Domitian (Part i)

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There has been a significant trend within scholarship to rehabilitate the character and reign of Domitian. Instead of the older image of a delusional tyrant who terrorized Roman aristocracy and the senate, Domitian is now presented as a good administrator whose character was no better or worse than any other emperor. This revision has necessitated a re-evaluation of the historical sources. This article will review the image of Domitian found in the ancient sources and then compare and contrast that with the one produced within some sections of modern scholarship. It will seek to demonstrate that greater weight needs to be given to the works of the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus than is evident in some recent work. It will seek to establish that the older image of Domitian is still one that has considerable merit and deserves renewed consideration.

Introduction

Ancient sources both secular and ecclesiastical have been used to present the Emperor Domitian as a tyrant to Roman aristocracy and as a persecutor of the Church. His reign is viewed as one of increasing terror, particularly towards the end.

In recent times some scholars have sought to rehabilitate the character of the man and his government and have vigorously challenged this historical picture of Domitian. K.H. Waters, whose work has been influential and typical of this process, has sought to present Domitian 'as a moderately decent man'[1]. The

[1] K.H. Waters, 'The Character of Domitian', in *Phoenix* 18, 1964, p.69. See also B.W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian*, London: Routledge, 1992; idem, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order - A Prosopographical Study of Domitian's Relationship with the Senate, AD81-96,* Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979; L.L. Thompson, 'Domitianus Dominus: A Gloss on Statius *Silvae* 1.6.84', in *AJP* 105, 1973, p.469-475;

transformation of Domitian has been so profound, that some sections within scholarship have produced a picture of 'another' Domitian. Instead of a tyrant, Domitian is rehabilitated, becoming a good administrator whose character was no better or worse than any other emperor. The outcome of this revision of Domitian's character and reign has been to place a very large question mark over the older notion that Christians were literally persecuted by him or as a consequence of his reign.

It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that scholarship is now of one mind on this issue. Two notable exceptions are P. Keresztes and B. Reicke[2]. However, the older presentation of Domitian as a tyrant is still found in many modern commentaries on Revelation[3]. Nevertheless, this revision of Domitian raises serious questions. If one were to accept the older presentation of Domitian found in the ancient secular sources, then one could observe an historical setting into which Revelation may be placed. Given the nature of the book and the conflict motif[4] that runs through it, if Domitian was not after all the tyrannical monster that delighted in terrorising opponents, then it could be claimed that his reign is an unsuitable historical setting in which to place Revelation.

R.S. Rogers, 'A Group of Domitianic Treason-Trials', in *CP* 55, 1960 p.19-23; C.H.V. Sutherland, 'The State of the Imperial Treasury at the Death of Domitian', in *JRS* 25, 1935, p.150-162; L.L. Thompson, *The Book of the Revelation,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, ch.6 'Domitian's Reign: History and Rhetoric'. This transformation can also be seen in recent general histories of the Roman Emperor, see M. Grant, *The Roman Emperors* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996.

[2] P. Keresztes, 'The Jews, The Christians, and the Emperor Domitian', in *VC* 27, 1973, p.1-28; B. Reicke, 'The Inauguration of Catholic Martyrdom according to St John the Divine', in *Augustinianum* 20, 1980, p.275-83.

[3] Modern theologians make much more use of the ancient secular sources than perhaps was the case with some older works on Revelation.

[4] R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of the Revelation,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.35ff.

Ancient sources therefore that have a direct bearing on the key issues of debate among scholars must be evaluated to establish their reliability in constructing a profile of Domitian and his reign. One must begin here, because it is impossible to discuss Domitian separately from the sources that have recorded his life. Epigraphic and numismatic evidence may provide invaluable insights to aspects of Domitian's reign, but this type of evidence is not sufficient in itself. One needs to examine what is recorded, for only then is it possible to come to a conclusion about both the Emperor and the worth of such sources. In addition an attempt should be made to construct a profile of the Emperor to see whether his reign is a suitable backdrop to Revelation.

Domitian's reign has been traditionally linked with Revelation because of the claims made concerning his alleged desire to be addressed using divine language. Scholars have noted that the text of Revelation 13v15-17 appears to reflect the ancient religious phenomenon of Emperor-worship. Understanding the historical setting of Revelation will require an investigation of this ancient religious tradition. Scholars from all traditions have recognised the need to understand the historical background to John's imagery, whether it is a preterist who interprets Revelation essentially as a window into the first century of the author, or a futurist who maintains that what John saw historically will find a greater fulfilment in the future. If John is describing the imperial cult in Revelation, then it is necessary to examine this religious tradition of the ancient world, to better understand those passages that appear to reflect such a religious phenomenon.

a. Standard Sources

Thompson[5] helpfully sets out the standard sources for Domitian and his reign as follows:

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[7] Thompson, *The Book of Revelation,* 1990, p.97.

Tacitus

Agricola (98)

Germania (98-99)

Histories (100-110)

Pliny the Younger

Panegyric (100)

Letters (105-9)

Dio Chrysostom (c40-112)

Discourses

Juvenal

Satires (115-27)

Suetonius

Lives of the Caesars (c 120)

Dio Cassius

Roman History (c 215)

b. Evaluating the Standard Sources

Scholars who have argued that Domitian was not a tyrannical monster but rather a competent emperor, using Waters description of him 'a moderately decent man'[6], have raised major questions concerning the quality of the evidence in the standard sources. As a consequence of this historical revision some scholars have

[6] Waters, 'The Character of Domitian', p.69.

questioned the reliability of these ancient sources in retaining suitable evidence with which to construct an accurate picture of Domitian. Thompson rightly observes that the 'standard portrait of Domitian is clearly not drawn by neutral observers'[7]. Waters, however, is much more dogmatic.

