THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN AND THE IMPERIAL CULT

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In an essay published in 1988, Versnel reacted to Fergus Millar’s fundamental article on the role which the imperial cult played in the persecutions of the Christians.1 Millar had contended that the imperial cult played only a minor part in the persecutions.2 Versnel argued that the Christians’ refusal to worship the emperor caused the pagans to associate the Christians with mythic examples of lawlessness and chaos. Consequently, according to Versnel, the imperial cult played a less harmless part in the persecutions than Millar had suggested.

In his essay, Versnel referred in passing to several passages in the Revelation of John, mainly to show that, in his turn, the author of this book too used mythic images to denounce his enemies.3 In the present contribution I shall look somewhat more closely at Revelation’s attitude towards the imperial cult. My question is: why was the author of Revelation so fiercely opposed to the imperial cult?

A few words must be said with regard to the place where and the time when Revelation originated. There is a general consensus that the book was written in the Roman province of Asia. As to its place of origin, Ephesus is a good candidate since the church in Ephesus is the first congregation mentioned in the list of seven churches to which the work is addressed (1:11; 2:1).4 The book is

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1 Versnel 1988.
3 Versnel 1988, 255, with references to Rev. 12:1–4 (the dragon trying to devour the baby); 13:8, 14–18 (the beast representing the Roman emperor); 17:1–6 (the great whore representing Rome, drunk with the blood of God’s people).
4 The author only says that he ‘saw’ his revelation on Patmos. He does not say that he wrote his work there. Even the announcement that the author experienced his rapture on Patmos (1:9) can best be understood as a piece of literary fiction which is characteristic of the apocalyptic genre. The narrative framework of apocalyptic literature is always fiction. And one does not need to experience a rapture in order to write apocalyptically; one only needs to be familiar with the apocalyptic literary tradition. The narrative framework of Revelation made the selection of the island of Patmos, probably because banishment to an island (relegatio in insulam; see, e.g., Digesta 48.22.7.2) was a well-known punishment and Patmos was situated not too far (some fifty miles) from Ephesus.
often dated to the reign of Domitian, mainly on the basis of the testimony of Irenaeus. But Irenaeus was writing in Gaul in about 180 CE. He thought that John saw his vision some 35 years before he, Irenaeus, was born. ‘We would not normally regard so distant, belated and second-hand an opinion as, by itself, evidence.’ Moreover, he had an apologetic motive for dating Revelation not too late: if it was written after the end of Domitian’s reign, its author could hardly have been a direct pupil of Jesus. Since Irenaeus attributed Revelation and the Fourth Gospel to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, a date some time before the end of the first century was highly recommendable.

Recently, serious doubts have been raised as to a Domitianic date. A date during Trajan’s reign, some time around 114 CE, seems much more plausible. In my view, Rev. 17:10 is especially compelling for a date during the time of Trajan. The author presents himself here as writing during the reign of an emperor whose successor will reign for only a short time. But how can he know that this successor will only reign for a short time unless that reign has already come to an end? In addition, the author knows that the short reign of this ruler will be followed by the reign of yet another emperor. Titus (79–81) and Nerva (96–98) ruled for remarkably short periods. Thus, the author must have written under Domitian or Trajan. But there is no firm evidence of the persecution of Christians during the time of Domitian. No pagan writer accuses Domitian of persecuting Christians. Revelation can therefore best be dated during the reign of Trajan. In any case the ‘number of the beast’, 666, mentioned in Rev. 13:18 and 15:2, is not incompatible with the identification of the beast as Trajan. This emperor’s name in Greek, NE. TPAI. Σ. (Νέρωνας Τραϊάνος Σεβαστός [Σεβαστός = Augustus] can easily be read as 50 + 5 + 300 + 100 + 1 + 10 + 200 = 666. The allusions to a threat from the Parthians in 6:2, 9:14–19, and 16:12–14 are also indicative of a date during the reign of Trajan. Trajan launched his attack on Parthia in 114 CE. Understandably, a date during Trajan’s reign is preferred by the most recent commentator.

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5 Irenaeus, Adversus haereses 5.30.3.
6 Moberley 1992, 367, 381.
9 Aune 1997, 1, lviii: ‘during the early part of the reign of Trajan.’ In Aune’s view, however, this is the date of the final redaction of the book. Considerable