

The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation

Summary

It is often said that the background to the visions of the Book of Revelation is the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Domitian at the end of the first century. As a result the Book of Revelation has been called ‘a tract for hard times’, whose principal purpose is to exhort the faithful to martyrdom and patient endurance. But of these persecutions little actual evidence has been found.¹ The messages to the churches in the first part of the Book of Revelation indicate the faithful were subjected to scattered trials, exile and occasional capital punishments, but nothing on the scale of the persecution envisioned later in the book (e.g., Rev chs. 7, 13). So the idea of the book as a response to empire-wide persecution of Christians or Jews was a scholastic invention of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and has largely been abandoned. However, in the absence of an alternative suggestion, a large question still remains over the immediate historical context of the visions of the Book of Revelation. Following the traditional dating of this book, internal cues from the text and the historical evidence for a change in Roman policy around that time, we propose a setting that helps to explain the historical origins and significance of the book more fully.

Introduction

Though revealed from heaven, the Book of Revelation was not given in a social vacuum. It was given to a particular person at a time characterized by a certain social, political and religious ‘background’. Knowledge about these circumstances not only clarifies the author’s intention and purpose, but also helps to better understand certain parts of the text, by giving them ‘context’. Furthermore, our knowledge of the background is constantly being illuminated by ongoing historical and archeological research. Various contemporary, or near contemporary sources, can now be added to those parts of the text which refer to the situation at the time it was written, providing a clearer view of that period. So before going any further in the historical reconstruction of this situation, it is essential to decide, as accurately as possible, the date when the Book of Revelation was written.

The Date of the Book of Revelation

To start with, it is a mistake to assume that the concerns of the Book of Revelation are limited to the period of history that is contemporary with its production.² In the divine instruction

¹ This proposal was based on the false assumption that the entire book describes the situation that prevailed at the time of writing. The vision of countless numbers of martyrs in heaven after coming through a great tribulation (Rev 7,9-17, ch 13; 19-1-10) was therefore assumed to represent the result of persecutions at the end of the first century. This was misleading because there are clear indications in the text that these visions refer to a time that is future to the author (1,19; 4,1). Writing c. 180 CE, Irenaeus denies John’s Apocalypse identifies the ultimate persecutor in those times, *Against Heresies*, III, 18.2-3; *apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 18.3.

² This is a basic assumption of the academic Preterist interpretation, though clearly untenable in a prophetic work like the Book of Revelation, whose vast scope extends up to and beyond the end of history and the realization of the ‘new heaven and the new earth’.

to the author to “write what you saw, and what is now, and what is to take place in the future (Rev 1,19), the text itself affirms that it refers not only to the time of the author, but also to the times that are future to him. Furthermore, each of the three parts of the text specified in this instruction is easily identifiable: “What you saw” refers to the introductory vision of the ‘one like a son of man’ among the seven golden lampstands (Rev 1,12-20, cf. 1,11), “what is now” relates to the messages to the seven churches (Rev 2–3), and “what is to take place in the future” is everything that follows these messages, including the reign of Christ which lasts at least ‘a thousand years’ and probably more (i.e. 4,1–22,21, cf. 4,1). Therefore the only part of the text that can, with certainty, be identified with the author’s own time is the “what is now” section, which records the letters to the churches (Rev 2–3). Everything else describes an undetermined time in the future, although the forms of expression used in the description of that future may be rooted in contemporary realities and therefore help indirectly to date the work as a whole.

After noting this temporal division in the text, between present and future, it must be admitted that the date of writing is never directly indicated by the author. In contrast to some other apocalypses (e.g., 4Ezra 3,1; 2Baruch 1,1), the date of production seems far from his mind. The temporal focus of his work is fixed constantly on the future, and in a special way on the second coming of Christ (Rev 1,3; 22,7.12.20). Even those parts of the text that refer to the author’s contemporary situation (Rev 2–3) are abundantly sprinkled with references to the future consummation, described as imminent and glorious.

However, even though the author did not care to record the dates of his exile on Patmos, or precisely when he wrote the revelation given to him, some of his contemporaries did take note of it, for Church tradition gives it a very precise date “at the end of (Emperor) Domitian’s reign”,³ which is to say 95-96 CE. There are few other works in the New Testament with such precise and widely accepted external evidence to authorship and date of writing. Nevertheless, since the beginnings of “critical scholarship” in the 19th century, this date has been challenged, often in the most perfunctory way.⁴ Although dismissive of traditional dating, critical scholarship has made a valuable contribution by questioning the text more closely for internal evidence of its date of production, and thereby motivating further research into the historical background.

Extensive research into the social, religious, historical, literary, archeological, epigraphic and numismatic background of the letters to the seven churches has confirmed the traditional date of 95 AD, reported by Irenaeus writing about 80 years later.⁵ As one of the scholars who has studied these sources extensively, Colin Hemer wrote “I started with a provisional acceptance of

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 30.3; *apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 18.3; V, 8.6. Also Clement of Alexandria (died c. 215) in *Quis div.* 42.

⁴ E.g., Craig R. Koester writes: “It is unlikely that Irenaeus preserves reliable historical information. His comment about the date is linked to his assumption that the author was John the apostle. If this assumption is incorrect, there is little reason to think that he was accurate about the date... Patristic evidence for the date of Revelation is not reliable” in *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven/London: Yale Univ. Press, 2014; 74.

⁵ It is important to note that Irenaeus (c. 130-202 CE) was born to a Christian family in Smyrna, listened to Polycarp in his youth, served the Church in Asia Minor until middle age, before being sent to Lyons (Gaul) where he was made Bishop in 177 CE. From birth until middle age, he was immersed in the society that had received the Book of Revelation only a generation before, well within living memory. It is highly unlikely that he transmitted the author and date of writing incorrectly.

the orthodox Domitianic dating, and have been confirmed in that view by further study”.⁶ He proceeds to list numerous features of the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2–3) that specifically point to a date in the mid-90’s CE, and then concludes “We accordingly reaffirm the Domitianic date of the letters in the light of the kind of evidence here considered, while recognizing that many of these indications are uncertain. Cumulatively they align themselves with the case widely accepted on other grounds that the Revelation was written about AD 95”.⁷

Other scholars concur, but only up to a point. Acknowledging Hemer’s study, David Aune, for example, notes “it is clear that the proclamations to the seven churches in Rev 2–3 reveal a relatively close acquaintance with the specific circumstances of each of the Christian communities addressed”,⁸ but he later rejects Hemer’s confirmation of the traditional 95 CE date, saying “The situation of the seven churches produces ambiguous evidence that could be dated from the early 70’s to the late 90’s”.⁹ In spite of Hemer’s conclusion that the internal evidence accords with external evidence in identifying a 95 CE date, scholars are loathe to accept this, for reasons that are hard to fathom. Most opt for a date sometime during the last 20-30 years of the first century.¹⁰ Unless good evidence can be produced to the contrary, which 150 years of critical research has so far failed to produce, it is justifiable to accept the traditional date of 95 CE, especially since it has been corroborated by Hemer’s work. It is therefore the date accepted in this study.

The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia Minor

The letters are messages dictated by the revealer, the Risen Christ, to the human author John and addressed to the ‘angels’ of the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. They start with a self-presentation of the revealer and conclude with his promises to the one who overcomes the numerous challenges to his or her Christian faith. The main body of the message consists of a divine judgment, which may be positive, negative, or both. A divine instruction follows, either with an exhortation (Rev 2,10; 3,7) or with a warning (2,5.16. 22-23; 3.3. 8b-9. 18), depending on whether the judgment is predominantly positive or negative. After this, in most cases, there is a consolatory remark. It is in the judgment section that we hear about the prevailing internal or external challenges facing each church and from the nature of these challenges the local historical background can be identified and enriched with known historical data. Three major challenges can be identified:

1. The First Challenge: the Teaching of Satan

In three of the messages, the most prominent challenge to the faithful community comes from false apostles (2,2) and false prophets (2,14-15; 20-21) all of whom appear to be associated with an otherwise unknown group called Nicolaitans, who were said to permit “fornication and the

⁶ Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNTS 11, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986; 3.

⁷ Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 5.

⁸ David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997; Vol 1, lx.

⁹ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Vol 1, lxiii (5), and lxx (5).

¹⁰ Cf. Koester “Revelation was probably written during the final decades of the first century.... the period 80-100 CE seems the most plausible”, *Revelation*, 79.

eating of idol-sacrifices”. The stylized and coded way of describing this challenge is not as obscure as it may seem at first glance, because it was not a new problem. It had confronted the Church previously and had caused heated discussion on the degree to which Christian converts from paganism should be obliged to keep Jewish law. ‘Fornication’ had a double meaning in religious circles, either literally as ‘sex outside marriage’, or metaphorically as ‘worshiping of images of pagan gods (idols)’; sometimes, as in this instance, it could have both meanings at once. Together with ‘eating the meat of the animals sacrificed to these gods (idols)’, all these activities were forbidden under Jewish law, and considered abominable, but nevertheless formed an important aspect of religious and social life of the Roman Empire at the time. To the Greco-Roman pagans, refusal to participate in these activities was considered ‘impiety’ (*asebeia*) or ‘atheism’ (*atheotes*) and belief in the imageless Judaeo-Christian God was considered ‘superstition’.

Therefore great tension arose between the practices of the ancient pagan religion and those of the new Christian faith. For those pagans who had joined the newly established Christian communities, refusal to participate in traditional ceremonies and rituals would have led to social and economic ostracism, or other more severe forms of persecution. There was such a strong pressure for new converts to continue to participate in old pagan customs and practices that firm guidance was needed from the Church leadership. Accordingly, the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem convened a meeting with Paul and Barnabas in about 49 CE and issued the following declaration: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood, and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell” (Acts 15,28-29). It is quite probable that John, the author of the Book of Revelation, attended that meeting and interpreted it strictly.

By contrast, Paul gives the declaration a less rigid interpretation in his first letter to the Corinthians, written from Ephesus in 56 CE: though firmly against fornication, the worship of idols and other forms of immorality, Paul discusses the permissibility of eating the meat that had been sacrificed to idols and could then be purchased in the public markets. After a somewhat lengthy analysis, he discouraged this practice for the sake of those whose faith was weak, while also admitting that it was actually of no consequence to those whose faith was strong (1Cor 8,1-13; 10,14-33). Although Paul had assented to the decision of the Apostolic Council, his advice to the Corinthians, which was later disseminated to the churches in Asia Minor (including those addressed in Rev 2–3), created a loophole, for those who claimed their faith was strong (i.e. the Nicolaitans), to argue that it was permissible to ‘eat meat sacrificed to idols’ and more. In these messages to the seven churches, the author clearly wishes to re-assert the original unambiguous decision of the Apostolic Council, formed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It seems to have been a much-needed clarification of the equivocal directions given by Paul.

But the Nicolaitan challenge is more serious than a simple dispute over orthodox teaching. The false teaching of the prophetess called Jezebel, to ‘fornicate and eat idol-sacrifices’, will end in illness and death for her and for her followers unless they repent from her practices (2,20-23). The severity of this punishment derives from the link between this teaching and ‘the deep things of Satan’ (2,24)—an expression that appears to be an ironic reversal of the Nicolaitan’s claim to know ‘the deep things of God’, or just the ‘deep things’, which ancient sources identify as the

boast of early Gnostic groups. The association of this teaching with Satan, the eternal enemy of God and the Church, is the main reason that it must be opposed and its promoters punished severely.

Apart from causing doctrinal confusion, the false apostles and prophets openly challenged the leadership of the churches, recalling the time prior to the appointment of fixed bishops and priests, when itinerant ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’ were the accepted leaders.¹¹ Many years before, the apostle Paul and others had warned about the problem of false teaching (Acts 20,28-30; 1Tim 1,3-11; 4,1-5; 2Pet 2,1-3, Jude 4), which inevitably accompanied the influx of large numbers of pagan converts who wanted the benefits of the new religion without having to renounce all their ties to the old religion. In the wake of the Christian expansion, this mixing of new and old would lead to the formation of various Gnostic sects, of which the Nicolaitans appear to be an early stage. The Church met this challenge by establishing the episcopal hierarchy at the end of the first century and by the adoption of a body of orthodox teaching, based on the writings of the apostles and their personal assistants.¹² The mention of this problem in these messages helps to confirm the dating of the Book of Revelation to the end of the first century.¹³

2. The Second Challenge: the Throne of Satan

The second main challenge to the churches is presented in the message to Pergamum “where the throne of Satan is” (Rev 2,13). On account of this evil presence, the Christian community had been called to declare its faith in Christ and one of its members, Antipas, had been martyred for his faithful witness (2,13). A similar situation may explain why, in the previous message, the Smyrnians are enjoined to “be faithful unto death”, for “the devil is going to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and you will have hardship for ten days” (2,10). In both situations, the devil or Satan (cf. 12,9) is the name for the Roman administration, which had shown itself ready to put Christ’s followers to death. It is therefore no coincidence that Pergamum was the official capital of the Province of Asia Minor and the seat of the Roman governor or pro-consul. With a long history of religious activity devoted to pagan deities such as Zeus, Athena, Demeter, Dionysius, and Aesculapius, Pergamum was one of the first cities in Asia to build a temple to Rome and her emperor (29 BCE). These temples, together with the presence of the Roman governor, established Pergamum as a regional centre for the imperial cult, which involved the idolatrous worship of the goddess Roma and of the ‘divinity’ of her most illustrious emperors.