When commenting on Pliny's *Panegyric,* Waters is utterly dismissive of its worth stating that 'one might as well reconstruct the character of a politician in, say, a Central American state from the speeches of his chief opponent as treat the *Panegyric* as historical evidence for the character of Domitian'[8]. Although Waters has found Pliny's work flawed, other commentators have used him as a reliable source of information on Domitian[9]. Jones attributes this distortion of Domitian's character to two separate factors; firstly, 'the bias of the literary sources and secondly, the judgmental standards adopted by the aristocracy'[10]. On these points Waters is once more extremely dogmatic and has no hesitation in stating that 'the perversion of the historical tradition is to be found in the relations of Domitian with the Senate'[11].

Unlike his father, Domitian rarely attended the Senate[12]. This, however, is not altogether surprising. Vespasian unlike Nero was of relatively humble origins. Therefore it was extremely important that he had a reasonable relationship with the governing classes,

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[7] Thompson, *The Book of the Revelation,* 1990, p.101.

[8] Waters, 'The Character of Domitian', p.50.

[9] For example, Grant, *The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome 31BC - AD 476,* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988, who uses Pliny several times as a source in his short account of Domitian's reign.

[10] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian,* 1992, p.196.

[11] Waters, 'The Character of Domitian', p.65.

[12] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian,* p.22.

especially the Senate[13]. This is not to suggest that his relationship with the Senate was perfect; it was not. Good relations with the Senate were a means to an end for Vespasian, who wanted to establish a dynasty - a notion that would have made the Senate uneasy. Vespasian was so determined to achieve this that he is reported to have said 'either my son shall be my successor, or no one will'[14]. He made no secret of his intentions, and displayed them on the coinage issued throughout his reign[15]. Despite some senatorial dislike of this adoption of the dynastic principle, the transition of power to Titus upon his father's death succeeded unchallenged[16]. The reign of Titus in comparison to that of his father's was short, twenty-six months and twenty days[17]. It is therefore difficult to assess his relationship with the Senate. Jones, however, does tentatively suggest that it was good, liking it to that of Trajan and Hadrian which had also both been positive relationships[18].

Domitian, in contrast, was in a different position to his father or indeed his brother. He was the third in the Flavian dynasty, with both father and brother having been deified already by the state. He did not really need therefore, the legitimacy of the Senate for his reign. Real power had already been transmitted to the dynasty. No one had seriously doubted who would succeed Titus. Although real power rested with Domitian, he appears to have made a genuine effort to win senatorial support during the first few years of his

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[13] See P.A.L. Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975, ch.12.

[14] Grant, *The Roman Emperors,* p.56.

[15] K. Scott, *The Imperial Cult under the Flavians,* Stuttgart-Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1936, ch.2, discusses Vespasian's use of coinage.

[16] Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, p.255.

[17] B.W. Jones, *The Emperor Titus,* London: Croom Helm, 1984, p.154.

[18] Jones, *The Emperor Titus,* p.125.

reign. Suetonius states that the start of Domitian's reign was reasonable enough (*Dom* 3). The last years of his reign, however, are described as being markedly different. Suetonius records how his rule became an 'object of terror and hatred to all' (*Dom* 14.1). Tacitus describes how the Senate-House was besieged, with 'the Senate surrounded by armed men, ... [and] consulars butchered' (*Agr* 45). By the end of his reign, Domitian had executed at least eleven senators of consular rank and exiled many others.

Jones and Waters are correct in maintaining that the Senate would be biased in its judgement of Domitian's reign. This is hardly surprising if the sources containing the record of his reign can be trusted. The issue therefore that needs to be addressed is the reliability of the major literary witnesses of this Emperor and his reign.

1. Tacitus. Tacitus, perhaps the greatest Roman historian, was born after the accession of Nero in AD54. His adolescent years were during a time when the Roman world was immersed in civil war. Although quite young at the dawning of the Flavian period, Tacitus lived and continued to live close to the corridors of power throughout most of his life[19]. It was during the Flavian dynasty that Tacitus was to enjoy an extraordinary career[20]. Despite this, Tacitus claimed that he mentally blotted out the fifteen years of Domitian's reign because of its tyranny[21]. Tacitus had served Domitian loyally and had been rewarded generously. Yet, he hated Domitian with every fibre of his being[22]. Commenting on this, Mellor speaks of the

[19] R. Mellor, *Tacitus,* London: Routledge, 1993, p.19.

[20] Tacitus attributes Vespasian as bestowing his first public honours upon him. During the short reign of Titus, he was elector *quaestor*, which consequently gave him membership of the Senate. Under Domitian, he was made *praetor* and admitted to one of the elite priestly colleges .

[21] Mellor, *Tacitus,* p.8.

[22] Mellor, *Tacitus,* p.40.

scars of those years marking Tacitus' works[23]. Why would a man who was honoured by Domitian - and the other Flavian Emperors - be so hostile towards him?

The answer to this question is not a simple one. It may be as Mellor suggests that Tacitus felt the shame of being a survivor or the guilt of being an unwilling collaborator. Perhaps it may be because he hated tyrants, all tyrants, but especially Tiberius, Nero and Domitian. Tacitus saw how Domitian had revived imperial tyranny and prohibited free speech, while at the same time seeing the Senate degenerate into an almost meaningless institution. For a scholar, orator and member of the Senate, Domitian's reign must have been virtually intolerable, even though he sought a middle path, something he called *moderatio*. Does this mean that we should seriously question the accuracy of Tacitus' history of Domitian's reign?

