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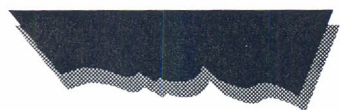
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# Revelation:



## Historical Setting and John's Call to Discipleship

BY LOREN T. STUCKENBRUCK

### Introduction

There is little question that ever since the beginnings of Christianity, as with any religion, believers have lived out their lives in ways that both respond to and reflect contemporary events and culture. And so, in the case of the New Testament, interpretation has often consisted of determining just what situation(s) provided the immediate point of departure for an author: what was it, within the shared experiences of authors and their readers, that triggered the composition itself? While the formative circumstances underlying many of the New Testament documents have been notoriously difficult to pinpoint with precision, the background for the book of Revelation has for over eighteen hundred years been frequently identified as one of political or social persecution. In turn, the historical setting has had implications for understanding John's message to his Christian readers: John's primary purpose was to comfort the congregations in the midst of their suffering and, by holding before them a vision of victory and judgment, to exhort them to remain faithful to the end. Along these lines, John Stott has stressed that Revelation counteracts fear in the face of systematic persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian through a vision of God's reign.<sup>1</sup> John Gager has called attention to John's unique message of consolation in "a situation in which believers had experienced suffering and death at the hands of Rome,"<sup>2</sup> and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has found therein a vision of an "alternative world" that stands above and apart from the "real social world" of suffering and death.<sup>3</sup> If these statements are correct, then John was

telling members of the congregations in Asia Minor to "hang in there" to the point of death because it was through dying that they would overcome.

This framework for understanding Revelation, however, poses a problem for interpretation. It raises the questions, Who are the legitimate heirs of John's visions of comfort? To whom would the book, as scripture, be most properly applicable, and in what way? If we may assume that the message of Revelation for today should somehow be continuous with the original message of the book, we may ask whether a work written to churches who knew persecution and social marginalization would have anything to say to Christians who live in relative comfort and for whom social disenfranchisement on account of faith is a meaningless category. In the comments to follow, I shall consider whether the purported setting of Roman persecution stands up to scrutiny, propose an alternative perspective, and reflect on the implications of this perspective for what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the book of Revelation.

### The Setting of Revelation

In recent years some considerations of the sociopolitical context of John and his readers during the time of Domitian<sup>4</sup> have questioned the degree to which a real (or at least systematic) persecution of Christians may be presupposed for the book of Revelation.<sup>5</sup> After all, our primary source for a deliberate political threat against Christians imposed by the Roman emperor Domitian is



found in a tradition preserved in Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History, from the fourth century C.E.:

Domitian, having performed acts of cruelty against many, having unjustly put to death no small number of noble and illustrious men at Rome, and having punished great numbers with exile, at length established himself as the successor of Nero, in his hatred and hostility against us [i.e., the Christians]. In this persecution, it is handed down by tradition, that John was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos.

Eusebius went on to claim that Domitian's persecution of Christians was referred to by Roman historiographers:

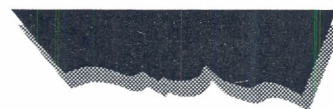
To such a degree did the dogma that we profess flourish, that even historians who are very far from befriending our religion have not hesitated to record this persecution and its martyrdoms in their histories.<sup>6</sup>

To which Roman historians was Eusebius referring?

Several Roman historiographers, writing after the time of Domitian's reign (81–96 C.E.), had painted a dark portrait of Domitian. According to Suetonius, writing in the second century C.E., Domitian "delighted" to hear the people in the amphitheater shout on his feast day, "Good Fortune attend our Lord and Mistress," and he had the provincial governors send out his letters in the name of "our Master and our God."<sup>7</sup> Dio Cassius, in the third century C.E., noted that Domitian had numerous statues of himself erected, so that "almost the whole world was filled with his images and statues constructed of silver and gold."<sup>8</sup> These writers, in particular Dio Cassius, wrote about sharp tensions between Domitian and the senators; Domitian used informers to bring charges against them and others, men and women. In short, the emperor was described as a totally incompetent tyrant whose increasingly self-serving policies were harmful to the welfare of the senators and who engaged in a "reign of terror" against those whom he suspected of treason.

By the time these caricatures of Domitian landed at Eusebius' doorstep, they had been transformed into a persecution of Christians!<sup>9</sup> This transference from tensions between the emperor and a handful of subjects in Rome to a systematic political persecution of Christians in Asia Minor is problematic if one is concerned with reconstructing an original setting for Revelation. In addition, as Leonard Thompson has pointed out, the portrait of

The picture of Domitian suggests that Revelation may have been written in a time when the Roman Empire, including Asia Minor, consisted of a relatively coherent and well-ordered society.



Domitian by the Roman historians who wrote during the second and third centuries is inconsistent with first-century sources composed during the period of his reign.<sup>10</sup> For example, the title "Lord and God" is absent from reports by writers in Domitian's court (e.g., Statius and Quintillian), nor is there any mention of it among inscriptions and coins throughout the empire. Statius even claimed that Domitian once prohibited people from calling him "Lord" during one of his feasts. When Domitian was called "Lord and God," it is more likely to have happened among local authorities who would have been attempting to benefit from his rule.