This association between pagan religious devotion and the Roman administration had no impact on the Christian communities for as long as the administration considered them to be a branch of the Jewish community, which had special status as a “licit religion” (*religio licita*).¹⁴ So

¹¹ The transition from itinerant community leaders to fixed administrators can be seen in *Didache* 11-15, believed to have been written around the end of the first century or the beginning of the second.

¹² The process of appointing fixed administrators (bishops and priests) in the churches was well underway by the time Ignatius wrote his letters to the churches in Asia, in 106/7. In these letters Ignatius actively promotes the office of bishop.

¹³ It appears that John himself had already started appointing bishops in Asia, for in the 90’s he was present at the consecration of his disciple Polycarp as Bishop of Smyrna (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 36; IV, 14).

¹⁴ The first time the Romans seemed to have distinguished Christians from Jews was in 64-65 CE, when the Emperor Nero was suspected of deliberately organizing a destructive fire in Rome, so that he could rebuild his palace and the surrounding part of the city according to his own grandiose plans. To deflect the suspicion, he blamed and,

far as the Romans were concerned, Paul's mission to the Jews and the gentiles had been an internal affair and, at least until the start of the 90's, the new communities that grew up with mixed gentile and Jewish members were not distinguished from those of the Jews. The Romans saw that both communities were administered by Jews who worshipped in similar ways to an imageless God, and were not interested in judging disagreements in Jewish law.¹⁵

However, shortly before the Book of Revelation was written in the mid 90's CE, the Jewish and Christian communities had already started to pull apart, most probably at the instigation of the Jewish leadership,¹⁶ and the two communities began to develop separate identities and go their own ways. When this separation became evident to the Roman authorities, the Christian churches could no longer be considered a 'licit religion' protected by Roman law, but became instead an 'illicit association', proscribed by the law. For the gentile converts from paganism, the legal infringement was compounded by what was seen as an impious abandonment of traditional religious customs. The new 'associations' were not only illegal but also irreligious, appearing as 'atheism', 'impiety' and 'superstition' to local religious sensibilities. To make matters worse for pious pagans, by the end of the century, large numbers of pagans in Asia Minor were becoming Christians.

Even though there was no coordinated campaign of persecution until the third century, the gentile Christian converts were subjected to scattered trials, exile and occasional capital punishments. After being reported to the authorities by informers, they were brought before the local magistrate. Penalties varied from place to place, and from magistrate to magistrate, but capital punishment was not uncommon, as the messages in the Book of Revelation indicate. There is evidence that the Roman magistrates gave the accused Christians an opportunity to go free if they would offer incense to an image of the emperor. This adaptation of the imperial cult as a loyalty test gave the accused the opportunity to refuse and witness to his faith in Christ, before being put to death for 'obstinacy' (*contumacia*).¹⁷

sometime later, sadistically murdered a multitude of Christians, including the apostles Peter and Paul. The numbers are not known but two sources speak of a 'great crowd' (1 *Clement* 6,1; Tacitus *Ann.*, xv, 44,3). In the martyrology (*Acta Sanctorum*) compiled later, 977 martyrs are named and their feast is on 29th June (the Feast of St Peter and St Paul). There is evidence that Nero may have been put up to this by his second wife, Empress Poppaea, who was a 'God-fearing' member of the Jewish synagogue and clearly knew the difference between Christians and Jews and did not want Jews to be among the victims. The memory of the indiscriminate expulsion of Jews and Christians would still have been fresh (49 CE). There are other examples of her influence on the decisions taken by the emperor. The specific charge against the Christians was probably 'arson' at the outset, but was later changed to something like 'hatred of the human race'—a term that alludes to Christian criticism of pagan Roman society in general, and to their expectation of the fiery 'end of the world'. Although the elites, represented by the literati writing about 50 years later (Juvenal, Tacitus, Suetonius) continued to denigrate Christians at every opportunity, it is probable that Nero's massacre generated not a little sympathy for the victims and a great deal of antipathy against the emperor. In fact, from 65 CE, conspiracies against his life multiplied, leading up to his suicide in 68 CE, when the Roman armies were on their way to arrest him. The official execration of Nero's memory, enacted after his death, then became a deterrence preventing future Roman emperors from considering persecution of Christians as a group. Perhaps for this reason, there was no centrally organized persecution of Christians for nearly two centuries.

¹⁵ Elegant examples of the disinterest of the Roman authorities in Jewish law are given in the accounts of Jesus' trial by Pilate (Jn 18,31-38; 19,6), and of Paul's trials by Gallio (Acts 18,12-17) and by Festus (Acts 25,18-20).

¹⁶ To be discussed in the next section.

¹⁷ A description of this 'loyalty test' in action a few years later is provided by the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, when he was pro-consul in Bithynia and Pontus around 111-12, and the Emperor Trajan (Pliny, *Epp.* X, 96,

In this context, it is not surprising that the teaching of the Nicolaitan prophets and apostles had become so popular that it was a threat to the Church's leadership, since permission "to fornicate and eat-idol sacrifices" would have allowed their followers to offer incense to the image of the emperor and therefore escape the penalty for refusing the loyalty test of the imperial cult.¹⁸ However, while removing persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the Roman authorities, it would also have blurred the boundaries between pagan and Christian worship. If the Church had allowed it, Christ would have become just another god in the pagan pantheon.

Historically, the newly critical attitude of the Roman authorities towards the early Christian communities can be dated to the later years of emperor Domitian's reign, which is to say the last decade of the first century. It undoubtedly limited the freedom with which Christians could live and share their faith, driving their activities underground to a greater or lesser extent. Less than half a century before, both Paul and Peter had counselled Christians to pray for and obey the Roman authorities (Rm 13,1-7; 1Peter 2,13-17), but now the Christian leaders identify the same authorities with Satan, the spiritual adversary of God and his people. If the change of the Roman attitude towards Christians was such an important part of the background at the end of the first century, it is surely relevant to ask what lay behind it. Why did the Romans suddenly turn against this relatively benign and well-wishing Jewish sect?

The simple answer is its success: many people from every class of society, rich and poor, were abandoning their ancient pagan traditions and temples to become members of the newly formed Christian communities. Not only was the urban and rural economy affected by this,¹⁹ but there was a fear that the ancient pagan gods would be angry at the lack of devotion and take revenge.

Before this drift from paganism and into the Christian churches, the pagan populace in the main population centres of the Roman Empire had shown a significant level of interest and participation in the Jewish religion. This was reflected in the large numbers of interested pagans attending the weekly synagogue services, and partially adopting Jewish customs and practices. For these 'God-fearers', as they came to be known, full membership of the Jewish community as 'proselytes' was impeded by the stringent dietary regulations (pork forbidden) and the obligation for male circumcision, a procedure held in contempt by pagan culture. Furthermore, interest in the Jewish faith waned after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and it was at this time that the young Christian communities presented themselves as an attractive alternative, boosted by an outpouring of public sympathy and interest following the cruel Neronian persecution of 66-68 CE.

Flavius Domitian, the future heir to the throne of the Roman Empire, grew up in this climate of rising public interest in the Jewish and Christian religions. By the time he came to power in 81

97; quoted with an explanation in F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, New York: Doubleday-Galilee, 1980; 422-27). It is not known when this test was introduced but some historians date it to the last 3-4 years of Domitian's reign (cf. Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001; 394).

¹⁸ In the letter to Pergamum (Rev 2,12-17), it is probably no coincidence that the seat of Roman authority (2,13), the martyrdom of Antipas (2,13) and the false teaching of the Nicolaitans (2,15) are all mentioned together, implying a connection between them: the teaching of the Nicolaitans was well received in those places where the Roman authorities were most active in putting Christians to the test.

¹⁹ Cf. The anger of the silversmiths at Ephesus in 52 CE (Acts 19,23-40) and the plight of the farmers who provided food for the sacrificial animals in Pliny's province of Bithynia around 110 CE (Pliny, *Epp.* X, 96).

CE, the flow from paganism into the young Christian churches must have been of considerable concern to the imperial authorities.

Domitian's character and interests were quite different to those of his predecessors, his father Vespasian (69-79 CE) and his elder brother Titus (79-81 CE). He was autocratic, suspicious, controlling, ruthless, self-righteous and pious in his loyalty to the pagan gods, especially to those whom he claimed had protected him through the civil war in 68-69 CE (Jupiter) and thereafter (Minerva). As his predecessors were both successful military men, they kept control of the armies and more or less excluded Domitian from military life. During their reigns, Domitian was given a number of official religious duties to perform as Pontifex Maximus, and so it is natural that he considered himself to be a guide on morals and religious conduct. Around 85 CE, he made himself the guardian of public morals for life (public censor), going further than previous emperors to root out corruption, nepotism and punish adultery with exile. He presided over the reopening of the lavishly restored temple to Jupiter on the Capitol Hill. Domitian's devotion to traditional pagan religion may explain why he regarded Judaism and Christianity, along with other newly-imported cults, with suspicion and growing hostility, especially towards the end of his reign. His hostility was mainly directed against the Roman and Greek citizens who abandoned pagan traditions and adopted other religions, especially those of his own family and among the ruling elite. However, his pagan zeal and devotion did not stop there, but, in the later part of his reign, drove him to claim divine status for himself by insisting that everyone address him '*dominus et deus*', including the patrician senators.²⁰ Whether this claim arose from an experience of the divine, or from pure self-glorification, it certainly suited Domitian's narcissistic personality, which in later years turned him into a cruel and paranoid tyrant.

The turning point came in 88 CE, when he faced an open revolt by Antonius Saturninus, the governor of the province of Germany who declared himself emperor and was supported by his army. Although the revolt was quickly suppressed by another governor, it seems to have exacerbated the Emperor Domitian's character flaws, and driven him, during the remaining eight years of his reign, to punish anyone, in Rome or in the Provinces, whom he suspected of opposing him, often relying only on the reports of unreliable informers. His victims included Roman citizens from all walks of life: philosophers, astrologers, rhetoricians, playwrights, governors, patricians and senators. At the instigation of the emperor, they were banished or executed for the slightest perception of insult. With the same heavy-handedness, the emperor meted out severe penalties for relatively trivial infractions.²¹

With this combination of zeal for pagan customs and hypersensitivity to insult, added to the routine triumphalist propaganda from the first Jewish revolt,²² Domitian made life very difficult for the Jews and their Christian rivals, especially during the final few years of his reign, in the 90's of the first century. Before attempting to describe this crucial period, we must first return to the third major challenge facing the Christian churches, as revealed in the messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

²⁰ 'Lord and god', cf. Suetonius *Domitian* 13.2; Dio Cassius *Hist.* 67,4.7; but also Jn 20,28 as a response.

²¹ Cf. Ben Witherington, *New Testament History*; 390-4.

²² "The Jewish victory provided the equivalent of a foundation myth for the Flavian dynasty, which came to power in 69 through civil war: the routine suppression of a provincial insurrection was turned into a great and glorious triumph of Roman arms", T.D. Barnes, 'The Sack of the Temple in Josephus and Tacitus', in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, eds J. Edmonson, S. Mason and J. Rives, Oxford: OUP, 2005; 129.

3. The Third Challenge: the Synagogue of Satan

The first major challenge came from false apostles and false prophets, the second from the Roman authorities, and the third major challenge confronting the churches of Asia Minor came from the Jews, or rather “those who call themselves Jews and are not, but a synagogue of Satan” (2,9; cf. 3,9).²³ Not only do they slander those who believe in Christ, but they are lying when they call themselves Jews. There is little doubt that this hard language, so far used only for the Roman authorities, refers to non-Christian Jews.²⁴ Furthermore, in a context in which the ‘throne of Satan’ refers to the official seat of Roman Provincial governor, ‘synagogue of Satan’ points to the people assembled around him, strongly implying willing cooperation between the Jews and the Roman authorities against the Christian churches. As with the other challenges, there is a wider context, with considerable historical depth.

On coming to power in 81 CE, Flavius Domitian did nothing to relax the Flavian administration’s humiliation of the Jews, but continued to exploit the Jewish defeat for its propaganda value for the Flavian dynasty. This made it clear that the Jews would not receive permission to rebuild the temple under his principate. Following the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt in 70 CE, he had participated in the triumphal march in 71 CE. He kept the fine high-priestly robes in his palace and continued to display the precious Jerusalem temple vessels in the temple of Peace. He built and opened a second triumphal ‘Arch of Titus’ on the *Via Sacris* and continued to issue coins publicizing the defeat of Judaea (*Judaea Capta* and *Judaea Devicta*) until 85 CE.