Mellor is very definite on this point. He states that 'Tacitus certainly held strong views on the personalities and polices of the imperial court, but there is no evidence that he invented or suppressed the facts .... if the facts are as accurate as possible , we see the advocate's hand arranging the evidence or the prosecutor's voice urging the jury of posterity to find for conviction as any attorney might do today'[24]. How then are we to regard his works and are they suitable sources of evidence on which to construct a portrait of Domitian?

Partially in answer to this question Mellor pleads that 'we cannot judge Tacitus by the dry academic history of the later twentieth century .... Tacitus wrote neither scientific history, nor a bare chronicle of events'[25]. Mellor is correct in this observation. Tacitus was writing for posterity, which is wider than twentieth century

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[23] Mellor, *Tacitus*, p.8.

[24] See p.35f, where Mellor addresses this specific issue .

[25] Mellor, *Tacitus*, p.45.

academia. While we may enjoy collecting facts, Tacitus was intent on delving deeper, seeking a moral meaning being convinced that history held *exempla* for future generations. The suggestion that Tacitus hatred of Domitian undermines the value of his evidence is based upon a dubious premise. The evidence of a witness is not invalidated simply because of his/her extreme dislike of the accused. One may hate a person charged with the most heinous of crimes without necessarily falsifying the facts. If this were not the case, how could a rape victim give evidence against the man who violated her? Tacitus hated Domitian because he hated tyrants, no matter who they were - whether Tiberius, Nero or Domitian. His dislike of Domitian was the result of an ideological revulsion of Domitian's tyrannical use of his absolute power. At least Trajan, whose power was no less absolute than Domitian's, displayed a benevolent veneer to his regime. It is, however, significant that Tacitus never concluded his promised work on Trajan, adding it into his work on the lives of the Caesars. While Tacitus's work must be read with the understanding of his hatred of Domitian, it is very unsatisfactory to dismiss his record of Domitian as easily as some have sought to do.

2. Suetonius. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was probably born during the year of the four Emperors - AD69. Wallace-Hadrill explains that during the reign of Trajan and under the sponsorship of Pliny the Younger, Suetonius began to make his literary debut[26]. Although his debut was hesitant, his work the *'Twelve Caesars'* reflects a writer whose reputation is established[27]. Wallace-Hadrill, described the work of Suetonius as 'not history', but an attempt at a middle path between history and biography[28]. He observes that 'when an individual plays a dominant role in historical narrative of the

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[26] A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: The Scholar and his Caesars,* London: Duckworth, 1983, p.4

[27] Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius,* p.8. Although he makes the observation that Suetonius lived somewhat under the shadow of Tacitus, p.2.

[28] Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius,* p.8-10.

period.... history is most likely to take the form of biography and biography of history[29]. Suetonius' response was to write 'not history'. Tacitus had written history and Suetonius was far too modest or honest to challenge Tacitus[30]; rather than challenge Tacitus' work, his intention was to complement it. If he approached his work from a different and yet complementary angle to Tacitus' work, his basic goal was the same. The past for the Romans contained important lessons for present and future generations. The application, however, of this common notion in Tacitus and Suetonius is important. Tacitus, writing as a Roman historian, commented on how people ought to behave. Suetonius on the other hand 'analyses how the Caesars behaved comparing this against the assumptions about imperial behaviour. Hadrian could well have read the Caesars out of interest, but not to be taught lessons'[31]. From the careful structure of his work and the deliberate motivation to create his own genre[32], Suetonius' work on the *Lives of the Caesars* was intended to be, and indeed was, received as a major literary work in the Roman world.

It is therefore somewhat astonishing to read the dismissive fashion in which J.C. Wilson treats the ancient scholar and his work. Citing L.L. Thompson's work on Domitian and Suetonius description of him, Wilson virtually dismisses Suetonius' work by calling him 'that most gossipy of all the Roman historians' and dismissing him as an employee of the Antonines[33]. Almost unbelievably he then asserts that 'Suetonius gains favour for them from his readers by

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[29] Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius,* p.8.

[30] Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius,* p.9

[31] Wallace-Hadrill *Suetonius,* p.24.

[32] Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius,* p.10.

[33] J.C. Wison, 'The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation', in *NTS* 39, 1993, p.595-596.

showing their Flavian predecessors in the worst possible light. Suetonius has virtually nothing good to say about Domitian'[34]. While Thompson goes to some lengths to cast doubt upon the reliability of the ancient sources, he does not go as far as Wilson does. The question that must now be addressed is how does Suetonius depict Domitian and his reign?

It is clear from reading his section on Domitian that Suetonius knew the Emperor and experienced the effects of his reign (*Dom* 12). Far from having nothing good to say about Domitian, Suetonius includes in his portrayal of him evidence of the Emperor's reign that was clearly intended to give a balanced view of the man and his administration. For example, Suetonius states 'he was most conscientious in dispensing justice' and that he 'kept such a tight hold on his city magistrates and provincial governors that the general standard of justice rose to an unprecedented high level' (*Dom* 8). If Wilson is correct in his assertion that Suetonius has virtually nothing good to say about Domitian, these comments by Suetonius on Domitian's early attempts at dispensing justice appear to place a serious question mark over his dismissal of Suetonius as a reliable source. Neither can it be said that this is an isolated example. Suetonius also records Domitian's edict forbidding the further planting of vines in Italy because of the neglect of the corn-lands, which may be seen as evidence of an Emperor who was aware of the practical needs of a people. Suetonius also records that 'no one thought of him as in the least greedy or mean either before, or for some years after his accession - in fact, he gave frequent signs of self-restraint and even generosity, treating his friends with great consideration and always insisting that, above all, they should do nothing mean' (*Dom* 9). Even in his closing observations, Suetonius still reflects on some good features i.e. his appearance (*Dom* 18); his natural ability with a bow (*Dom* 19) and his stocking of the burnt-out libraries (*Dom* 18). Even his reference to Domitian's sexual habits is more a matter of fact than the reflections of a gossip intent on destroying his victim (*Dom* 22). To the average Roman,

[34] Wilson, 'The Problem of the Domitianic Date', p.596.