To be sure, there was a flourishing emperor cult during the time of Domitian. However, there is no evidence that what happened while he was emperor (the erection of statues, for example) was anything essentially different from what happened during the reigns of his predecessors or successors.

It may well be, therefore, that the later reports about Domitian were giving him unjustified bad press. The contemporary documents about the senators demonstrate that his relations with them were relatively good throughout his reign. The economy of Asia Minor as well as road systems throughout the empire were greatly improved under him. Inscriptions show his concern that his traveling officials not take advantage of the hospitality of provincial authorities and that the wealthy owners of grain not deprive the poor during times of famine.<sup>11</sup> Domitian was no saint, but neither does he seem to have been noticeably worse than a majority of the other Roman emperors.

The picture of Domitian suggests that Revelation may have been written in a time when the Roman Empire, including Asia Minor, consisted of a relatively coherent and well-ordered society. It was a society in which people, insofar as they participated in its sanctioned institutions, could expect to live in confidence, trusting in the stability



of economic, social, political, and religious spheres of life. There is little doubt that many Jews found themselves able to participate in these conditions of prosperity in Asia Minor during the first and second centuries, and the same may be said of a number of Christians. Such evidence surfaces in Revelation itself. In chapters 2 and 3, John may have been referring to such Christians when he used the labels "Nicolaitans" (2:6, 15); adherents to "the teaching of Balaam" (2:14–15); and a prophetess "Jezebel" who was beguiling other Christians in Thyatira to "practice fornication" and "eat food sacrificed to idols" (2:20).<sup>12</sup> These references allow for the inference that some were willing to prosper economically at the expense of remaining loyal to God. The allusions to being "rich" in the message to Laodicea (3:17) suggest that the Christians there were living in circumstances favorable to a reasonably comfortable lifestyle.

### From Setting to Discipleship

Against Christians (and Jews) who were accommodating themselves to the wealth and prosperity of Roman Asia Minor, John offered another picture of reality. It would be misleading to describe the setting of Revelation as merely one of political persecution or social crisis, and it is doubtful whether these labels provide the logical point of departure that explains the work as a whole. Far more, it seems John himself was concerned with defining and preserving that which is distinctively Christian. In order to make his own view of the world clear and unambiguous to the congregations of Asia Minor, he sharpened the differences between Christian faith and the social institutions and loyalties of the immediate environment, eliminating light and dark shades of gray and insisting on a discourse that insists on reality in terms of black and white. In short, he was calling the churches to uncompromising repentance (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19; see 9:20–21; 16:8–9, 11). And if repentance, then he was stressing how different that attitude and way of life was over against the dominant pragmatic culture, a culture in which people stood to gain wealth and security by selling out to a system that he regarded as uncritical, undiscriminating, and tolerant.

If it is correct at all that there is little real evidence that supports a political persecution sponsored by Domitian (not only of Christians but also of the senatorial class in Rome), then we are forced to ask what we are to make of references in Revelation to tribulation, persecution, beheading (20:4), conquering (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14), pouring out of blood (16:6), and death (2:13; 6:9, 11; 12:11; 20:6).

For the most part, passages frequently taken as allu-

sions to harsh realities faced by John's readers are not descriptions of what was actually happening in their world. As far as a reconstruction of the historical setting is concerned, the most important texts consist of John's statements about himself and about the situation of the churches he was addressing.

The language in Rev 1:9 is ambiguous. John describes himself as one "who share[s] with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance" and then refers to his presence on the island of Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Eusebius (see the citation above) apparently interpreted the reference to Patmos as an allusion to banishment because of religious persecution. However, it is likewise possible to consider that John may have been on Patmos simply in order to bear witness to the word of God.

In the seven messages in chapters 2 and 3, several references to suffering are telling. In 2:10 John tells the Christians in Smyrna about what he expects will happen imminently, not about what is actually going on at the moment. Suffering to the point of death here is something John anticipates. In 3:10, although he commends the Philadelphian Christians for their patient endurance (of what, it is not specified), John again anticipates an hour of trial "which is coming on the whole world." Only in 2:13 is there any concrete evidence that Christians (and here, only one!) have been killed on account of faith: "Antipas my faithful witness was killed among you." Was this a tragedy that had just occurred in Pergamum? The phrase "in the days of Antipas" implies that it was not such a recent event.