Domitian also continued the diversion of the Jewish temple tax into the Roman treasury, where it was used for the repair of pagan temples and renamed *Fiscus Judaicus*. In fact, he increased the humiliation of the Jews even further by exacting the two drachma tax “with the utmost rigour” (*acerbissime*). In effect, this meant that the people who had previously escaped paying the tax, were now compelled to do so, including ‘those who without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews (i.e. pagan ‘God-fearers’ and proselytes, those of mixed Jewish-gentile descent), as well as those who concealed their Jewish origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon the people (i.e. non-observant Jews by birth)’.²⁵ Domitian also extended the pool of taxable subjects, by removing the age limits.²⁶ In order to ensure prompt compliance, Domitian relied on tax-collectors, tribunals and on a network of informants, thus introducing the potential for ‘calumny’, or false accusations. This measure was partly aimed at discouraging conversions from paganism to Judaism, and indeed to Christianity, for there was as yet no

²³ It should not be overlooked that all three challenges are now linked with Satan (cf. 1Pet 5,8-9).

²⁴ Neither gentile nor Jewish Christians would ‘slander’ other Christians, as these so-called Jews are accused of doing, and non-Jews would not try to call themselves Jews. For an informative discussion on the subject, see Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Revelation and its Social Context’, in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, Others in Late Antiquity*, eds J. Neusner and E. Frerichs, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985; 187-218; esp 206.

²⁵ Cf. Suetonius, *Domitian* 12, 1-2.

²⁶ The original Jewish temple tax was required of adult Jewish males only, from the ages of 20-50. According to Josephus, Vespasian imposed the *Fiscus Judaicus* immediately after the suppression of the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE, extending it ‘On all Jews, wheresoever they be’, i.e. including all ages (above 3 years and up to 62 at least), both sexes and slaves as well. From Suetonius’s account (in *Domitian* 12) of a 90 year old being examined in court for marks of circumcision, we can infer that Domitian removed all age limits (cf. *Fiscus Judaicus*, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol 6, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971, cols. 1325-6).

attempt by the authorities to distinguish the two communities. Basically, all those leaving the traditional imperial religion would now have to pay for their decision and would see their taxes used for the upkeep and restoration of the religion they had abandoned. Quite apart from the shrewd logic working to the advantage of the imperial religion, the emperor's order to exact the tax "with utmost rigour" was also clearly a sign that increasing numbers of people were moving from paganism to Judaism or Christianity at this time, at the end of the first century.

These measures, however, had serious knock on effects for Christians. The leaders of the Jewish synagogues were now encouraged to register their members, which gave them a certain control in the determination of who was a Jew and who was not. The decisions of these Jewish leaders led to a situation in which the full members of the Synagogue paid their taxes and in return were allowed to practice their religion freely, while others (especially pagan converts to Christianity) were exposed and became liable to prosecution for 'atheism', 'impiety', or as members of an 'illicit association'. So although the rigorous collection of this tax by Domitian may have been aimed at further vilifying the Jews, it rapidly became a cause of insecurity and persecution for Christians, depending on the whim of Jewish informers and the attitudes of the local administrators. Suddenly, informers from the Synagogue were able to report members of the Christian churches to the Roman authorities for 'claiming to be Jews, but were not', ironically reversed in the two messages mentioned above (cf. Rev 2,9; 3,9). More importantly, the distinction between Jew and Christian became known officially and within a short time led to specific targeting of Christians and their communities (cf. 2,10.13; see above).

At the same time, at the beginning of the 90's, and perhaps arising from the need to distinguish non-Christian Jews from Christian Jews, the newly established Council of Jewish sages in Jamnia, Judaea, issued instructions to insert into the public prayer of the synagogues a modified version of one of the eighteen benedictions that was actually a curse on Christians and other sectarians (i.e., 'non-orthodox' Jews). It was ironically called the '*Birkat HaMinim*'.²⁷ No Christian or sectarian would pronounce such a malediction against himself and would either leave the synagogue or become conspicuous by his silence during the recital of the prayer. This 'malediction test' was most probably instituted by means of a circular letter, from Rabbi Gamaliel II to the synagogues in the diaspora, containing a "dignified but firm denunciation of the Christians, accompanied by an order to have no fellowship with them, as well as a copy of the new passage to be included in the service of the synagogue".²⁸

It is now understood that, following the introduction of this prayer into diaspora synagogues, with the antichristian blasphemy that it expressed and generated, the process of separation known as 'the parting of the ways' proceeded rapidly. The timing of this 'parting of the ways' coincides

²⁷ I.e. "the 'blessing' of the Sectarians". It reads: "And for the apostates let there be no hope; and may the insolent kingdom be quickly uprooted, in our days. And may the Nazarenes and the heretics perish quickly; and may they be erased from the Book of Life; and may they not be inscribed with the righteous. Blessed art thou, Lord, who humblest the insolent", Emil Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev and ed by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black, in 3 vols, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973; 461. This version of the prayer was found more than a century ago at the Geniza in Cairo and is thought to be the oldest in existence, dated to sometime in the second or third centuries CE. Interestingly, its curse against the Nazarenes (the Christians) is disarmed completely by the Risen Lord's assurance to the 'one who overcomes' in Rev 3,5, declaring he will never erase his name from the Book of Life. Christ is therefore the one who has the authority to erase names from that Book.

²⁸ James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism*, Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1961; 77-81, quote from 81.

squarely with the writing of the Book of Revelation, the other Johannine writings, other late New Testament writings (2Peter, Jude) and with a number of non-canonical Jewish and Christian texts (4Ezra, 2Baruch, Letters of Clement, Barnabas and Ignatius). As summarized by James Dunn, “The crisis of 70 CE did not settle the matter, then. There is other evidence, however, which strongly suggests that the following period, the period between the two Jewish revolts (66-70 and 132-135) was decisive for the parting of the ways. After the first revolt it could be said that all was still to play for. But after the second revolt the separation of the main bodies of Christianity and Judaism was clear-cut and final, whatever interaction there continued to be at the margins”.²⁹

The End of Domitian’s Reign

Towards the end of Domitian’s reign, there is ample evidence of a further intensification of the emperor’s hostility towards his perceived rivals and enemies. This hostility seems to have reached a climax in the years 95-96 CE with the conviction of many high-ranking Romans, including members of his own household:

1. “Towards the end of Domitian’s reign the emperor became increasing tyrannical and, partly as a result, justifiably paranoid, executing at least twelve former consuls on charges of dissent or alleged conspiracy.”³⁰ Among those he suspected of plotting against him was his cousin Flavius Clemens, grandson of Domitian’s uncle Flavius Sabinus and husband of Domitian’s niece Domitilla and their children. According to the 3rd century historian Dio Cassius, Clemens was sentenced to death at the end of his consulship in 95 CE, on the charge of “atheism, for which many others also were condemned who had drifted into Jewish ways”, mentioning also the execution of the former consul Acilius Glabrio partly on the same charges.³¹ By indicating that many others had been condemned by Domitian in the same way, losing life or property, Dio Cassius is describing a new level to the Emperor’s hostility at this time.³²
2. There is good evidence in rabbinical sources that four leading rabbis from the reconstituted Jewish authority in Jamnia (Judaea) travelled to Rome in the autumn of 95 CE.³³ The

²⁹ James D.G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1991; 238.

³⁰ Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*, London: Allen Lane, 2007; 467

³¹ Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67, 14. Domitian did not spare his niece, the wife of Clemens, and their seven children, two of whom he had nominated heirs to the throne. Domitilla was exiled to the island of Pandateria on the same charge as her husband and no more was heard of her children (Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67,14.2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,18; Suetonius, *Domitian* 15:1). Roman tradition claims Clemens and Domitilla had become Christians, along with Glabrio, a fellow victim and former consul, although this is disputed.

³² Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67, 14. Some have reasonably suggested that these measures were aimed to prevent Romans, or at least high-ranking citizens, from abandoning their traditional religion and becoming Jews or Christians. Goodman disputes this was a problem calling for active measures, claiming Judaism was more unpopular than ever following the destruction of the temple of its only God (*Rome and Jerusalem*, 467; also ‘The *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome’, *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, eds Edmondson, Mason and Rives, Oxford: OUP, 2005; 172-7). Goodman’s view of widespread negative attitudes towards Judaism actually conflicts with the evidence, presented below, for a successful conspiracy against Domitian by Jewish sympathizers in the Senate. Goodman’s view is not unchallenged, however, and is rightly rejected by William Horbury, in his *The Jewish War Under Trajan and Hadrian*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014; 132-6.

³³ The evidence is dispersed in various rabbinical sources: a useful summary can be found in the recent book by Reuven Hammer, *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015; 35-39).

ostensible purpose was to intercede for their people with the Roman authorities, in the hope of being able to avert further persecution. It is possible that the abuse (*calumnia*) surrounding the collection of the *Fiscus Judaicus* had reached intolerable levels, added to the humiliating search for descendants of King David. But both of these annoyances had been continuing for some time, and neither adequately explains why the four leading rabbis made the long journey to Rome at such a hazardous time of year. The reason for this visit must have been much more compelling. Two of the more enigmatic Jewish sources suggest that Domitian was planning to expel the Jews from Rome, or worse, but was dissuaded by Ketiah Bar Shalom, identified by historians as Flavius Clemens, who paid with his life.³⁴

3. At about this time (93-95 CE), Domitian seems to have been alert to the incubation of a messianic Jewish revolt, for he used informants to hunt down and execute anyone, in the Jewish or Christian communities, who was known to be a descendant of King David and the Judean royal family. There is even a Christian account of Domitian summoning Zoker and James, the two grandsons of Jude, Jesus Christ's brother, to an interrogation. They were released after giving their witness and demonstrating that they were simple farmers in Galilee.³⁵ For the same reason, a brutal investigation of the son of Christ's uncle, Simon son of Clopas, also took place around this time.³⁶
4. In the same year (95-96 CE), the Apostle John wrote his Book of Revelation after being exiled to the island of Patmos, even though he was about 83 years old.³⁷ As a circumcised Jew, he was obliged to pay the temple tax to the Romans, but could not be forced to observe pagan rituals or be charged with membership of an 'illicit association'. The only charge that could have been brought against him was 'causing a disturbance of the peace by his preaching' (cf. 1,9). Since only the nobility were offered exile instead of the death penalty, it is possible that the sentencing magistrate accepted that he was the 'high priest' of their branch of Judaism and so he was punished with exile on the Isle of Patmos.³⁸
5. Several early Christian writers, including John (cf. Rev 1,9; 2,10.13), describe this period as one of particular hardship and suffering for Christians, in Rome and elsewhere. In 95 CE, Clement of Rome refers to this difficult time when he excuses his delay in writing to the Corinthians on "the sudden and repeated calamities that have befallen us".³⁹ In Alexandria, Pseudo-Barnabas may have been referring to it when he writes "For these are evil days, with the worker of Evil himself in the ascendant".⁴⁰ According to Melito of Sardis, Tertullian and Eusebius, the Emperor Domitian ranks with Nero as an organizer of persecution against

³⁴ B. *Avod. Zar.* 10b, and *Deut. R.* ii.24. For discussion of these sources and their historical interpretation, see 'Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis', by Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster, in *Journal of the Theological Society* (NS), vol 34, Pt 1, April 1983, 31-55. For more on this figure, see M. Aberbach, Ketiah Bar Shalom', in *Enc. Jud.* vol 10, cols 925-6.

³⁵ Hegesippus *apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,19-20.

³⁶ Hegesippus *apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,32.

³⁷ For confirmation that this was John the Apostle, cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,18, who mentions the exile of Domitilla at the same time.

³⁸ A century later, he was remembered as 'the one who wore the petalon (mitre)' according to Polycrates *apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,31.

³⁹ 1Clement 1:1, as quoted in F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 412.

⁴⁰ Letter of Barnabas, 2, dated convincingly to the reign of Nerva (96-98 CE) by Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster in 'Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis', *Journal of the Theological Society* (NS), vol 34, Pt.1, April 1983, 53-55; supported by James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (Reihe 2, 64) Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994; 26-28; and Horbury, *Jewish War*, 298-303.

Christians.⁴¹ Eusebius wrote “Many were the victims of Domitian’s appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God. He was, in fact, the second to organize persecution against us, though his father Vespasian had had no mischievous designs against us”.⁴² By saying ‘finally’, Eusebius is indicating that Domitian’s turn against God, and against God’s people, took place at the end of his reign.⁴³

All the evidence presented above shows that, as Domitian’s reign was coming to an end (95-96 CE), his cruelty was not merely aimed at those who crossed or annoyed him, but was strongly focused on Jews, Christians and those gentiles who were ‘drifting into Jewish ways’ or, to be more precise, on Jewish sympathizers among the ruling elites and on those pagans who were leaving their traditional customs to become Jews or Christians. Finally the intensity of hostility against these religious minorities actually increased in 95-96 CE, over and above previous levels, suggesting that Domitian was aware of a specific threat arising from their communities, similar perhaps to the revolt of Antonius Saturninus in 88 CE.

