup> Like Revelation, Hebrews belongs

<sup>30</sup>McFayden, "Domitianic Persecution," 60-61.

<sup>31</sup>Salmon, *History of the Roman World* 235; Charlesworth, *CAH* 11.32.

<sup>32</sup>So McGiffert, *Apostolic Age* 631; W. Ramsey, *The Church in the Roman Empire* 260. J. L. Price, on the other hand, claims that the tradition for her faith "is late and probably worthless" (*Interpreting the New Testament* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961] 446.)

<sup>33</sup>Henderson, *Five Roman Emperors* 49; Gsell, *Domitien* 294-296; McFayden, "Domitianic Persecution" 63.

<sup>34</sup>I follow Filson (*New Testament History* 325, n. 1.) at this point. I suggest Hebrews was written from Asia by a leader in the Roman church who has already witnessed—or heard of—the death of Antipas and the persecution which the churches in that province are beginning to experience—hints of which are found in the Letters to the Seven Churches (Rev. 2-3). In Asia the possibility of governmental pressure was much



in that category of Christian literature termed "martyrology"—a handbook for strengthening and encouraging Christians so that they will not flee from death, but will willingly, yea, eagerly, accept martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> The readers were not being cautioned, as suggested, to rouse themselves from "threatening lethargy";<sup>36</sup> if such were the case, then why the parade of martyrs reviewed in Chapter 11, all of whom died? Further, in 6:6 a technical term is used for apostasy, *parapesontas*. This word means a denial of faith in Christ under persecution.<sup>37</sup>

Persecution had earlier befallen the church to which the Epistle was addressed (10:32-34). This can only refer to the Neronian persecution<sup>38</sup> which is the only persecution concerning which we have any information, whether by tradition or history. At the same time, the following verses indicate that a similar situation is on the horizon (10:35-39). A similar motif is found in 12:4, where the possibility of shedding blood is imminent. In both instances, however, there is a note of caution: in the Tenth Chapter *Auctor* reminds his readers that they have need of endurance in order to do the will of God. He then quotes the LXX of Isa 26:20, "my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." He could very well have quoted Hab 2:4; "the righteous shall live by faith"; but that passage does not carry with it the warning against apostasy. In Chapter Twelve *Auctor* reminds his readers that it is God who chastens His children; in fact, the very experience of discipline implies that they are sons of God, for discipline is a sign of parenthood, lack of it a sign

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greater inasmuch as it was not outside the experience of this region to participate in emperor worship. Thus if Domitian began using the title *Dominus et Deus* to describe himself in A. D. 86, such an acceptance would find a more positive response in Asia than in Rome. But since there was a strong Christian element in Asia, which could probably trace itself back to the Ephesian ministry of Paul (Acts 19:10) and the later leadership of John, the Christians there were the first to apprehend the significance of Domitian's claim to divinity and thus be in the forefront of opposition to it. Domitian's claim was not taken seriously in Rome by the church until the martyrdoms of Clemens Glabrio and the subsequent exiling of Domitilla in A. D. 95/96. But the Christians' opposition to the emperors' claims in Asia had been met earlier and had already resulted in the martyrdom of Antipas (Rev. 2:13). Thus *Auctor*, among the "they of Italy" (Heb. 13:24) who greeted the Roman church, and who was present in Asia, warned the church at Rome what could await them—hence the Epistle to the Hebrews.

<sup>35</sup>M. Rist, "Revelation: A Handbook for Martyrs," *Iliff Review* 2 (1945) 270. The call to fidelity in the face of opposition, the use of Jesus as an example of suffering to death, the warning that there is no forgiveness for those who cave in under pressure—these controls are used both Hebrews and Revelation.

<sup>36</sup>A. C. Purdy, "Hebrews," *IB* 11.591.

<sup>37</sup>E. Dinkler, "Apostasy," *IDB* 1.170.

<sup>38</sup>Not the Claudian, as urged by T. Hewitt (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: London: Tyndale, 1960] 39 and W. Manson (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Historical and Theological Reconsideration* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951] 71).

of bastardy. But such suffering will be in vain if persistence is not maintained.<sup>39</sup>

It is most unfortunate that Chapter Eleven in the English Bible is read out of context. After a short introduction on the nature of faith, *Auctor* begins by citing historical examples of those who walked—and died—by it. It is not by chance that he started with Abel, for Jewish apocalyptists viewed him as a martyr. As *Auctor* moves along the “roll call of the saints,” the crescendo mounts to a martyrological peak, as example after example of dying for the faith is given (vv 35-38, particularly). All died, not having received the promise, but having seen it from afar. All sought a better country—a heavenly one. The apogee to the martyr scene is found in 12:1-12, where *Auctor* paints a picture of a colosseum with the readers in the arena, surrounded by a great crowd of martyrs, a “packed throng of spectators in the amphitheatre which shimmers or swims before the eyes of the agonists in the arena.”<sup>40</sup> Yet all look to Jesus, who joyfully, as the proto-martyr, endured the cross, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God triumphantly. And while *Auctor* is not as overtly insistent as was John of the Apocalypse, yet there is a hint that only those who die for their faith will gain the crown of life (Rev. 2:10). One should also note that in Heb 12:1 as in Rev 2:13 *martyrs* is already beginning to shade off into “the red sense of ‘martyr’ . . .”<sup>41</sup> It has been urged that *Auctor* “summons up this host of witnesses before his readers in order to encourage them. . . Having given them grounds for faith, he now gives them living examples of faith.”<sup>42</sup> Such was not the case; he gives them *dead* examples—men who died in the past for the faith as *martyrs*, not as witnesses. Manson summed up the concept when he wrote:

...the writer to the Hebrews knows no final formula under which to bring the Christian life except that of martyrdom for Christ's sake or preparedness for that eventuality. Christians are summoned to go forth to Jesus ‘without the camp’, bearing his reproach (13:13). The words ‘You have not yet resisted to blood in your

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<sup>39</sup>D. W. Riddle, *The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1931) 172.