Suetonius comments on Domitian's sexual behaviour would hardly raise an eyebrow compared with some of his predecessors.

Suetonius, however, does paint a broader picture of Domitian, than that already presented. He does say that Domitian was cruel (*Dom* 10.2); cunning (*Dom* 11); greedy for money (*Dom* 12); vain (*Dom* 13); and that he was hated (*Dom* 14) and generally describes a man who terrorised the Senate and the elite of Rome. That he paints a black picture of his reign is in no doubt. What is called into question is the reliability of his portrayal of Domitian. Scholars like Wilson, Waters and Thompson, have caricatured the work of this ancient scholar by their over generalisations concerning his work, dismissing him as a paid employee of the Antonines and attacking his character by labelling him a gossip. It must be admitted that Suetonius recorded stories that no one other than Domitian could have known about, such as the Emperor alone catching flies. If he was alone, how did anyone see him? The saying, however, of Vivius Crispus (*Dom* 3) seems to indicate that it was a popular story during Domitian's reign.

It is unacceptable to dismiss the account of Suetonius simply because he wrote under the patronage of Pliny, Trajan and Hadrian, as though his work must therefore be necessarily suspect. The account of Domitian's character and reign found in Suetonius' *Caesars* accords well with how Jones considers the various components of Domitian's character and reign[35]. Suetonius presents a picture of a man who began his reign reasonably well, attempting good administration and governmental practices but who progressively became violent, cruel and finished his reign as a

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[35] Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order,* considers Domitian's life and reign under these headings: 1 The Early Years; 2 The Middle Years; 3 The Revolt of Saturninus; 4 The Last Years. Although Jones' later work, *The Emperor Domitian,* presents Domitian in a slightly more positive fashion, his division of Domitian's life in his 1979 work accords well with the description of his reign in Suetonius.

tyrant terrorising all who opposed him - or all whom he imagined opposed him.

Neither should Suetonius' dismissal of Domitian's military actions be cited as evidence of his bias against the Emperor. Domitian's military actions in Britain and the strengthening of the German legions were the actions of a prudent man. They would not have created much enthusiasm back in Rome, in contrast to Titus' stage-managed victory over Jerusalem[36]. Suetonius' comments about Domitian's unnecessary military campaigns (*Dom* 6) may simply reflect his lack of understanding concerning military strategy. Although Suetonius' account of Domitian must be read against the backdrop of his relationship to the Senate and the Antonines, his presentation of the Emperor is not as unbalanced as some authorities have suggested.

Portrait of Domitian[37]

Domitian (Titus Flavius Domitianus) was born in AD 51, and was the second son of Vespasian and Flavia Domitilla. Unlike his brother Titus, who saw court life through his boyhood friendship with Claudius' son Britannicus, Domitian's early years saw a decline in the Flavian fortunes[38]. By the time of his eighteenth birthday, however, the family fortunes had fully recovered. This period of political and financial difficulty for Vespasian did not seriously damage Domitian's education as both Tacitus and

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[36] A. Massie, makes this claim in his work, *The Caesars,* London: Penguin Group, 1983, p.20.

[37] For a fuller and more detailed account of his life see the standard sources especially the work of Jones, *The Emperor Domitian.*

[38] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian*, p.9, however, warns against laying too much stress on the decline in the family fortunes as a contributing factor in the development of his character. Massie, *The Caesars,* in contrast, cites this as a significant cause stating 'it was a childhood and adolescence which had left him deficient in social ease, reticent, even misanthropic', p.215.

Suetonius record his erudite capability (*Hist* 4.40; *Dom* 12.3; 18.2; 9.1). Evidence of competence in the art of poetry can be detected in the poems he wrote on the capture of Jerusalem[39].

One area of disagreement among scholars is Domitian's relationship with his father, particularly after Vespasian's rise to the throne. In his survey of Domitian's life and reign, M. Grant presents Vespasian's youngest son as 'seething with embittered grievances and frustrations'[40]. Massie similarly accepts the suggestion that Vespasian kept his younger son in the background[41] thereby creating the environment for these frustrations to emerge. Evidence to support this, apart from Suetonius' remarks, is usually sought from Vespasian's refusal to allow his son any military experience. Although Domitian continually asked his father for permission to be involved in military operations, his father always refused to give his permission. This situation, it is argued, gives us an insight into the strength of the relationship Vespasian had with Domitian as opposed to Titus, who was involved by his father in the defeat of Jerusalem.

Some scholars however, have sought to present this father-son relationship in a different light. Jones and Thompson rightly modify the traditional picture by pointing to the impressive epigraphic and numismatic evidence that exists and that may shed light on Vespasian's relationship with Domitian. Far from keeping him in the background, Vespasian included busts of both his sons on his coinage[42]. The implication being that both sons were important to Vespasian's dynastic plans. This is further borne out by Jones' careful research into the number of consulships received by Titus

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[39] See Jones, *The Emperor Domitian,* p.12.

