CHAPTER FIVE

THE *APOCALYPSE* AND DOMITIAN’S ICONOGRAPHY

*The Lamb’s victory in sacrifice and the festal community*

We argued in the last chapter (4A) the general historical reliability of the Christian tradition of Domitian as a second Nero in persecuting Christianity. Dio Cassius *Hist.* 67.14 was hardly contrary evidence since by the phrase τὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνη this author probably had no intention of identifying Judaism as distinct from Christianity (4A 1). Indeed he would not have registered any distinguishable difference between either faith at a superficial, phenomenological level. Furthermore, the claim that Domitian was a persecutor did not rest upon the Christianity of Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla alone (4A 2 and 4A 3).

But in one respect the Eusebian tradition had been deceptive in that it presupposed a general edict of persecution impossible before A.D. 251. Our hypothesis was that non-participation in the Imperial Cult, whilst not in itself illegal, exposed the non-participant to other accusations of practicing a *superstitio* the purpose of which was to cause social disorder through creating metaphysical disorder that disrupted the cosmic harmony of the *pax deorum* (3C 2.3). But if this were the case, then it would be particular changes in the Imperial Cult itself that would cause persecution, since non-participation would attract particular notice.

Let us now consider those changes, and how they are reflected in the iconography of the *Apocalypse*.

**PART A. DOMITIAN’S CULT AND THE DATE OF THE APOCALYPSE**

The *Apocalypse* presupposes the reality of a particular and dangerous confrontation between Domitian and the Church. If no such novel and particularly vicious confrontation occurred in that reign, then this would be evidence against a Domitianic date for the *Apocalypse*, and hence its association with the situations presupposed in turn by
Clement *Corinthians* and reflected in the immediately succeeding generation of Ignatius of Antioch. Let us begin, therefore, with a consideration of the date of the *Apocalypse*, and the confirmation of that date in critical changes that occurred in the ceremonial and iconography of the Imperial Cult under Domitian that also find reflections there.

5A 1. *The date of the Apocalypse*

Rejecting the testimony of Irenaeus (*Adversus Haer. V*, 30,3; Eusebius *H.E. III*,18), Jones argues for a date in Nero’s reign. His grounds are his belief in the greater probability that the description in *Apoc.* 17, 9–11 refers to that reign. The beast with seven heads is clearly the Roman empire since they correspond to the seven hills on which the harlot sits. But they are also seven kings (v. 9). “Five have fallen, one still is, and the other has not yet come…” (v. 10). Jones considers that all other solutions simply “avoid the obvious choice” that Augustus is the first and therefore Nero must be the fifth.¹

But I would suggest that the choice is only “obvious” to someone who is in a position to know the specific details of the history of the Principate. The author of the *Apocalypse*, which was a semi-literate work, was hardly such a person. In his situation in Asia Minor, he would get his information from non-literary artefacts like temples of the Imperial Cult such as those at Ephesus, Smyrna, or at Pergamon, and from prominent and striking statues and numismatic iconography of particular emperors to be found there. He took over such a kaleidoscope of non-literary imagery and refashioned his fragmentary images into new patterns. Though those patterns bear the influence of his Judaeo-Christian background, they also retain the impress of their original pagan matrix. There are five indications of a date in Domitian’s reign in the text of the *Apocalypse* itself, from which we can conclude that the Seer’s imagery was drawn from the specific background provided by his reign.

5A 1.1. *Domitian’s edict on the vineyards*

*Apoc.* 6,6 (“a *choinix* of wheat for a denarius (*χοίνιξ σίτου δηναρίου*), and three *choinikes* of barley for a denarius (*καὶ τρεῖς χοίνικες κριθῶν δηναρίου*), and do not damage the olive and the vine (*καὶ τὸ ἐλαιὸν καὶ τὸν οἶνον μὴ ἁδικήσῃς*)”) appears quite clearly to refer to Domitian’s

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