What happened next not only confirms that there was a serious threat, but also indicates the nature of the threat which Domitian was reacting against at the end of his reign: “He suspected, not without reason, that many members of the senate were plotting against him, and towards the end of his reign he took severe action against some of them, including certain members of the imperial family... It was Domitilla’s steward, Stephanus by name, who a few months later offered his service to a group of senatorial conspirators against Domitian’s life and assassinated him (18 September, A.D. 96). The same day, Domitian was replaced by Nerva, an elderly Senator (96-98), who reversed several of Domitian’s tyrannical measures”.⁴⁴ As with Nero, Domitian’s memory was then ‘condemned to oblivion’ (*damnatio memoriae*) by the Roman Senate, and those who had been exiled were allowed to return to their homes, including Domitilla, the wife of the executed consul Flavius Clemens, and John the Apostle.⁴⁵ Evidently the senatorial conspiracy which Domitian had tried to suppress finally succeeded in destroying him in 96 CE, at the age of 44. Of significance is the fact that the conspiracy was given a religious

⁴¹ Melito, *Petition*, apud Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.26; Tertullian, *Apol.* 5:4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.17 (quoted below).

⁴² Quoted from Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 3.17, Eng trans G.A. Williamson, rev. ed. London: Penguin, 1988; 80.

⁴³ Modern historians are eager to revise the impression that Domitian’s hostility was aimed specifically against Christians, but was rather projected widely on to any and every perceived rival or opponent. Eusebius’ statement not only confirms Domitian’s persecution of people other than Christians (“great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainment”), but also affirms that Domitian’s hostility against Christians was intensified at the end of his reign. This matches Dio Cassius’ report that towards the end of his reign, especially between 95-96 CE, Domitian focussed his anger specifically on those who had ‘drifted into Jewish ways’, which included Christians.

⁴⁴ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 413. It is said that Domitian’s wife and immediate household knew of the plot and helped to carry it through to completion, cf. M. Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 468. Goodman also notes “Nerva had probably connived in Domitian’s murder and thus had a strong interest in winning popular support in Rome by countermanding his predecessor’s unpopular actions”, ‘Diaspora Reactions to the Destruction of the Temple’, *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways AD 70 to 135*, ed James D.G. Dunn (WUNT 66), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992; 33.

⁴⁵ The release of the exiles by Emperor Nerva, including John, is reported in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,20 and again in III,23 (quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II, 33.2 and III, 3.4), also in Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 68, 2.

dimension by the historian Dio Cassius, when he refers to the charge against the many who were condemned as ‘drifting into Jewish ways’.

Within a short time of taking office Nerva gained Senate approval to reverse Domitian’s policy on the collection of the former temple tax called *Fiscus Iudaicus*, further raising suspicion that Jewish interests were at stake in the conspiracy against the former Emperor, and that Jewish sympathizers formed a majority in the Roman Senate.⁴⁶ The reversal was announced on coins issued three times in Rome, between November 96 CE and Summer 97 CE, with the caption “FISCI IUDAICI CALUMNIA SUBLATA”, translated “the abuse of the Jewish Fund has been lifted”. Although the specifics of this change are debated, it is agreed that an alleviation in the collection of the tax followed with immediate effect, if not actually a temporary suspension.⁴⁷ According to Dio Cassius, Emperor Nerva also cancelled Domitian’s policy of criminalizing ‘atheism’, impiety’ and ‘a Jewish mode of life’, released all those on trial for these charges and executed the informers.⁴⁸

There is also a substantial body of unofficial evidence indicating that Nerva gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and restore sacrifices. This could have been agreed while the four leading rabbis from Jamnia were still in Rome, for it appears that they were present at the enthronement of the new emperor in September 96 CE. Dated by textual clues to 97 or 98 CE, the Letter of Barnabas indicates, by combining two verbs in the future tense (‘shall build’, ‘will build again’) with a verb in the present (‘it is happening’), that the Jews had received permission, and were already planning, to rebuild the temple with the help of the Romans: “Lo, they who destroyed this temple shall themselves build it. That is happening [now]. For owing to the war, it was destroyed by the enemy; at present even the servants of the enemy will build it up again”.⁴⁹ The news of Nerva’s change of policy towards the Jews, and particularly towards the rebuilding of the temple, seem to be the author’s motive for writing the letter, which adopts a stance strongly opposed to these plans. He is thought to have been a Christian Jew from Alexandria.

In early 98 CE the elderly Nerva died after only 16 months on the throne and was succeeded by Trajan. Trajan initially adhered to his predecessor’s policies regarding the Jews, who celebrated a feast day every year in his honour and called it ‘Trajan Day’.⁵⁰ The friendship must have been mutual, for it incurred a reprimand from a Greek delegate from Alexandria, called Hermaiscus, when visiting the Emperor in Rome around 112 CE. After the Emperor had

⁴⁶ An extraordinarily detailed survey of the extent of Jewish involvement in this conspiracy can be found in the article by Shimon Applebaum, ‘Domitian’s Assassination: The Jewish Aspect’, in *Scripta Classica Israelica*, vol 1, (1974); 116-32. In summary: “Judaism had penetrated deeply not only the ranks of the Roman aristocracy, but also among the Roman populace. It need not be assumed, of course, that everyone accused of judaization was really a proselyte, but evidently genuine conversions were sufficiently common to make the charge plausible. It seems, moreover, that a rapprochement with Judaism had begun to serve among the oppressed nobility as an expression of protest against the tyrant”, *ibid* 121.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, archaeological surveys at Edfu (Apollonopolis Magna), in Upper Egypt, show an absence of evidence (inscribed potsherds or ostraca) for the collection of the Jewish tax until 98 CE, i.e. there was a pause of about 1-2 years during the reign of Nerva, until it was resumed in the first year of Trajan’s reign.

⁴⁸ Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 68,1-2.

⁴⁹ Letter of Barnabas, 16:3-4, citing Isa 49,17, quoted by Richardson and Shukster in ‘Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis’, 34; references supporting the dating of this letter are given in n. 40.

⁵⁰ *Megillat Ta’anit* on 12th Adar.

criticized the Greeks for treating the Jews harshly in Alexandria, Hermaiscus bravely accused the Emperor of being an advocate of the impious Jews, and remarked ‘We are sorry to see your council filled with impious Jews’.⁵¹ Commenting on this remark Horbury writes, “No doubt that is wild, but it will exaggerate a sympathy with Jews and Judaism genuinely found among some associated with senatorial circles. This would be consistent with the upper-class attraction to Judaism which was criticized by Persius under Nero and again by Juvenal under Trajan or Hadrian, and is suggested under Domitian by Dio Cassius on T. Flavius Clemens and by Epictetus”.⁵² As an indication of the prevailing mood at the end of the first century, Josephus issued his apology for Judaism, *Contra Apionem*, in which he presents Judaism as “the rational man’s religion”, and also reissued his own autobiography.⁵³

In brief, Nerva’s reign and the early part of Trajan’s, were times of genuine détente and mutual respect between the Roman leadership and Judaism, in which the return of the Jews to Judaea and the restoration of Jerusalem and her temple looked certain. Jewish tradition does indeed allude to the time when the Romans gave the order to rebuild the temple, whereupon they resumed immigration to Jerusalem and Judaea, aided by two wealthy Jews by the names of Lulianus and Pappus: “In the days of Joshua b. Hananiah the [Roman] State ordered the Temple to be rebuilt, Pappus and Lulianus set tables from Acco as far as Antioch and provided those who came up from the Exile with all their needs...”.⁵⁴ These two eminent Jews are reported to have set up banks along the Mediterranean coast, from Northern Israel to Syrian Laodicea, to finance pilgrims and immigrants coming from the diaspora, and especially from Cyprus. Archeology has confirmed the success of their work, and of the Emperor Nerva’s reform, by finding in Judaea and Samaria a large number of Domitian coins countermarked with the profile of Nerva or Trajan.⁵⁵

From a benediction in the Mishna, prescribed by R. Akiba at around this time, it appears that building activity was in progress and sacrifices had resumed at an altar on the Temple Mount: “Therefore, O Lord our God and the God of our Fathers, bring us in peace to the other set

⁵¹ It appears that Trajan’s wife, the Empress Plotina, was a Jewish sympathizer and encouraged her husband to be the same. For the above interpretation of the original source (*Acts of Hermaiscus, POxy. 1242 = Acta Alexandrinorum VIII = CPJ 157*), see Horbury, *Jewish War under Trajan and Hadrian*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014; 213-5.

⁵² Horbury, *Jewish War*, 304.

⁵³ One wonders how much Josephus may have been involved in the activities to depose Domitian and replace him with Nerva, being himself a member of the Flavian household and therefore close to those who had suffered at Domitian’s hands.

⁵⁴ *Gen. R.* lxiv 10 on Gn 26,29, as quoted by Richardson and Shukster in ‘Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis’, 47. R. Joshua Ben Hananiah was a disciple of R. Yochanan Ben Zakkai, and a leading member of the Rabbinic Council of Jamnia. Like Ben Zakkai, he was known for his conciliatory attitude to the Romans and was one of the four rabbis on the delegation to Rome in 95-96 CE. He took over leadership of the Council after the death of Gamaliel II (c. 114 CE) until his own death in 131 CE. The chronology of this account in *Gen. R.* lxiv 10 is so confused that many scholars follow Schürer in asserting that it has no historical value at all. But so long as we bear in mind that the episode refers, not to the *giving* of the order to rebuild, but to the announcement of its *cancellation* at the instigation of the Samaritans and, above all, to R. Joshua’s role in deterring the crowd from rebellion, then the date can be inferred as follows: granting that the two eminent financiers Lulianus and Pappus were finally put to death by Trajan (according to several Talmudic sources), then this episode can be dated between 114, when R. Joshua Ben Hananiah took over leadership of the Council, and 117 when Trajan himself died. As it is highly likely that the outbreak of the diaspora revolt (War of Kitos/Quietus) from 115-118 was also due to the cancellation of the order to rebuild (for lack of a conciliatory intervention like that of R. Joshua in Judaea), then the cancellation can be dated fairly accurately to the years 114-115 CE.

⁵⁵ Cf. Richardson and Shukster, ‘Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis’, 44, n. 28.

feasts and festivals which are coming to meet us, while we rejoice in the building-up of thy city and are joyful in thy worship; and may we eat there of the sacrifices and of the Passover-offerings whose blood has reached with acceptance the wall of thy Altar, and let us praise thee for our redemption and for the ransoming of our soul. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast redeemed Israel!”⁵⁶

Mention should also be made of the Talmudic report that R. Gamaliel II instructed his slave to “Go out and roast us the Passover offering on the perforated grill...”, followed by a discussion of the correct procedure.⁵⁷ Given that the Passover sacrifice could only take place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and that R. Gamaliel II was the head of the Rabbinic Council in Jamnia from about 80-114 CE, then this report signals the restoration of sacrificial rites on the site of the temple, in the period under consideration. In fact, there are many other accounts in the literature that indicate some form of cultic activity on the Temple Mount between 70 and 135 CE,⁵⁸ although it is not likely to have been permitted under the Flavian Emperors (69-96 CE), since their policy was to humiliate the Jews and make political capital out of their defeat, even to the extent of shutting down the Oniad temple at Leontopolis in Egypt (73 CE). Under this policy, which became most severe under Domitian (81-96 CE), it is difficult to imagine the soldiers of the garrison in Jerusalem allowing access to the Temple Mount or permitting any significant building activity in the City. Not until Nerva was there any significant change in this policy towards the Jews and with his liberalizing reforms in 96 CE it is at last conceivable that building on the Temple Mount and in the City was permitted and, at the same time, the resumption of sacrificial activity too. It is undoubtedly to the post-96 CE period that the reports of cultic activity on the Temple Mount refer.

It is not known how or why this agreement broke down, though Jewish frustration at the lack of progress was one of the main causes of the violent diaspora rebellions from 115-118 and the final revolt in 132-135 CE.⁵⁹ William Horbury suggests that the Emperor Trajan withdrew his support sometime between 106-11 CE, because of “fears of unrest in the eastern provinces”, following the annexation of Arabia.⁶⁰ Almost certainly other factors contributed to the Emperor’s decision. He may have become aware of the messianic prophecies circulating at this time, which all associated the rebuilding of the temple with the appearance of the Davidic king-messiah, who would then judge and destroy the Roman Empire and oversee the transfer of power to

⁵⁶ M. *Pesahim* 10:6, *The Mishnah*, Eng trans Herbert Danby, Oxford: OUP, 1933; 151. R. Akiba Ben Yosef was born around 50 CE, was ordained and appointed a judge in 93 CE, was one of the leading rabbis from Jamnia to travel to Rome in 95-96 CE, founded his own academy in Bnei Barak and flourished in Judaea until his death under Roman torture in 132, having already proclaimed Bar Kochba the messiah in 131 CE (cf. Reuven Hammer, *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy*, xxi-xxii).