[40] Grant, *The Roman Emperors,* p.60.

[41] Massie, *The Caesars,* p.215.

[42] See Scott, *The Imperial Cult,* p.23; Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order,* p.11.

and Domitian[43]. Although Titus was publicly groomed to follow his father, Vespasian while not wanting Domitian to be seen as rivalling Titus, marked his younger son out as a future emperor through the various consulships Domitian received[44].

Despite Vespasian's dynastic plans, it must be admitted that Domitian himself may have felt somewhat overshadowed by his elder brother. Titus had experience of the royal court early in his youth and was associated with the military victory in Israel. In contrast, Domitian had neither experience of the royal court or a significant military victory. Vespasian and Titus were soldiers and had shared common experiences, whereas Domitian was not a soldier and had no experience of battle, let alone receiving battle honours. Therefore, while Vespasian cannot be said to have ignored or belittled Domitian, it is reasonable to suggest that, Domitian's preference for solitude and his difficulty in being sociable was as a result of his father's policy of preparing Titus first for the office of emperor. It may be argued therefore that Domitian's youth to a large degree shaped the type of character he would develop in later life.

If his relationship with his father is a matter for disagreement between scholars, the issue of his relationship with Titus is rather more definite. Both Tacitus and Suetonius portray Domitian as plotting against his brother (Tact. *Hist* 4.52; Suet. *Dom* 2.3). In his work on Titus, Jones highlights two distinct though closely related allegations; firstly, 'Domitian saw himself as his brother's equal in rank and status in 69 and in 79' and secondly, 'in their personal relationship, mutual antipathy was often evident'[45]. This observation by Jones is both succinct and accurate. Suetonius records how Domitian felt that Titus had cheated him out of a half-share in the Empire by having Vespasian's will altered (*Dom* 2.3). When Titus died - probably not as a result of Domitian's actions -

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[43] Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order,*p.11.

[44] Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order,* p.12.

[45] B.W. Jones, *The Emperor Titus,* London: Croom Helm, 1984, p.118.

Domitian assumed full control of the empire, without many tears on his part. If Tactius and Suetonius are even partially correct in their presentation of Domitian as being hostile and scheming towards his brother, it may be possible to develop a profile of a man who not only felt second best to his elder brother, but who was bitterly resentful at not receiving a more significant role during Titus' brief reign. This coupled with a feeling of underachieving, in contrast to his father and brother, may have contributed to the feeling of insecurity that manifested itself in his paranoid obsession about plots against his life (Seut. *Dom* 21).

Domitian came to the throne in September 81 and reigned until his assassination on the 18 September 96[46]. Although some have raised questions as to Domitian's experience and ability[47], he appears to have displayed considerable ability to personally control the affairs of the Roman Empire very effectively. Evidence of this can be seen in his important, though unglamorous[48] military campaigns. In his first campaign against the Chatti, he displayed according to Grant, 'an ingenious combination of forward offensive actions and defensive fortress construction'[49]. It is true that his military campaigns in Germany left him open to later ridicule[50], however, these actions displayed Domitian's strategic awareness and his

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[46] See Barnard, 'Clement of Rome and the Persecution of Domitian', p.251.

[47] See Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order,* p.7ff.

[48] Massie, *The Caesars*, p.219; Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, p.61.

[49] Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, p.61.

[50] Thompson, *The Book of the Revelation,* cites Dio Cassius who commented that Domitian's campaigns 'filled him with contempt as if he had achieved some great success' (67.3.5). Suetonius is unequivocal about the importance of some of these campaigns in the eyes of many in Rome 'some of Domitian's campaigns, the Chattian one for instance, were quite unjustified by military necessity'. He does, however, continue 'but not so against the Samaritans'(*Dom* 6.1).

ability to secure what had previously been Rome's weak link in its northern frontier. These wise and prudent actions were to be rewarded when the Samartians crossed the Danube in 84; with his Rhine position strengthened, he could focus on the Danube, personally leading two expeditions across the river to restore order.

His administrative skills and further evidence of a lucid mind can also be seen in three further important changes he made to military policy and army life. Firstly, during the reigns of Vespasian and Titus, Rome had carried out an aggressive expansionist policy in Britain with Agricola[51] being responsible for a series of successful operations in Wales and southern Scotland. Rather than continue this policy, which would have required greater finance and been a greater drain on resources, Domitian halted this expansionist policy. He ordered a comprehensive withdrawal from Scotland, dismantling all the northern Scottish forts[52]. This policy reversal made him unpopular with many generals and again left him open to the cutting remarks of Tactius (*Agricola* 39.2). It does, however, indicate how Domitian was able to pinpoint priorities in the empire, for having scaled down military operations in Britain he was able to strengthen Rome's forces in Germany. This decision indicates something of his resolve and determination to make unpopular choices to strengthen the empire.

Secondly, he raised the army's wages by thirty three percent. It had been many years since the army had received a pay rise. Having seen the role the army played in the civil war - the year of the four emperors - and indeed the rise of his father to the throne, this practical move reveals a man who had keen sense of safeguarding his position. While some have pointed to the fall in the value of currency as being grounds for this pay raise[53], it must be set

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[51] Agricola was the father-in-law of Tacitus.

[52] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian,* the section on War - 'Britain' p.131-135.

[53] Sutherland, 'The State of the Imperial Treasury at the Death of Domitian', p.150-162.

alongside Domitian's personal knowledge of the role and importance of the army.