How might the remaining references to suffering and persecution in the book of Revelation be explained? It may be that John's view of suffering and persecution—indeed his whole concept of discipleship—began with his understanding of Christ. For him, Jesus was first and foremost "the Lamb that was slaughtered" (5:6). One might say that the mark of being a disciple of Christ was, for John, to "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (14:4). Christian discipleship involved living a life that was not only radically holy but also, as in the case of Jesus, was expected to result in death. It was not, however, merely a matter of disciples' imitating what Jesus had done. John's understanding of Jesus' death, mentioned only briefly (in 11:8), went well beyond his consideration of a crucifixion at a single point in time. John read Jesus' death both backward and forward. Rather than being a moment in history, Jesus' death became the basis through which reality—past, present, and future—was redefined. And so, the Lamb,

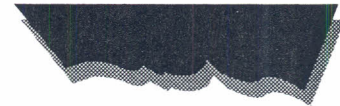


who "was slain from before the foundation of the world" (13:8), became the yardstick against which the unfaithfulness of those whose names "are not written in the book of life" (13:8; 17:8) was to be measured. A decisive historical occurrence in the history of salvation was, for John, transformed into a principle of conquering death through which the cosmos was reconfigured. A disciple was therefore one who actively participated in the head-on collision between God's rule and the demonized Roman Empire, knowing well that death would be the inevitable result. Death was by definition regarded as a necessary outworking of what it meant to be a follower of Christ. Though John might have silently allowed for the possibility that a faithful Christian could avoid death, to state that openly would have been to undermine the radical call to discipleship that consumed his message, which was predicated on the timeless reality of the Lamb's death.

### Conclusion

The brief observations and reflections above suggest that the book of Revelation is not to be read as a composition whose meaning is filtered through the lens of a political or even social crisis. This is not to deny the possibility that some Christians were indeed being persecuted for their faith (for example, Antipas of Pergamum, mentioned in 2:13); in addition, John in all likelihood knew of the persecution of Christians under Nero in 64 C.E., which was largely confined to Rome. Nevertheless, John's purpose may have been more comprehensive; he addressed members of Christian communities who were facing a wide range of circumstances in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century. John's message to them is perhaps best understood as a theological treatise, which, to some extent, the prophet John believed could hold true regardless of the particular circumstances being addressed. In this sense, Revelation might properly be understood as problematic. The way into John's theology and understanding of discipleship should not so much rest on a reconstruction of political and social circumstances, often based on external sources—indispensable as that may be for interpretation. I am convinced that in John we discover a theologian who was one of the earliest Christians to reflect poetically on questions such as the nature of God, the nature of Christ in relation to God, the nature and function of angels, and on what it means—in view of all this—to be a Christian, not only in first-century Asia Minor, but also in the cosmos as it exists under the dominion of clashing earthly and supraterritorial powers. The theological agenda of Revelation consists of John's own profound

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development of Jewish and Christian traditions, woven together into a tapestry whose picture of the imminent future is at once beautiful to look at and horrifying to ponder.

The problem of how the historical context of Revelation relates to John's theology may raise a further, intriguing question: What is the relationship between history and literature? We may assume that the literate of each age have always had thoughts about this or that subject, but what is it that makes people put pen to paper and present these thoughts in a way that will communicate to others? To put the point dialectically: Does history produce literature, that is, was Revelation the product of a crisis that triggered an antidotal reaction on the part of John? Or is it possible that literature can create—or provoke—history? Perhaps we have here an analogy to the multifaceted function of media in our contemporary society. Media not only reports, reflects, and reacts to culture but also shapes and creates it, even to the point of determining how people live out their lives. Similarly, we may wonder whether John wrote Revelation as much to produce a crisis as simply to reflect and respond to one. To the extent that this is the case, Christian communities who read John's visionary message—including those who today are enjoying privileges that go with social and economic success—have a lot to think about.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 127–28.

<sup>2</sup> John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, "Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation," in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 181–202 (esp. 192–99).

<sup>4</sup> Though the date of the composition of Revelation must ultimately remain an open question, a majority of contemporary scholars assign it to the latter period of Domitian's reign. Despite allusions to Nero (e.g., the mark of the beast in 13:18 and the influence on the text of the myth about Nero's rumored resuscitation and return, in the passage 12:18–13:10), there is some evidence that hints that John composed his visions to be read among the Asia Minor churches at a later date: (a) The foundations of the new Jerusalem in 21:14 bear "the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb"; the reference sounds as if the apostles are figures of a more distant past than one might suppose would have been the case during Nero's rule in the 60s. (b) Since Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake in 60–61 C.E., one would not expect allusions to economic prosperity there so soon thereafter, had John written in the 60s. (c) As the earliest extant witness to comment on the date, Irenaeus, writing near the end of the second century, proposed that Revelation was

written during Domitian's reign. For these reasons, the discussion below will take the Domitianic date as a point of departure.

<sup>5</sup> So, e.g., Adela Yarbro Collins, in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), who cautiously refers to a "perceived crisis," and especially Leonard L. Thompson, in "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 147–74 and *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.17–20.

<sup>7</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Dio Cassius, *History of Rome*, 67–68.

<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that the claim of a persecution of Christians under Domitian had not already been made; see Tertullian, *Apology* 5, 8. However, Eusebius developed this tradition in a form that went well beyond what is attested through earlier sources.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Revelation*, 15–17.

<sup>11</sup> See especially David Magie's detailed treatment of the situation in Asia Minor, which covers the reign of Domitian, in his two-volume work *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:566–92.

<sup>12</sup> While the activity of "Jezebel" could literally refer to deplorable sexual conduct, John's statement about her refusal to repent (2:21) suggests that, at least until very recently, she was still a member of the community. It is possible that "fornication" merely functions as a metaphor for eating food brought from the temples.