⁵⁷ TB *Pesahim* 75a.

⁵⁸ For a thorough survey see the essay by Kenneth Willis Clarke, ‘Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D.70’, in *The Gentile Bias and Other Essays*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980; 9-20.

⁵⁹ “The long-term consequences [of losing hope that the Jewish Temple might be rehabilitated within Roman society] were immense. Towards the end of Trajan’s rule, in 115 CE, a violent Jewish insurrection erupted in Egypt, Cyrene, Cyprus and Mesopotamia. Our sources of evidence—all either Christian or pagan, since the rabbis were silent on the whole affair—give no reason for the uprising, but the obvious cause will have been frustration at the continuing refusal of Rome to allow the Temple to be rebuilt.” Martin Goodman, ‘The Temple in First Century CE Judaism’, in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, Ed John Day, London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2005; 465.

⁶⁰ Horbury, *Jewish War*, 304.

Jerusalem.⁶¹ Also to be considered is the Jewish tradition that mentions an intervention by the Jews' ancient rivals, the Samaritans, who advised the emperor to withdraw permission and tipped him on how this could best be done.⁶² According to this tradition, the cancellation of the 'order to rebuild the temple' can be dated quite accurately to 114-115 CE.⁶³ A tradition in the Scholion of *Megillat Ta'anit* reports that Trajan had to resort to executing Lulianus and Pappus, the Jewish bankers who were "active in organizing the movement of Jews into Palestine",⁶⁴ most likely in order to enforce his earlier prohibition on returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple. The tradition goes on to connect this murderous deed with his own immediate death (117 CE). Though this coincidence is unlikely, Trajan's death could have followed quite soon after. Several Talmudic passages then report the cancellation of 'Trajan Day', in the wake of the killing of these two eminent Jews.⁶⁵

Summarizing, it appears that around 114-115 CE Trajan reversed his permission for the Jews to return to Judaea and rebuild their temple because of local unrest, but they continued nonetheless. Soon several regions of the diaspora were in revolt (the War of Kitos/Quietus, 115-118 CE) and all means were necessary to prevent the violence spreading to Judaea. To enforce his earlier prohibition on immigration, Trajan or his commander Quietus executed the bankers Lulianus and Pappus in about 116-117 CE.

The picture that emerges from this arrangement of historical data is quite novel: a conspiracy of Jewish sympathizers amongst the Roman ruling elite finally succeeded in taking out the tyrannical Emperor Domitian in 96 CE and replacing him with their own man, Emperor Nerva. Nerva acted with speed to reverse the anti-Jewish taxes and laws introduced by his predecessor and abolish the abuses. Within a short time, the word spread around that the Jews had started rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. This appears to have motivated a letter of passionate opposition by an Alexandrian Christian once identified with the apostle Barnabas, whose statements confirm the start of preparations for temple building. On the Jewish side, there is really no way, other than with the renewal of sacrifices, to explain the joyful combination of present attainment and future anticipation in the benediction that R. Akiba prescribed for the Seder on the first night of Passover.⁶⁶ This benediction fits well with the beginning of the process of restoration, around 100-110 CE, and suggests that an altar was in use on the Temple Mount at that time. It complements the literary evidence of an effort to help Jews return to Judaea and

⁶¹ By this time at least three of these messianic prophecies were circulating in Greek: *4Ezra* (c. 100 CE), *2Baruch* (c. 105) and *Sib Or* 5 (c.110). In *4Ezra*, Trajan would have been identified with the last of the line of Roman emperors: if the third head of the Eagle in the 5th vision is identified with Domitian (*4Ezra* 12), then the two little wings who follow would be Nerva and Trajan. The vision then foresees the termination of Trajan's reign by the Lion, who represents the messiah of the Jews. In this situation there was clearly little Trajan could have done to avoid Jewish messianic fervour aimed against himself and the Romans.

⁶² The tradition derives from *Gen. R.* lxiv 10 on Gn 26,29, partially quoted above. It does not take much effort to imagine the strife that would have been caused by Jews returning to the properties they had abandoned 40 years previously. Undoubtedly many of those properties had been occupied by opportunists from Samaria and other neighbouring countries, not to mention properties that had been handed over to Roman army veterans as a reward for their services during the first revolt.

⁶³ For our dating of the cancellation of the order, see n. 54.

⁶⁴ Quote from Shimon Applebaum, 'Notes on the Jewish Revolt under Trajan', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, (1966) vol 2, 29.

⁶⁵ TY *Ta'an* 2:13, 66a; TY *Meg* 1:6, 70a; TB *Ta'an* 18b.

⁶⁶ M. *Pesahim* 10:6, quoted above.

Jerusalem from the western diaspora and particularly from Cyprus.⁶⁷ A few modern scholars are beginning to recognize that ‘something of the Temple worship was restored’ at this time.⁶⁸

The ‘return’ of the Jews continued well into the reign of Nerva’s successor Trajan, and lasted until around 114-115 CE. So for 17 years, from late 96 to about 114, there was—or at least there appeared to be—a real expectation among the Jews that Jerusalem would be restored and the temple rebuilt, at first under Nerva and then under Trajan. For reasons unknown, but most likely included local unrest caused by Jewish immigration, Trajan then prohibited further activities leading towards resettlement of Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple (114-115). Messianic fervor coupled with frustration caused by Trajan’s prohibition were the main causes of the violent diaspora revolts that lasted from 115-118, and contributed to the final revolt of 132-135 CE.

A Change in Perspective

Although Emperor Domitian relied on informers to a great extent, it was no secret that the Jews had high hopes of restoring Jerusalem and rebuilding their temple. For this they prayed three times a day in their synagogues.⁶⁹ The destruction following their defeat in the first revolt (66-72 CE) had hit them badly, not only because of the huge human loss, displacement and enslavement, but also because of the pain and disorientation at the destruction of their religious and cultural centre. However, similar catastrophes had happened to them in the past, most memorably in 586 BCE, and yet they had returned 70 years later to restore their nation and rebuild their temple. Following the defeat in 70 CE, Jewish refugees from Judaea streamed into the main population centres of the Roman Empire—Rome, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Antioch—where they recovered quickly with help from the wealthy diaspora communities. As noted by the Church historian W.H.C. Frend, “The speed and extent of the Jewish recovery after 70 both in Palestine and the Dispersion have sometimes been underestimated. In these two generations Judaism was far from being a spent force politically or culturally”.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for scholars to assume that Jewish religious and political ambitions ended completely with the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. This is generally regarded as the watershed moment in Jewish history when Jews throughout the Roman

⁶⁷ As mentioned above, under the direction of Lulianus and Pappus.

⁶⁸ Cf. K.W. Clarke, ‘Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D.70’, *The Gentile Bias*, 9-20. In a talk ‘On the Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple’, at a recent conference on *Rethinking the Jewish War (66-74 CE)*, [Ecole Biblique, Jerusalem, from Oct 30–Nov 1, 2018], Prof. Etienne Nodet presented evidence culled from Jewish (Rabbinic and Josephus), pagan and Christian sources that concluded: “if we dispose of the early Rabbinic traditions, which represented a very limited portion of the Jewish people between 70 and 135, we may safely conclude that during this period the population grew up in Judea, and that something of the Temple worship was restored”. At the very least, the construction or repair of the outer altar is implied.

⁶⁹ Cf. Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 448-9. Also ‘The Temple in First Century Judaism’, *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, 2005; 463: “The Temple had been destroyed, so the task of Jews must be to ensure that, as rapidly as possible, it be rebuilt”. A prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem, the temple and the throne of David was one of the eighteen benedictions (*Shmoneh ‘Esreh*) pronounced thrice daily in the synagogues from antiquity.

⁷⁰ W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984; 35. In his *Rise of Christianity*, the same author writes: “It would be a mistake to think that after the fall of Jerusalem Judaism turned in upon itself. In Palestine it reorganized itself quickly around the scholars of the academy at Jamnia under a leader (patriarch) of the house of Hillel”, *The Rise of Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982; 125.

Empire settled down in the diaspora and made a permanent adaptation to life without their temple, under the leadership of R. Yochanan Ben Zakkai and the Council of Jewish sages at Jamnia. Subsequently, according to this view, there were a few local Jewish uprisings in various places, but, in the words of Martin Noth, these form “an appendix to the history of Israel, which had already come to an end”.⁷¹

According to this view, the Jews were a spent force after 70 CE, on their way out of history, creating trouble here and there, but nothing to threaten the imperial authorities or the growth and expansion of the Christian churches. On the basis of this view, Domitian’s hostility from 90-96, but especially from 95-96 CE, had no particular motive and can only be understood as the cruel and vindictive violence of a psychopathic tyrant.

In fact, though poorly documented at the time, the subsequent uprisings and wars were much more extensive and destructive than the first, leading to the conclusion that the first revolt was just the beginning of a resolute and unrelenting Jewish nationalist movement increasing in intensity over the next 65 years and culminating in the second Jewish revolt, which ended with the virtual eradication of Jewish life in Judaea and Jerusalem. One scholar of the period justly observes “In long-term consequences, the Bar-Kokhba Rebellion of 132-135 CE, “the Last Revolt” against Roman rule, may well have been the greatest disaster in Jewish history, bar none”.⁷² The true watershed moment for Jews, then, was the defeat of the second Revolt in 135 CE, for only then did the surviving Jews settle down in the diaspora and make a permanent adaptation to life without their temple.

Contrasting with the former view presented above, this revised view holds that Jews had recovered so well by 90 CE that they were perceived as a growing threat by Domitian, whose hostility can now be understood as a justifiable concern, and by 132 CE they were again ready to challenge the Romans with greater unity and strength than in the first revolt. According to this revised view the intervening period should therefore be redefined as an increasingly assertive resurgence of Jewish nationalism. It is this rising tide of Jewish nationalism that best explains subsequent history of the Jews and their tragic interactions with the Romans and Greeks, and indeed with Christians too. Since it better explains the history of the period 90 and 135 CE, it forms the genuine background for the interpretation of the Judeo-Christian literature produced in these years, including 4Ezra 3-14, 2Baruch, 4th and 5th Sibylline Oracles, Apocalypse of Abraham, the Johannine Corpus, the Letter of Barnabas, the Letters of Ignatius and the Apocalypse of Peter, amongst others, not to mention the reform of Judaism that was taking place

⁷¹ Martin Noth, rev Eng trans, *The History of Israel*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960; 448. Quoting from Isaac and Oppenheimer (‘The Revolt of Bar Kochba: Ideology and Modern Scholarship’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol xxxv, no. 1, Spring 1985; 33), Daniel Gruber writes: “In a similar way, ‘Historians used to assume that the Jewish diaspora began after the destruction of the Second Temple. This view was determined by a theological concept, for in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth scholars wished to represent the destruction of the Second Temple as divine punishment of the people of Israel since they saw the rise of Christianity as the true continuation of Judaism.’ This negated the importance of the Bar Kochba Rebellion, since “the issue” had already been decided in 70 CE. The theological conclusion distorted the history.” *Rabbi Akiba’s Messiah: The Origins of Rabbinic Authority*, Hanover: Elijah Publishing, 1999; 14.

⁷² Daniel Gruber, *Rabbi Akiba’s Messiah: The Origins of Rabbinic Authority*, Hanover: Elijah Publishing, 1999; 1; who on p.1 also cites S. Abramsky on “Bar Kochba” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol 4, col 2236: “In Jewish tradition the fall of Bethar [the headquarters of the Bar Kochba Revolt] was a disaster equal to the destruction of the First and Second Temples”.

under the rabbis at Jamnia, especially under R. Akiva, with the selection of the canon of Hebrew Scriptures and of an official text, the new translations of the texts into Greek and into Aramaic, and the collection of materials that would eventually be included in the Mishnah (the core of tractates *Tamid*, *Yoma* and *Middoth*).

In so far as this passionate yearning for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the resurgence of national restoration among Jews, from 90-135 CE, have not yet been grasped by scholars, it is an ‘elephant in the room’ of first-second century studies.

The Impact of the Jewish National Resurgence

At the end of the first century, the Christian churches were expanding rapidly in Asia Minor and elsewhere, but Christians were numerically still a small minority compared with the Jews, who comprised about 10% of the Roman Empire at that time, and about 5% of the population of Rome. Although the ‘parting of the ways’ had begun around 90 CE, with the establishment, official recognition and increasing influence of the Rabbinical Council of Jamnia under Rabbi Gamaliel II, there were still strong social and cultural ties between the Jewish and Christian communities. The introduction of the so-called *Birkat HaMinim* ‘benediction’ may have contributed to a liturgical separation of members of both communities in the early 90’s,⁷³ but the boundaries were still blurred by 95-96 CE, especially in the area of eschatology based on the book of Daniel. Both communities shared the hope for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth by his messiah. Both communities regarded the Roman Empire to be the fourth beast of Daniel, more or less evil and destined for destruction by the messiah at the appointed time (Dn 7). So in this area of the faith, there was still room for agreement, despite sharp differences on other issues (e.g., Torah, Election, Monotheism and Temple⁷⁴).