Thirdly, Domitian's awareness of the importance of the army can also be identified in his institution of 'a new kind of army personnel bureau in which full records relating to every centurion were kept up to date. This enabled him to make personal decisions on all their appointments, promotions and transfers after considering the evidence'[54]. This bureau was not simply some form of micro-management, by a meddling emperor. Rather, it is the action of a man who understood the importance of the army and how it works. Through his personal involvement in appointments and promotions in the army, Domitian's control over the army increased, hence further strengthening his position.

Those who have sought to rehabilitate the character of Domitian have succeeded in presenting him as a capable administrator who also had a keen military mind and whose polices were continued by his successors Nerva and Trajan. Although Domitian was hated by many in the upper-classes of Roman society, the actual mechanics of the empire, which had been enhanced by Domitian's skills, were left in place and built upon by future administrations.

A further aspect of this rehabilitation has been B.W. Jones' work on Domitian's relationship with the Senate and appointments to it. In his writings Dio, portrays Domitian as murdering senators as early as AD83[55]. This picture is further developed by Tacitus and Suetonius presenting the emperor, particularly in the later years of his reign, as being intolerant and aggressive towards the Senate. Jones has shown that the view that Domitian restricted senatorial promotion is unfounded. His work has shown that Domitian made extensive use of appointments. Furthermore, the actual numbers recorded of senators murdered during Domitian's reign has been

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[54] Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, p.62.

[55] Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order*, p.7.

shown to be relatively small. Jones calls it a small percentage of his 600 senators[56].

Evaluating the character of either the man or his administration however, must involve more than counting the numbers actually murdered and whether Domitian had a lucid mind and displayed excellent administration skills. Those who have sought to rehabilitate Domitian have only succeeded in demonstrating that he was one of the best administrators who ever governed the empire. What they have failed to do, is to demonstrate that Domitian could very well have been both an able administrator and a tyrannical despot - like Stalin and Hitler. A further examination of the man will reveal another side of Domitian. It will demonstrate how a man using his keen mind could create an environment of terror and fear, where through key examples of brutality his reign could easily be known and characterised as one of terror[57].

Suetonius comments that although the early part of his reign had many favourable aspects to it, namely his early attitude to dispensing justice, 'his good-will and self-restraint were not, however, destined to continue long, and the cruel streak in him soon appeared' (*Dom* 10). Indications of this can be seen in his treatment of the three Vestal Virgins in AD83 and Cornelia, a Chief-Virgin some years later. In AD83 three Vestal Virgins were found guilty of immoral behaviour and executed by the traditional method, with their lovers being sent into exile. Some years later Cornelia, according to Suetonius, who had been acquitted at her first trail was

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[56] Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order*, p.85 . See also, R. Rogers, 'A Group of Domitianic Treason Trials', *Classical Philology* 55, 1960, p.19-23.

[57] As Barnard, 'Clement of Rome and the Persecution of Domitian', observes, 'administrative and military prowess is of little avail if the administrator is a tyrant for then constitutional safeguards can be swept aside at will and tyranny introduced by the backdoor', p.252.

re-arrested burned alive with her lovers being clubbed to death in the Comitium. To Roman society, this was gratuitous cruelty[58].

An interesting example of the fear he exerted within the Senate, is the story of a group of men brought before the Senate on the charge of treason. Suetonius claims that Domitian stated that the response of the Senate to this case would be taken as an indication of his popularity in the House and recorded how he 'easily got them condemned to "old-style execution". However, he seems to have become all at once appalled by the cruelty involved, because he pleaded to have the sentence modified' (*Dom* 11). The exact words of Suetonius are worth noting, 'gentlemen of the Senate, I know that you will not readily grant me anything I ask, but let me beg one favour of you, pray allow these men to choose the manner of their deaths' (*Dom* 11). The striking features of this episode are; firstly, that Suetonius being a Senator and whose readership was primarily senatorial would have recorded such a shameful incident of cowardice and complicity in something so distasteful. The existence of this story would be inexplicable if it was not an accurate presentation of a well-known incident. Secondly, Suetonius appears to have a particular interest in this story by giving one of the few direct quotations in his work on Domitian. Clearly he wishes his readers to view this as a historical event. Thirdly, the extreme sentence passed by the Senate in response to Domitian's popularity test indicates the fear, or terror, that gripped those who sat in the House. It is unlikely that Domitian would have adopted this approach if the Senate had not been completely submissive and certain that he could have these men executed by the Senate. The extreme response of the Senate, contained in the severity of the manner of execution, also indicates the fear within the House of what the consequences would be if Domitian did not get his way.

This grip of fear upon the ruling classes was further tightened by Domitian's extreme use of confiscation legislation, introduced to

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[58] This example is only a flavour of the stories recorded by the standard sources of the appalling cruelty that marked the later part of Domitian's reign.

acquire money and property. He was engaged in a building process designed to emphasise his greatness[59]. In conjunction with this he also threw the most lavish of entertainments. As Suetonius remarks, 'this was more than he could afford' (*Dom* 12). To meet his financial needs he resorted to every means possible to balance the treasury accounts[60]. When one considers the pay rise to the army, his expensive public and private building programme, and considering Jones' observation that the imperial treasury was still able to work effectively under Nerva, the claims made by Suetonius and Pliny of excessive confiscations must be taken seriously.

