RULER OR GOD?
THE DEMOLITION OF HEROD’S EAGLE

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One of Revelation’s many cruces interpretum concerns the book’s brief and unspecific statements about the violent deaths of Jesus followers.\(^1\) The circumstances of the persecution that may have led to these deaths remain largely unknown. Scholars have even argued that most of these passages do not refer to oppression by political or economic institutions in Roman Asia in John the prophet’s past or present. The passages merely show that John perceived his group as being in conflict with these institutions and that, consequently, he anticipated persecutions in the future.\(^2\) From a tradition-historical perspective, most of the passages, at least, suggest a context of persecution. The vision about the two beasts in chapter 13 evidently builds on the famous deliverance story of Daniel’s three companions in Daniel 3, suggesting an analogous situation for Daniel’s companions and Jesus followers.\(^3\) The vocabulary in some of Revelation’s persecution passages matches that of Jewish and Christian passages about martyrdom.\(^4\) The last point that suggests a setting of persecution is that

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the relevant passages in Revelation are part of a presentation of two worldviews that exclude each other: the ideological clash between the world of the ruler and the realm of God in accounts of martyrdom. Thus, on the one hand common vocabulary and motifs suggest an overlap between Revelation and early Jewish and Christian passages about persecution and/or martyrdom; on the other hand, the passages in Revelation keep us largely in the dark about the circumstances of the persecution. There is, for example, no information about the interrogation or execution of Jesus’ followers by the Roman or local authorities.

The obvious way out of this *aporia* which has been chosen by many commentators is to fill these gaps in Revelation’s data by reading the passages together with other relevant sources. These include Roman passages about the persecution of Christians, the foremost being, of course, Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan about how to deal with obstinate Christians.5 Another helpful corpus in this respect concerns writings of martyrdom from areas that are important in Revelation, such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the *Martyrdom of Pionius* both located in Smyrna.6 I would like to contribute by calling attention to an episode that to my knowledge so far has not been discussed in connection with Revelation’s passages about the violent deaths of Jesus’ followers.

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5 There is a consensus now that Domitian did not organize a persecution of Christians. See for relevant passages P. Guyot and R. Klein, *Das frühe Christentum bis zum Ende der Verfolgungen: eine Dokumentation* (Texte zur Forschung 60; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 1:24–37. Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 95–115, analyzes the Roman sources about Domitian, including the character assassination by historians who shared negative opinions of the senatorial elite or created propaganda for Domitian’s successors. He concludes that there is no basis for claiming that Domitian persecuted Christians. See also Aune, *Revelation*, 1:lxxvi–ix.