However, in 96 CE, with Emperor Nerva’s reforms, the boundaries became clearer quite rapidly, as noted by Martin Goodman as follows: “All sorts of consequences may have resulted from this reform by Nerva. On the one hand it seems likely that the Roman state, and Romans in general, for the first time came properly to appreciate that people of non-Jewish origin could become Jews... On the other hand the definition of apostasy became startlingly clear for Jews... after A.D. 96 any ethnic Jew who publicly refused to pay the annual levy to the *fiscus Judaicus* on the grounds that he was no longer religiously Jewish thereby put his apostasy beyond doubt. It seems to me no accident that a clear distinction between Jews and Christians begins regularly to appear in pagan Roman texts after A.D. 96”.⁷⁵

It is easy to agree with Goodman about the significant effects of Nerva’s reforms on ‘the parting of the ways’, but less easy to see this depending on the payment of the *Fiscus Judaicus*. It

⁷³ “We may reasonably surmise that Jews willing to utter this ‘benediction’ tended to abandon Christianity, while Jews or proselytes unwilling to utter it were put out of the synagogue”, Craig A. Evans ‘Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift from Jesus to Justin’, *Christian-Jewish Relations through the Centuries*, eds S. Porter and B. Pearson, JSNTS 192, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000; 22.

⁷⁴ Following the main categories (‘the four pillars of Judaism’) discussed by James D.G. Dunn, in his *Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1991.

⁷⁵ Goodman, ‘Diaspora Reactions to the Destruction of the Temple’, *Jews and Christians*, 1992; 33.

might have helped the Roman administration to identify who is a Jew, but why should the Jews themselves have based their identity on such an insulting obligation imposed by external authority? Nevertheless, Goodman's intuition is closer to the truth than at first may appear. It was not the payment of the *Fiscus Judaicus* to the Romans that defined who was a Jew, but rather the original destination of that payment, the Jerusalem temple itself. Richard Bauckham is one of the few scholars to recognize "the centrality of the temple for the self-identity of common Judaism".⁷⁶ By reflecting on what, in antiquity, was common among all the varieties of Jewish belief and practice (considering especially the Samaritans and the Qumran community), and what would therefore have excluded a particular group, Bauckham argues that participation in the Jerusalem temple cult was the most important criteria of Jewish identity in the first century, noting that "The role of the temple in 'the parting of the ways' has been comparatively underplayed in the literature on this issue".⁷⁷

For as long as the Jerusalem temple existed, Christians knew how to oppose it (e.g., Acts 6-8) and to appease it (e.g., Acts 21, 20-25), though fundamentally they saw the Church itself as the temple of the messianic age (e.g., 1Cor 3,16-17; 2Cor 6,16; 1Pet 2,5; 4,17; Eph 2,20-22; Heb 13,15-16; Rev 3,12; 11,1-2), and knew from Christ's prophecy that the Jerusalem temple was doomed (e.g., Mt 23,38; 24,2; 26,61; 27,40; Mk 13,2; 14,58; 15,29; Lk 13,35; 19,44; 21,6; Jn 2,19).⁷⁸ Even after its destruction, however, Bauckham affirms "the issue of the temple did not disappear after 70 C.E., because the temple did not cease to be central to Jewish identity. Few Jews would have expected the loss to be permanent. The temple had been destroyed before—and rebuilt before, significantly after a period more or less the length of the period between 70 CE and the Bar Kochba revolt. Consequently, in Christian literature of this period, between the two Jewish revolts, the temple issue is alive and well precisely in texts in which the schism between Christianity and common Judaism is clear and painful: the Gospel of John, the Epistle of Barnabas",⁷⁹ and one could certainly add the 'Book of Revelation' as well.

So, given the centrality of the issue of the temple for Jewish identity, it is at last possible to understand why in 96 CE, Emperor Nerva's reforms had such a huge impact: precisely because they introduced a series of changes that seemed to Jews and Christians to lead inexorably to a restored Jerusalem and a rebuilt temple. From this time onwards the difference between Jews and Christians became quite stark: Jews were in favour of rebuilding the temple and Christians were not. As one might expect, the Jewish Christians, who had hitherto formed a bridge between the two communities, found themselves forced to make a choice. Craig Evans states it like this: "The Jewish wars for liberation from Roman control and the hopes for rebuilding the Temple tended to pit gentile Christians against Jewish Christians. For Jewish Christians this proved to be especially difficult, often forcing them to choose between their faith in Jesus on the one hand, and loyalty to their nation and people on the other".⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Richard Bauckham, 'The Parting of the Ways: What Happened and Why', *Studia Theologica* 47, (1993); 135-151.

⁷⁷ Bauckham, *Parting of the Ways*, 142.

⁷⁸ Bauckham demonstrates that it was this basic insight that enabled Christians to redefine their attitudes to all the other 'pillars of Judaism' (Election, Monotheism and Torah), gradually bringing about the complete theological separation from the mother Faith (*Parting of the Ways*, 146-8).

⁷⁹ Bauckham, *Parting of the Ways*, 145

⁸⁰ Craig Evans 'Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift from Jesus to Justin', *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 22-3.

The new Christian communities were composed of both gentile and Jewish believers in Christ. In the towns and cities of the diaspora, they were joined by many Jewish refugees from the first revolt in 70 CE, who were attracted to Christianity, firstly because of its charity, but also because Christ's prophecy of temple destruction had turned out to be true. However, as time went by and the prophecy of Christ's return became delayed, many of these Jewish Christians would have been tempted to reconsider the truth of Christ's claims to be the messiah. Among gentile converts also, the truth of this claim would have been questioned, with evidence being sought in the scriptures.⁸¹ Into this situation of 'messianic uncertainty', which must have prevailed at the end of the first century (cf. 2Pet 3,1-10), Nerva's reforms of 96 CE would have had a polarizing effect. By opening a door to the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, many of those Jews and gentiles who had initially been persuaded that Christ was the messiah would have returned to the synagogue and its lure of a material messianic kingdom based in Jerusalem.

Confirmation that this 'desertion' of the church actually happened is recorded in the First Letter of John, where it is described in terms resonant of end-times 'apostasy' (cf. 2Thess 2,3; Mt 24,10): "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that the antichrist was coming, so now many antichrists have appeared. Thus we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of our number; if they had been they would have remained with us. Their desertion shows that none of them was of our number.... Who is the liar? Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Whoever denies the Father and the Son, this is the antichrist. No one who denies the Son has the Father, but whoever confesses the Son has the Father as well." (1Jn 2,18-19.22-23). So this can be dated fairly accurately to the reforms of Nerva that began in 96 CE and continued, under Trajan, until about 114 CE. As tradition holds that the author John died at the start of Trajan's reign (98 -117 CE),⁸² the letter must have been written between 96-98 CE.

From precisely the same period, 96-98 CE, the Gospel of John was written to dispel unbelief and reinforce the faith of the believers, at this challenging time for the faith in Christ as the God-sent messiah, (Jn 20,31; 21,24-29; 20,27-29; 17,20-21; 14,10-12; 12,44.49; 11,25-26; 6,29; 3,16). Confronted by enthusiasm for the rebuilding the temple, John's Gospel gives a prominent place to the 'cleansing of the temple', when Christ dismisses the old concept of temple and identifies the new messianic temple as his own risen body (Jn 3,20-22). He then goes on to announce the redundancy of the temple to the Samaritan woman, because "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth" (Jn 4,21.23-24). On the same note, there is no need for a temple since the disciples of Jesus will be temples for God the Father: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (Jn 14,23). All of these passages speak directly to the background described above, of anticipated Jewish national restoration.

⁸¹ "The main issue between the two communities concerned the proof from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah. Qumran had had its Testimony literature in favour of the Righteous Teacher. Testimonies and proof texts derived from the Old Testament indicating that Jesus was Messiah played a crucial part in the debate.... Either Jesus did fulfill the prophecies and was Messiah, or he did not and was a fraud who suffered —a just reward for his deceit", W.H.C Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 124-5.

⁸² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.33.2; III.3.4, *apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,23.

Also relevant is the aptness and propriety of the language accusing the Jews of being ‘sons of the devil’ for wanting to kill Jesus (Jn 8,44) in the context of their claim to be sons of Abraham (8,31-47). The not-so-subtle message here is that the Jews should not feel entitled to return to the land of Israel, as they were planning at that time, because they are not sons of Abraham, to whose descendants the land was promised (Gn 15,18-21). The message is to ‘the Jews’ in general, not the leaders in particular, because the excitement generated by Nerva’s reform affected all the Jews, even those who believed in Jesus (Jn 8,31). The language is appropriately strong so that the readers would understand that support for the Jewish nationalist revival was diabolically opposed to God and would end in disaster. Under the circumstances, which were perceived as being close to the end-times, strong language was clearly required to dissuade Jewish believers in Christ from choosing the wrong path.⁸³

The mention of the antichrist and the devil in John’s first letter and Gospel bring us back to the Book of Revelation, to consider the way in which the Jewish national revival under Nerva also appears in the background for this work.

The Jewish National Resurgence and the Book of Revelation

Before presenting those aspects of the Book of Revelation that appear to respond to a background of Jewish national revival as outlined above, it is important to recall that the visions recorded in the book were seen by the author John while he was exiled on Patmos in 95-96 CE, according to the text and to reliable tradition (Rev 1,9).⁸⁴ At exactly this time, in Rome, a senatorial conspiracy to depose Emperor Domitian was being hatched and the Emperor was responding by condemning the many aristocratic senators whom he suspected of conspiring against him, accusing them of ‘drifting into Jewish ways’. John’s visions therefore predate September 96 CE, when Domitian was assassinated, the Emperor Nerva took power and his reforms were enacted. Strange though it may seem, John directly benefitted from Nerva’s takeover and reforms, for as a result he was quickly released from exile and free to publish his account of the visions in the Book of Revelation.⁸⁵ The same events that allowed the Book of Revelation to ‘see the light’, however, also unleashed a resurgence of Jewish nationalism involving principally the return of the Jews to Judaea and Jerusalem, with the aim of rebuilding the temple. Given that John’s visions are presented as prophecy, it should not be surprising to find a prophetic relationship between his visions and the Jewish hopes and expectations unleashed by the reforms. In short, one might expect the Book of Revelation to give Christian discernment into these future hopes and expectations of the Jewish people.

⁸³ There is a modern tendency to feel embarrassment about, and to apologize for, the author’s harsh language against ‘the Jews’ (e.g., *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel*, eds R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuille, Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). It is helpful to remember that Jesus used the same language against his disciple Peter (cf. Mt 16, 23), indicating that this form of reproach was not unusual even among friends. If that is insufficient, the context here may help to explain why it was necessary to use such strong language: because it was quite simply a temptation of the devil, and perilous for the soul’s salvation, to leave the Church and return to the Synagogue, for the Synagogue was heading the wrong way (this was made clear to everyone in 135 CE). John’s use of this terminology was therefore appropriate and proportional to the dangers he foresaw in the immediate future. The subsequent misinterpretation and misuse of John’s reproach is a separate issue and should be pondered deeply by those responsible for Church discipline.

⁸⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 18; III, 20; III, 23.

⁸⁵ In this respect, one could say that Nerva’s reforms were also providential for John and for Christians.

At this point, it is also important to introduce a new element into the discussion of the Jewish national resurgence about to be unleashed on Jerusalem and Judaea. This revival of hope in restoration was spiritually supported by prayers for liberty and redemption and by those Scriptures evoking divine liberation from imperial domination, either in the past such as the ‘exodus’ from Egypt and later from Babylon, or in the future as prophesied in Daniel’s visions of the destruction of the 4th beast and the blessed reign of his Holy Ones.⁸⁶ Since Rome had done exactly what Babylon did centuries before, by destroying Jerusalem and her temple and silencing the Jewish leadership, it was a simple step to identify Rome with Babylon and see the ancient prophecies for the return from exile in Babylon, as applying literally to the situation of the Jews at the end of the first century. Selected passages from the ancient prophecies of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah, Daniel and others would have been interpreted anew, in the late first century CE, in order to fuel hope and enthusiasm for the restoration of Judaea, Jerusalem and the temple. The defeat, exile and slavery brought about by the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in 70 CE had created a situation very similar to that of the Babylonian exile, such that the exilic prophecies from Babylonian times now came to life with new significance for the Jews. Furthermore, a prominent feature of these prophecies was the appearance of a messianic warrior king from the line of David, who would help to fulfil the prophecies of restoration, before going on to judge the nations and defeat the ruling powers.