When considering his motivation in pursuing these confiscations, Jones quotes from Pliny who believed that Domitian was motivated by envy rather than need. 'He possessed far more than he needed but always wanted more. It was fatal at that time ... to own a spacious house or an attractive property' (*Pan* 50.5). While envy may indeed be a part of the motivation, Massie gives another possible rationale, 'financial pressure was a means of cowing the opposition'[61]. Domitian's approach to increasing the revenue in the

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[59] Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, notes as examples, the building of a new residence on the Palatine Hill 'to express his exalted conception of the imperial role', p.63; a villa outside the city overlooking the waters of lake Albano, which had in its grounds, a theatre and an amphitheatre. For a detailed account of all Domitian's building projects see Jones, *The Emperor Domitian,* p.79-98.

[60] It must be noted that Jones, *The Emperor Domitian,* 1992, p.77, has highlighted the extreme differences in presentation of the economy under Domitian between Gsell and Syme. His observation that he left sufficient funds for Nerva to exercise a normal economic programme, however, does not negate the means by which he achieved this.

[61] Massie, *The Caesars,* p.225. Further evidence of the excessive lengths to which Domitian went in order to acquire revenue can be seen in the *ficus Iudaicus*, a tax levied on all Jews. Vespasian introduced the tax for the first time subsequent to the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Up to this time Jews were exempt from paying a tax for the benefit of the temple of Capitoline Jupiter. With their temple destroyed and as a price for leaving the Jew's privileges, national identity and religion intact,

treasury further adds to the picture of a reign that was marked, particularly the later part, by fear and terror.

A further aspect of Domitian's character which must be considered is his alleged desire to be called Lord God (*Seut* 13) *Dominus et Deus*. Those who have sought to rehabilitate the man and his reign have endeavoured to minimise or explain away this specific issue. Jones for instance, acknowledges that many scholars have accepted the claim that he insisted on being addressed in this fashion. But, after a brief consideration of the evidence[62], he concludes that 'Domitian was both intelligent and committed to the tradition religion. He obviously knew that he was not a God, and, whilst he did not ask or demand to be addressed as one, he did not actively discourage the few flatters who did'[63]. Jones' assertion that Domitian did not demand to be addressed as a god, does not give satisfactory consideration to the comments made by Suetonius. Similarly, his dismissal of Statius and Martial, and their writings, by calling them flatters is excessively simplistic and does nothing to address this source of evidence. Indeed it may be argued that they caught the political mood of the court and were promoting 'the cult

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Vespasian introduced the *ficus Iudaicus*. As M. Smallwood states 'it was a shrewd and humiliating blow which he dealt to pious Jews when he made them in effect purchase the right to worship Jahweh by a subscription to Jupiter'. See 'Domitian's Attitude Toward the Jews and Judaism', in *Classical Philology* 51.1, 1956, p.2. During Domitian's reign this tax was rigorously exacted. Under Vespasian it was paid by practising Jews. However, as Smallwood, asserts that, motivated by hostility toward the Jews and Judaism and his need of money widened the criteria of those who had to pay the tax, p.23. During his reign many were accused of living a Jewish life and thereby faced the threat of payment even though they were not practising Jews or Jewish proselytes. Although the tax was exacted long after Trajan, Nerva issued an edict forbidding this abuse.

[62] In contrast to other issues his treatment of this issue is rather brief and hardly exhaustive.

[63] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian*,p.109.

of personality' already freely acknowledged there[64]. Before seeking to comment on this issue, the evidence found in the various sources should be considered.

Suetonius observed about Domitian that 'arrogantly he began a letter, which his procurators were to circulate, with the words: "Our Lord God instructs you to do this!" and "Lord God" became his regular title both in writing and conversation' (*Dom* 13). These comments are supported by Dio (27.4.7) and the later writers Aurelius Victor, Eutropius and Orosius[65]. Although Statius noted that on at least one occasion Domitian rejected the title[66], Scott has demonstrated that he frequently used the word *dominus* when referring to the emperor[67]. Statius' contemporary Martial, expressly calls Domitian *dominus et deus*, although there are occasions, as Scott highlights, when this title is not used[68]. However, Scott has demonstrated that the poets did not hesitate to ascribe to Domitian the attributes of godhood[69]. They depicted Domitian as possessing *numen*, a divine power that manifests itself in different ways[70].

With such an impressive list of Roman sources (Suetonius, Dio, Aurelius Victor, Eutrpoius, Orosius, Statius, Martial and Juvenal) it seems incredible that scholars such as Thompson, Waters and Jones can maintain that; 1] 'there is no evidence contemporary with

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[64] A. Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae,* Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983, p.45, 53.

[65] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian*, p.109.

[66] See Thompson, *The Book of the Revelation,* p.106.

[67] Scott, *The Imperial Cult*, p.104-105. Thompson's work, *The Book of the Revelation,* has sought to challenge Scott's presentation of this issue.

[68] Scott, *The Imperial Cult*, p106.

[69] Scott, *The Imperial Cult*, p113-125.

[70] Scott, *The Imperial Cult*, p116.

Domitian to support the post-Domitian claims that he required titles appropriate to a tyrant or that he shifted from principate to dominate'[71]; 2] 'Domitian disliked flatters and discouraged dilators'[72]; 3] that 'he obviously knew that he was not a God'[73]. In order for these scholars to make these assertions it is necessary to ignore the evidence of Suetonius, relegate Statius and Martial to the level of grovelling flatters, who sought only personal gain and advantage, and be determined to reject the overwhelming and unanimous evidence that presents Domitian as having serious delusional flaws.