<sup>40</sup>Manson, *Hebrews* 82.

<sup>41</sup>Moffatt, *Hebrews* ICC 193. There are two ways by which *martyrs* is used in the NT. In an active sense, it can translated “witness”—one who sees and reports on what he has observed (Acts 1:8). It may be used passively as “martyr”—one who takes the brunt of persecution (Acts 22:20, of Stephen). In Heb 12:1 it is used in the latter sense. Note the Greek connective which begins 12:1 (*toiargoun*, also in 1 Thess 4:8), which ties this verse immediately with the preceding. The context in which 12:1 lies requires a passive use of *martyrs*—they were put to death.

<sup>42</sup>H. C. Kee, F. W. Young, and K. Froehlich, *Understanding the New Testament* (2nd ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 441.

conflict against sin' (12:4) suggests that for him the last sacrifice comes definitely into the prospect which lies before the faithful.<sup>43</sup>

It may thus be seen that Hebrews has a purpose far transcending mere laxity of faith; as Donald W. Riddle noted, "It is becoming widely recognized that meaning obtains to many of the statements of the Epistle to the Hebrews when they are read in the light of Domitian's suppression."<sup>44</sup> It now remains to note some possible references to the period of Domitian, particularly as seen in Chapter Thirteen.

The exhortation in 13:4 regarding marital fidelity "among all" may certainly refer to Domitian's sexual irregularities. This admonition for Christians is without parallel in the NT; it may thus be related to the Emperor, particularly the admonition that the "marriage bed be undefiled." Not only had Domitian defiled the marriage bed, but he even used a technical term, *pulvinar*, for it—a word that was used for the bed of a god (Suetonius *Dom.* 13. 1).

The admonition in 13:5, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have," can very well be understood against the backdrop of Domitian's greed and extravagant monetary practices, which in turn were responsible for the confiscatory deeds that frequently ended in the death of his victims. The readers are encouraged to do these things because in Deut 31:6,8 and Josh 1:5 God has promised, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Further support comes from Ps 118:6, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?" In light of these two quotations lifted to the attention of a community threatened with persecution, God's assurance of aid on the one hand and the confidence that there is nothing any man—not even the emperor!—can do to him who has put his trust in God is underscored.

The counsel regarding the leaders (*hegemenoi*) is singular also in the NT. For one thing, they are not specified as *episkopoi*, *presbyteroi*, or *diakonoi*; but their example is to be imitated continually. The reference to the reader being strengthened by grace, not by foods (v 9) could well have reference to the lavish banquets and picnics which characterized much of Domitian's entertainment.

Heb. 13:13 urges bearing the abuse of Christ. Closely connected with it (by the conjunction *gar*- is the reason (v 14): here there is no abiding city. The reader is rather really continuing to seek (emphatic use of the present tense of *epizetoumen*) the coming city. Even Rome herself, with all her stature and prestige, can never satisfy the longing, seeking soul.

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<sup>43</sup>Manson, *Hebrews* 190-191.

<sup>44</sup>Riddle, *Martyrs* 170.

Further verification that Hebrews was written during Domitian's reign comes from I Clement. The relation between these two literary works is understandable only in the light of Domitian's suppression which both of them treated. Written near the end of A.D. 95, I Clement took note of the "sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves." This refers to the persecutions which the Roman church had suffered at Domitian's hands or those of his minions.

Two important lessons emerge from Domitian's treatment of the Christians. The first touches the sociology of the first-century Church. With the martyrdoms of Clemens and Glabrio and the exiling of Domitilla, there is evidence that the new religion was "gently making its way not only into the slaves' garrets of the crowded city or the underlings' quarters in Caesar's household, but even into the palaces of the nobility and claimed the adherence of the Emperor's own kin."<sup>45</sup> Those noble-born Christians kept the faith to the end. Up to this time Christianity had remained largely a religion of the downtrodden, the slaves, the lower classes; had it remained confined to such social classes, it would hardly have survived. But the martyrdom of Christian nobility is evidence that it had made its way into the very highest circles of the empire.

The second lesson is the importance of the year A.D. 95 for church history, the significance of which has been so well described by MacFadyen:

Down to 95 A.D. the relation between the church and the empire had been one of mutual tolerance. The imperial officials had regarded the Christians as an inoffensive, if somewhat irrational, sect and had protected them against mob violence to which they were constantly exposed. Accordingly the Christians had regarded the empire as a divinely appointed instrument in the world for the suppression of crime and restraint of the Antichrist. Loyalty to the emperor and strict obedience to his behests had been inculcated by their leaders as a religious duty. Now it was realized on both sides that God and the emperor were rivals for the ultimate allegiance of men. The fact is that the year 95 A.D. is a date of supreme importance in human history. It marks the beginning of a conflict between religion and the state which can never entirely disappear until "the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Henderson, *Five Roman Emperors* 50; Salmon, *History of the Roman World* CBE.

<sup>46</sup>MacFadyen, "Domitianic Persecution," 65-66.

And emerging from the persecution was not only the Epistle to the Hebrews, but also the Apocalypse of John, I Peter and I Clement. Thus by placing Hebrews in the context of Domitian's persecutions, a solution to the problem of date can be posited with credibility.

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