Fuelled by the identification of the Roman Empire as the 4th beast of the prophet Daniel (Dn 7), prophecies of violent liberation from Roman rule had been forming and circulating among the Jewish people for over a century, causing numerous disturbances in the early parts of the first century, and likely playing a large role in the first revolt too.⁸⁷ Then, in the words of Joseph Klausner, “The idea of redemption was strengthened and given new life, especially in its purely political aspect, by the catastrophe of 70 CE... It is clear that the Messianic hopes awoke to a new and fuller life in the first decades after the Destruction. This new stage of development is most important for us because it is *explained* by the outstanding historical event that preceded it—the Second Destruction; and it in turn *explains* the almost as outstanding historical event that followed it—the revolt of Bar-Cochba and R. Akiba’s participation therein”.⁸⁸ And again, more emphatically, “Through this great misfortune, which fell so heavily upon the Jewish people, the Messianic hopes, and particularly the politico-national part of them, were revived in full force. “Out of grief over the overthrow of the Sanctuary,” says Emil Schürer, the Messianic hope drew new nourishment, new strength. This was significant and portentous also for *political* relations.”

⁸⁶ The particular prayers and Scriptural passages are presented and discussed by Horbury in *Jewish War*, 32-39; 137-49. Horbury lists the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shmoneh ‘Esreh*), the Pentateuchal prophecies of Jacob, Balaam and Moses on the victorious future destiny of the Israelites and the Psalms of divine mercy as among the most authoritative literary sources of hope between at this time and, among the prophets, the world-historical prophecy in Daniel 7 was the most influential. Also, “Among writings of a prophetic kind, bitter anti-Romanism from the Flavian period or later, together with hope for Israelite national redemption at the hand of a messianic figure, marks not only the fifth Sibylline book, but also the apocalypses of Ezra (...), Baruch (...), and St John”, *Ibid* 34. Although Horbury does not mention, as a source of inspiration and hope, the prophecies of return from Babylonian exile, such as Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel and Zechariah, the adoption of the Babylonian setting and her Jewish scribes (Ezra, Baruch) in the apocalypses of this period, show dependence on these prophecies too. These are the facts on which the reconstruction presented here is built.

⁸⁷ For a clear and brief survey of the messianic movements in the first and second centuries, see Craig A. Evans ‘Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift from Jesus to Justin’, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 23-35.

⁸⁸ Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1955; 396-7.

It was quite natural that people should have started looking for that Messiah who would take vengeance on the Romans for the blood they had shed and restore Israel's former glory. The political element certainly came to the fore at that time".⁸⁹

Under these volatile conditions, all that was needed to ignite the synagogues with messianic fervor was a timetable of events leading to the defeat of the last emperor and the end of the Roman Empire. This did indeed make an appearance towards the end of the first century or the start of the second. Around this time, the 'popular prophecy' outlined above⁹⁰ evolved into a precise, though encoded, plan with details about when the Roman Empire would yield to the reign of the Jewish messiah-king and his Torah-observant people, who would inhabit Jerusalem and restore the temple service on Mt. Zion.⁹¹

In brief, from a certain point in the 90's, the Jews began to expect the imminent transfer of power from Rome to Jerusalem, into the hands of a ruler descended from King David, who would ceremoniously complete the transfer of power with the judgment and execution of the last Roman Emperor. Under the burden of exacting taxation during Domitian's reign, this prophecy must have resounded loudly and longingly in the ears of the members of the Jewish community, in the diaspora and in Judaea.

But to the ears of a Roman emperor already shaken by threats to his throne, this prophecy would have been a serious provocation. It is tempting to think that it was Domitian's discovery of this messianic prophecy that accounts for his ruthless search for the 'offspring of David' and the violence of his reaction against those whom he saw 'drifting into Jewish ways', including his own family. It is hardly surprising that he reacted with anger, not least because he was identified as the last emperor, or one of the last.⁹² His anger would have surged when he learnt that the father of the two nephews he had chosen as heirs, his cousin Clemens, was himself a Jewish sympathizer, and that his heirs were therefore being raised in a pro-Jewish environment. Not for long, for in mid-95 CE, Domitian executed Clemens, exiled his wife, and of their children nothing more is heard.

After Domitian's assassination and the enthronement of his successor Nerva in 96 CE, the credibility of the popular messianic prophecy would have been boosted considerably, giving it an important role in the Jewish national resurgence unleashed by Nerva's reforms. Although all the main elements of this 'popular prophecy'⁹³ were already known and circulating in the Jewish community, it found its clearest written expression in a pseudonymous work attributed to Ezra, datable to the year 100 CE.⁹⁴ Without doubt, the publication of this prophecy added a strong

⁸⁹ Klausner, *Messianic Idea in Israel*, 394, quoting from Schürer's *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* (Leipzig, 1907), 1⁴, 660.

⁹⁰ By 'popular prophecy' is meant the commonly held religious hopes and expectations of the Jewish people in the first century; for a history and summary of the main components, see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 448-554.

⁹¹ E.g., see n. 61 above.

⁹² Cf. note 61. According to the sequence of Roman emperors in 4Ezra 11-12, Nerva is the penultimate and Trajan is the last, although these last two emperors seem to have been added as an afterthought. Although completely conjectural, it is possible that the Domitian was originally supposed to be the last (as the 3rd head of the Eagle), but that this had to be modified afterwards in the light of events.

⁹³ See n. 90.

⁹⁴ Preserved by the Christians, this writing is now called 4Ezra 3-13. It can be dated accurately on the basis of 4Ezra 3,1, and also from the sequence of Roman emperors represented by the multiple wings and heads of an Eagle in

‘messianic fervour’ to the nationalistic passions already aroused by Nerva’s reform, sustaining them through the early years of the reign of his successor Trajan. Together with other written compositions,⁹⁵ it undoubtedly helped to inspire the violent insurrections in the diaspora (115-118 CE) and finally in Judaea (132-135 CE).

For Christians, however, the popular messianic prophecy of the Jews was deeply inadequate because, although referring to contemporary events, it made no reference to the first coming of the messiah in the form of Jesus Christ, nor to the salvation he had brought to the nations of the world through the preaching of the Gospel. It was begging to be replaced with a prophecy containing the complete truth about Jesus Christ and the way he would fulfil the ancient prophecies. For his believers, the Risen Christ responded in 95 CE with the visions and revelations given to his apostle John and circulated in the Book of Revelation.

The form and content of this book may seem strange to modern minds, but against the background of rival messianic expectation described above, it sits smartly and securely as the definitive ‘Word of God and Witness of Jesus Christ’. Uppermost among the themes of the Book of Revelation that resonate with the hopes and expectations of the Jewish national revival is the theme of the messianic king: this is Jesus Christ who has already come into the world, where he was slain like a lamb, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where he is now enthroned beside Almighty God in heaven (Rev 4–5). There Christ receives the scroll that will enable him to judge the world at the end of history (Rev 5,6-14; 20,11-15).

The temple is the main unifying theme of the entire book, which reveals the heavenly sanctuary fully replacing its ruined and abandoned earthly copy in Jerusalem: Christ appears as the eternal expiatory whole offering (the *Tamid*), the slain lamb, at the centre of a liturgy of atonement taking place within a sanctuary in heaven and involving the whole of creation, a liturgy which commenced with the sacrifice of the lamb (the Crucifixion) and concludes with the final judgment and the fulfilment of God’s will for mankind. The furnishings of this sanctuary in heaven and the activities of the liturgy represent the annual service for the Day of Atonement in the second temple in Jerusalem.⁹⁶ There could be no better way to represent the eternal fulfilment of the temple in Jerusalem and thereby show that there is no longer any need for a temple ‘made by human hands’. Not even in the final state of eternal perfection envisioned by John, will there be sanctuary or temple in the City where God will dwell with his peoples (cf. Rev 21,22).

The Book of Revelation says a lot about Jerusalem too. Only after the final judgment, when all evil is judged and removed from the world, will the holy city, New Jerusalem, come down from heaven, where it is being prepared, to become the place of God’s dwelling on earth (Rev 21–22). In the meantime, especially during a brief period at the end of history, the earthly Jerusalem will be trampled and profaned by the nations, so that instead of being called Holy City (11,2), she becomes the ‘Great City’ (11,8); instead of ‘Zion’, her spiritual name becomes Sodom and Egypt (11,8).

the 5th vision (4Ezra 11–12), concluding with 3 heads (Vespasian, Titus, Domitian) and 2 little wings (Nerva and Trajan; see n. 61).

⁹⁵ 2Baruch (which appears to be a Rabbinical revision and update of 4Ezra in c. 105) and the 5th Oracle of the Jewish Greek Sibyl, c.110, whom Horbury describes as “almost the prophetess of the diaspora revolt” (*Jewish War*, 32).

⁹⁶ Cf. John and Gloria Ben Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003.

In the description of Christ's messianic kingdom (Rev 20,4-6), the text again takes issue with the popular view: there is no mention of a restored earthly Jerusalem or a rebuilt temple of stones. The temple and Jerusalem are now identified unmistakably with Christ's faithful in heaven (3,12). And the people in heaven who are saved from God's judgment are not just Jews, but people from every nation, tribe, race and tongue (Rev 7,9-10). Even the frustrated longing for this messianic kingdom is shown to be vain by the large number of cross references to the eternal life of the faithful realized, in the present, through their participation in the heavenly liturgy: 'priests of God and of Christ' (20,6;1,6; 5,10); thrones for the faithful (20,4; 2,26-28; 3,21;5,10); the first resurrection untouched by the second death (20,5-6; 2,11; 14,12-13); the souls of the martyrs in heaven (20,4; 7,9-16; 15,2-3). So there is really no need to wait for the messianic reign to be established after Christ's second coming, because it has existed by faith, if not yet by sight, from his first coming and Ascension to heaven, and ever since it has been growing and expanding on earth. The rule of Christ and his saints is a heavenly and spiritual kingdom over the whole world and runs concurrently with the liturgy in heaven that represents the Day of Atonement. The vision of the kingdom is therefore retrospective, as suggested by the Psalm, "a thousand years in your sight (O Lord) are like a day, a day that is passing away" (Ps 90,4). The reign of Christ for a thousand years on earth are like one day in heaven—a Day of Atonement—a day that is passing away' (Ps 90,4). What appeared to be starting is in fact already passing away.

The future coming of the messiah is from heaven, in judgment, to defeat his enemies (19,11-17). Here the narrative in the Book of Revelation, as it stands, comes very close to the popular messianic paradigm forming the common core of Jewish messianism in late second-temple times, showing above all that the second coming of Jesus Christ will fulfil the traditional Jewish messianic expectation in the correct order and in every detail. It is in the Book of Revelation that "the fullest implementation of the traditional messianic prophecies is found",⁹⁷ even though the "traditional Davidic messianism is qualified here, as it is in the roughly contemporary 4 Ezra 13. The warrior messiah comes from heaven. But he is a warrior messiah".⁹⁸

Another point of contact with traditional messianic prophecy is the identification of the messiah's ultimate adversary with imperial power and military might on a global scale, identified as the instrument and embodiment of radical evil (Rev 11,7; 13; 17,3-18). The superficial similarity between the vision of Christ's return in the Book of Revelation and the coming of the messiah in judgment, according to the popular Jewish paradigm, has caused many interpreters to confuse the two prophecies and therefore misinterpret the Book of Revelation.⁹⁹ The most important point has been missed: the Book of Revelation presents a different vision of the judgment—a cosmic vision that takes account of Christ's prior universal mission of salvation. The judgment has therefore been postponed and the adversary is going to be a beast, or rather a double beast, of a different order.

⁹⁷ Quoted from John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed, Grand Rapids MI, Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1995; 234-5.

⁹⁸ Collins, *Scepter and Star*, 235.

⁹⁹ The misinterpretation is called the Preterist interpretation, which assumes that Christ's adversaries in Revelation, the beasts of the sea and the land, refer to figures contemporary with the author. The fact that Revelation is taking a stand against the prevailing messianism of the time, by postponing judgment until all the world has had an opportunity to hear the Gospel, means that this vision is still very much in the author's future.

So, at this point, there are important differences to consider, because this imperial ‘beast from the sea’ is headed by a man (13,18) who will wield more power than anyone the world has ever seen. His brief 42-month rule over all the earth, immediately prior to Christ’s second coming (13,5-7, cf. 17,14), presumes the establishment of a one-world government. During his reign, he acts decisively against Christ and his followers: he kills the two witnesses (11,7), persecutes the saints (12,17;13,7; 15,2) and goes off to make war against the Lamb (17,14). However, many aspects of his rule emulate the redemptive actions of Christ, especially his passion, resurrection, ascension and worship in heaven: one of the heads of the beast is fatally wounded (13,3), but his recovery (13,12.14) leads to the ascension of the beast from the abyss (11,7; 13,1), the full manifestation of its power in the world (13,2-8) and the worship of his person (13,4.8.12.15). This combination of hostility to Christ and his followers, together with imitation of the true redeemer, leads to the conclusion that the beast is a false redeemer, a false messiah, the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit, known in Christian tradition as the Antichrist.

