THE JEWS, THE CHRISTIANS, AND EMPEROR DOMITIAN

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There have generally been two classes of writers who have interested themselves in the texts that have come down to us concerning Judaism and Christianity during the reign of the Emperor Domitian. The first, perhaps the larger, group has claimed that this Emperor was the originator of a systematic and general persecution of the Christians, while the other group, going in the opposite direction, has claimed that there was no, or hardly any perceptible, persecution of the Christian Church under Domitian.

The most important sources for our problem are the passages from Suetonius and Dio Cassius on Domitian’s rule, but particularly important are the passages on Domitian’s attitude towards what both writers call ‘living according to Jewish life and customs’. This is about the sum of our main sources, although there also are some other minor passages in Classical literature that must come into consideration. The interpretation of ‘living a Jewish life’ has proved to make most of the differences between the conclusions of the main groups of writers.

Another source is what is generally referred to as ‘Christian literature’. The author who obviously weighs the heaviest in this group is Eusebius with his Historia Ecclesiastica and Chronicon. Considerable differences have again resulted when a modern writer accepted or rejected the authority of this Christian historian concerning the information that he had decided to transmit to us about the victims of Domitian. Serious consideration to some other Christian sources such as the ‘First Letter of Clement’ to the Corinthians and some passages in the Apocalypse, although a prophetic work, must also be given.

It is perhaps unfortunate that improper emphasis and often wrong interpretation was given, by both these two opposed groups, to often very rhetorical passages by Melito, Tertullian, Lactantius, and others, the consideration of whom is not essential at all. They certainly would
not be missed in an enquiry into Domitian’s treatment of Jews and Christians.

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The first Classical text that relates closely to our topic is Suetonius’ famous passage on the *fiscus Iudaicus*. Its reference to the Jews of Rome and the Empire is stated, but it is not entirely clear whether it concerns people of Jewish origin by race still faithful to their ancestral religions and apostates from it or, in addition, proselytes to Judaism of gentile origin. Suetonius’ text has an obvious enough reference to a tax evasion of some kind, depending on the interpretation of the above categories of the accused of this crime. The business of the *fiscus Iudaicus* referred to by Suetonius concerned one of the general taxes clearly imposed on the Jewish nation as a whole and should not be confused with local taxes such as the *tributum capitis* imposed on the inhabitants of Palestine after its subjugation by Pompey the Great. The general tax payable to this *fiscus* was the so-called didrachma that had, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., been payable by Jews everywhere to the temple of Jerusalem; the same sum was now being collected for the victorious Jupiter Capitolinus from every Jew of at least 20 years of age. Whatever Vespasian’s motives may have been in imposing this tax, the didrachma was the price Jews across the Empire had to pay yearly for the right of observing their ancestral religion. The administration was centralized in the *fiscus Iudaicus* in Rome, which had at its head a *procurator* who was assisted by a large board, but the money for the *fiscus* was probably collected throughout the Empire by the ordinary tax-collectors.

For a better understanding of Suetonius’ text it would be most helpful to know who exactly had to pay the tax for the *fiscus Iudaicus*. Josephus’ text (note 3) would imply that the tax-payers in this case were the same as those paying for the temple of Jerusalem. Dio Cassius’ text (note 3) suggests that all Jews observing their ancestral ἐθνικὴ were to pay the tax.

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1 Suetonius, *Domit.* 12,2.
3 *Ibid.* 7,6,6; Dio Cassius 65,7.
5 Τούς τὰ πάτρια ἀντίων ἐθνικὴ περιστέλλοντας.
6 C.I.L. VI,8604.
7 Suetonius, *Domit.* 12,2.