The identification of the sea-beast as a false messiah is clinched by the fact he is promoted by another beast, a ‘beast from the land’ identified as a false prophet (cf. 13,11-17; 16,13; 19,20; 20,10), who deceives people with his ‘signs’, especially by bringing ‘fire down from heaven to earth in the sight of men’ (13,13). This sign is packed with significance for identifying the nature of the cult promoted by the false-prophet. Firstly it suggests that he wishes to identify himself with the ancient Israelite prophet Elijah (cf. 2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40), who is expected to return and prepare for the messianic age (Mal 3,1-24), and secondly it recalls the divine consecration of a new altar (Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). The imitation of this sign by the false prophet therefore implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult. In view of the central importance of the temple in Jerusalem for the performance of this cult, the dedication of a new altar by the false prophet, in this impressive but inauthentic way, presumes the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore it is clear from the text that the renewed cult is not directed to the worship of God, but rather to the false messiah and his patron, the devil, even though it is based on the site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14).

It is important to stress that the time of the final conflict, though imminent, is also postponed into the future. It has been delayed to the end of the heavenly liturgy whose duration corresponds to at least a thousand years on earth, or perhaps much more.¹⁰⁰

So, the Book of Revelation differs significantly from, and firmly ‘takes issue’ with, the most important aspects of popular messianic prophecies of mainstream Judaism at the time and recasts them, with Jesus Christ in the leading role, into a new and all-embracing ‘history of salvation’, from beginning to end, and finally to the vision of creation renewed. The greatest convergence is in the representation of the second coming of Christ as the coming of the messiah in the popular expectation. The greatest divergence is in the representation of the ultimate adversary of Christ as the leader of a global but brief pseudo-messianic empire—a leader who has

¹⁰⁰ Accepting, according to Ps 90,4, the temporal equivalence and concurrence of the heavenly liturgy (one day in heaven) and the messianic reign of Christ and his saints (1000 years on earth; Rev 20,4-6), then the final events (clustered around the second coming of Christ) are both imminent from a heavenly point of view and delayed from an earthly point of view.

his throne in Jerusalem and is worshipped in a rebuilt temple. Here finally, at the end of history, the Jerusalem temple is rebuilt, not by the messiah of God, but by his ultimate adversaries, the devil's messiah and his prophet.

The lesson from this should be clear to all people in every age: the Book of Revelation speaks prophetically of a time immediately preceding the second coming of Jesus, when the Jews will again return to their land, restore Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. The rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple will indeed happen, but it will be a diabolical deceit.

By taking issue with the popular messianic prophecies in such a specific and comprehensive way, the content of the Book of Revelation confirms that its original setting was the revival of Jewish nationalist hopes and expectations at the end of the first century. There can be little doubt that John's prophecy contributed to the process of separation between Christians and Jews, 'the parting of the ways', by revealing to Christ's followers a way that was different to that of the Jews—a way guided by a messiah whom most Jews continued to reject. Strong language, such as "Synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2,9; 3,9), warned Christians away from the rival messianic movement of the Jews. It was a timely warning, for a mere 35 years later the popular prophecies which inspired the Jewish national revival proved disastrously false.¹⁰¹ Instead of the restoration of Jerusalem and her temple, and the defeat of the Roman Empire, Jewish civilization in Jerusalem and Judaea was totally erased by the Emperor Hadrian acting in response to the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE).

Final Thoughts

In researching the background for the Book of Revelation, and contemporary writings, the focus has been on the history of the period, the last decade of the first century. For the period in question, the historical record is fragmentary and often unreliable. Nevertheless, contemporary writings do exist from many different sources, Jewish, pagan and Christian, and all of them agree about a revival of Jewish nationalist hopes and expectations when Emperor Nerva took over the principate from Domitian in 96 CE, and initiated his reforms. Roman support for Jewish national restoration lasted well into the reign of Nerva's successor, Trajan, but appears to have come to end around 114 CE for reasons that are not at all clear.

At the root of this revival was the simple desire to restore what had been destroyed in the first Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE: the temple, Jerusalem and daily life in Judaea. Up to 96 CE, the Roman emperors of the Flavian dynasty had been unwilling to relax the social and financial pressures that had been placed on Jews since their defeat in the first Jewish revolt. Goodman and other historians insist that this oppression was for propaganda reasons, as the Flavian dynasty had built its political capital on victory over the rebellious Jews and therefore ignored the many precedents for allowing defeated populations to resume their traditional worship.¹⁰² However, this argument cannot stand, as 25 years had passed since the suppression of the first revolt and the victory meant little to the new generation of Romans. In fact, the new generation felt uneasy about the humiliation of the Jews, as reflected in Suetonius' account of the genital examination of

¹⁰¹ Cf. note 83.

¹⁰² E.g., Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 448-9, 464-5.

a 90 year old Jew in a crowded courthouse.¹⁰³ Similarly, both Pliny and Tacitus portrayed the opponents of Domitian as heroes.¹⁰⁴ It is much more likely that Domitian, as a pious pagan emperor zealous to uphold traditional religious customs, was alarmed at the rising, empire-wide interest in Judaism and in its Christian offshoot, especially among the ruling classes in Rome, and for this reason he kept up the pressure on the Jews, aiming to deter proselytism and conversion. In the end, due to a change in public attitudes, the emperors' harsh policy had the opposite effect of incubating a conspiracy of Jewish sympathizers in his own government.

It is hardly surprising that a conspiracy of Jewish sympathizers should then act to relieve the punitive measures that had been imposed on the Jews 25 years previously and allow a return to the *status quo ante*. This alone must have been 'good news' for the Jews, and a cause of renewed hope in the imminent restoration of their national and religious life. It ignores, however, the injection of messianism, which entered into the situation in the last decade of the first century through popular prophecy, because of Roman harshness and injustice and also, arguably, a growing rivalry with Christianity.

It is difficult to know when, exactly, in this period, the 'messianic factor' started to come to the fore. It was certainly a major driving force in the later diaspora revolts from 115-118 CE, and again, in Judaea, from 132-135 CE, so it would be reasonable to assume that it was on the rise in the 90's CE, prompting Emperor Domitian to search and eliminate the descendants of King David. The rumour that a Jewish king-messiah would kill the Roman Emperor and then rule over the Roman Empire might have been the unknown 'factor' that provoked Domitian into taking drastic action against several aristocratic Senators, even his own family, for 'drifting into Jewish ways'.

Of all the various causes leading to the failure of Jewish national restoration in the early second century, the evidence suggests that the greatest contribution came from the 'messianic factor'. By the end of the first decade of the second century, at least three versions of the popular messianic prophecy were circulating, all predicting the imminent downfall of Rome (4Ezra 3-14, 2 Baruch and 5th Sibylline Oracle), and in the new translation of the Aramaic Targum of Isaiah 53 the portrait of the Jewish messiah as a victorious warrior had replaced the 'suffering servant'.¹⁰⁵ The proliferation of seditious literature would not have escaped the notice of Emperor Trajan and, together with the sporadic outbreaks of local unrest, must have contributed to his decision to withdraw Roman support for the rehabilitation of the Jews in about 114-115 CE. Trajan's decision then provoked a violent and destructive backlash in Cyrene, Egypt and Cyprus, again inspired by the 'messianic factor'. Only about 15 years later a second revolt broke out in Judaea, again inspired by the 'messianic factor'. This time the leader, Simon Bar Kochba¹⁰⁶ was hailed as messiah by the greatest rabbi of the age, R. Akiba Ben Yosef. The bloodshed and destruction was

¹⁰³ Suetonius, *Domitian*, 12:2.

¹⁰⁴ Goodman, 'The Fiscus Judaicus and Attitudes to Judaism', *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, 2005; 175.

¹⁰⁵ This early 2nd century expression of militant Jewish messianism is generally neglected. For a full examination of the topic see the study by Jostein Ådna, 'The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah', in *The Suffering Servant" Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds B. Janowski and P. Stuhlmacher, Eng trans by D. Bailey, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2004; 189-224.

¹⁰⁶ Simon's real name was Bar Kosiba, which became Bar Kochba ('son of the star') after being proclaimed messiah (according to the messianic prophecy at Num 24,17) and Bar Koziba ('son of the lie') following his death and defeat.

greater than anything witnessed in the land before or since, as the Emperor Hadrian employed all the resources necessary to crush it and then obliterate Jewish presence from Jerusalem and most of Judaea. Whatever level of restoration the Jews had managed to achieve in the period from 96-114 CE, under Nerva's reforms, all was completely destroyed in the Roman suppression of the second and final revolt. The 'messianic factor' that had promised to the Jews, at the end of the first century, a holy and blessed kingdom of Israel on the ashes of the Roman Empire, now turned out to be catastrophically false.¹⁰⁷

On the other hand, the Book of Revelation and the other Johannine writings steered Christians in completely the opposite direction, away from the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple 'made with human hands' and out into the larger world, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and inviting the pagan nations to join the Church, the new Israel. As seen above, the Book of Revelation reflects this mission by presenting the plan of God's salvation in the light of the Christ's first coming, and by revealing how his first coming has changed the significance of the issues linked to Jewish national restoration. In brief, there is no longer any need for a temple or another king-messiah.

However, the prophetic visions of Revelation achieve this crucial modification, not by abolishing the messianic judgment of 'popular prophecy', but by postponing it to the time of Christ's second coming. What the Jews had keenly expected at the end of the first century, on a local level, the Christians now expect at the end of history, on a cosmic and global scale. Far from ridding the world of the 'messianic factor', the Book of Revelation simply postponed the world-shattering event, and reaffirmed that Jesus Christ is the messiah who will come again to judge at the end of history. At his return to perform judgment, he will conquer all his adversaries, chief of whom is the militarily invincible but false messiah, aided by a false prophet and worshipped at a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem—a scenario that has all the appearances of a final pseudo-messianic revival of the undying Jewish nationalist project.

It is surely no coincidence that the conditions that formed the background to John's reception of Christ's Revelation, in 95 CE, reappear on a far greater scale when it comes to be fulfilled at the end of history, only now the Jewish nationalist movement will not be fighting against the dominant political and military power, but will instead be leading it, before finally fighting against Christ himself at his return (Rev 13;17;19). In other words, the Jewish nationalist revival that lay behind the visions of the Book of Revelation at the end of the first century is just a small anticipation of the Jewish nationalist movement that will accompany the fulfilment of its prophecies at the end of history. Developing this insight further, the first century setting of the Book of Revelation gives the right framework for understanding its significance as a prophetic warning of the events immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. Because the historical setting of the Book of Revelation is analogous, in many ways, to the situation prior to judgment at the end of history, the historical setting not only helps to explain the origin of the Book of Revelation, but also its ultimate significance. This, perhaps, is the greatest contribution that the study of the historical background can make to the understanding of the Book of Revelation.

In other ways, too, this study has helped in the comprehension of the text, both its form and content. As mentioned above, the context of a Jewish national revival, inspired by popular

¹⁰⁷ For the importance of 'messianism' as a factor in the origin of the revolts, see Horbury, *Jewish War*, 275-7.

messianic prophecy, explains the dire need for a Christian version of the Jewish prophecies that were gaining popularity at that time among Jews, Christians and even among gentiles.¹⁰⁸ It is probable that many Jewish Christians were returning to the Synagogue on account of the nationalistic hopes inspired by these prophecies. Competition and rivalry between the Church and the Synagogue were tense. In this context, the transmission of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John seems both divine and providential, not only as a specifically Christian view of the Plan of God, but also as an antidote to the uncritical acceptance of, and belief in, the popular messianic prophecies. Written in the formal prophetic style of the time, the Book of Revelation is an effective antidote precisely because it can be trusted: it is a Revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1,1), authenticated by God (1,1.8) and given to John the beloved apostle of Christ (1,1.4.9). Its words are trustworthy and true (19,9; 22.6) and it provides the believer with a complete and coherent view of the divine will for mankind and Christ's central role in the realization of that vision. This emphasis on Revelation's divine origin and authority would have contrasted starkly with the anonymous, or pseudonymous, prophecies transmitted informally, by hearsay, among members of the Synagogue communities.

As was the case then, when the Book of Revelation reinforced Christian faith in the sovereign messiahship of Jesus Christ against the rival messianic claims of Jewish nationalism, so too in these days of rising Jewish nationalism the Book of Revelation has a similar, even more critical, role to play.

It is to be hoped, finally, that the clarification of the historical setting of the Book of Revelation can shed light on the many other writings and events of the time, helping to populate the lacuna that has hitherto existed in our knowledge of the end of the first century and start of the second.

John Ben Daniel,
Jerusalem,
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¹⁰⁸ The rising enthusiasm for a literal fulfilment of the 'popular prophecy' at this time may also explain some rather odd comments of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, indicating that even gentiles were promoting Judaism (proselytizing): "All the same, if anyone should make use of them (the ancient prophets) to propound Judaism to you, do not listen to him. Better hear talk of Christianity from a man who is circumcised than of Judaism from one who is not— though in my judgment both of them alike, if they fail to preach Jesus Christ, are no more than tombstones and graves of the dead, which limit their inscriptions to the names of mere mortal men", Letter to the Philadelphians, 6; in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, Eng trans Maxwell Staniforth, London: Penguin Classics, 1968; 112-3.