In assessing the arguments presented by Thompson, Waters and Jones, it is interesting that none offer any suggestions as to why Suetonius makes these references or why they are suspect; other than the inference that because it is Suetonius it must necessarily be suspect. If there were no other sources where it is recorded that these titles were given publicly to Domitian, then one could begin to understand why caution is urged in accepting this evidence from Suetonius. However, as Jones admits, even given that Dio supports the report of Seutonius - not to mention the references in the poets - any rejection of Suetonius' witness must be based on stronger grounds.

That the argument has not really moved forward in the past years is demonstrated in Beale's recent commentary on Revelation[74] in which he examines Thompson's arguments. His assertion that Domitian's alleged demand that he be addressed as 'Lord and God' finds no documentation in sources dating from the time of Domitian's reign itself may be true, but this is not the whole story.

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[71] Thompson, 'Domitianus Dominus: A Gloss on Statius *Silvae* 1.6.84', p.475.

[72] Waters, 'The Character of Domitian', p.67.

[73] Jones, *The Emperor Domitian*, p.109.

[74] G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation,* Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1999, p.9-12.

There is evidence of its use as a means of flattery. Beale also suggests that it is possible that while Domitian did not require the divine title as a policy, there may have been times when it was called upon as a way of expressing loyalty. The evidence of Pliny shows that this was the case only a few years later in Trajan's reign. As Scott had done before him, Beale reminds his readers of the existence of passages from Statius, Juvenal, Martial and Silius Italicus, as well as inscriptional and numismatic evidence from Asia Minor, that attest to people addressing Domitian as a deity. He points out that even Thompson cites Quintilian, a contemporary of Domitian's, who refers to the Emperor as a god. This contradicts his own assessment of Quintilian on the same page[75]. Beale is attracted to Scott's view, denied by Thompson, that continual flattery probably affected the Emperor's self-image and he came to have an increasingly inflated view of himself. Beale explains that Thompson does acknowledge that over the course of the Empire there was an increasing tendency to emphasize the Emperor's deity. Yet inconsistently 'does not allow this judgement to affect his view that Domitian was no different from earlier emperors in his claim to deity and his policy of persecution'.[76] E. P. Janzen has asserted from his study of the numismatic evidence that coins minted during Domitian's reign reveal escalating delusions of grandeur, including claims to deity which exceed that of former Emperors. This evidence on the one hand confirms negative evaluations of Domitian by the majority of Roman writers and on the other calls for a reevaluation of Thompson's assertions about the ancient sources, since he has not interacted with numismatic sources.[77]

Secondly the suggestion that Domitian disliked flatters and discouraged dilators must also be seriously challenged. In his work

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[75] Thompson, *The Book of the Revelation,* 1990, p.105.

[76] Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p.12.

[77] E .P. Janzen, 'The Jesus of the Apocalypse Wears the Emperor's Clothes', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 1994*, ed. E. H. Lovering, Attlanta: Scholars, 1994, p. 637-661.

on Statius, Hardie maintains that both Statius and Martial had privileged access to the Emperor's court where their poetry was probably recited. Indeed he further suggests that 'it was natural that an Emperor who was interested in poetry should encourage the attention of two of the most prominent Latin poets of the time'[78]. However, Domitian's interest in Statius and Martial's poetry was more than that of a keen lyricist. As Hardie notes, 'Domitian used Martial and Statius for directly propagandist purposes .... the poetry of Statius and Martial appears to have assisted in the projection of Domitian as the strong leader of a united and devoted state; they played their part'[79]. If Hardie is correct in his evaluation of both Statius and Martial's position and function within Domitian's court, the suggestion that Domitian disliked flatters is difficult to understand. Why would Domitian encourage both poets by giving them access to the royal court and using them as propagandists for his reign, if he disliked flatters? It may be argued that, rather than simply flattering to gain or keep favour, it is easier, however, to accept the suggestion that encouraged by the Emperor's attitude and response, both played a prominent part in the promotion of the imperial cult.

Thirdly, Jones offers no argument to substantiate his assertion that Domitian obviously knew he was not God. Is it obvious that he knew he was not a God? Since Gaius thought he was a god, why shouldn't Domitian? Even if it were obvious that Domitian knew this, why did he permit Statius and Martial to use divine language concerning him? Given his position and power he had the right and the authority to end or discourage them or anyone else from doing so. Although Thompson, Waters and Jones have sought to minimise the issue, or indeed explain it away, the evidence that Domitian encouraged, promoted and permitted the worship of his genius must be carefully weighed when constructing a profile of this man.

Conclusions

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[78] Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae,* p.46.

[79] Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae*, p.46.

The attempt to rehabilitate the character of Domitian through an unreasonable questioning of the reliability of the ancient sources is unsatisfactory. There is a consistent picture of Domitian that runs throughout the standard sources that cannot be ignored or minimised by dismissing them as either paid employees, as in the case of Tacitus and Suetonius, or flatters, as in the case of the poets Statius and Martial. Of course it is reasonable to recognise that personal prejudice will effect the picture presented, as no one is free from prejudice. However, rather than dismissing these ancient sources as unreliable, it is possible to still regard their evidence as valuable and important insights into the life of Domitian, but read with an awareness of personal prejudice. Otherwise, how can we ever hope to make any meaningful investigation into most of ancient history.

The picture that emerges of Domitian is of an Emperor that lived to some extent in the shadow of his father and elder brother. It is reasonable to suggest that Vespasian's attitude towards his youngest son, especially when he was emperor, owed more to his dynastic plans than that of a loving father-son relationship. Watching his brother being groomed for highest office in preference to himself, most likely created a feeling of resentment towards his brother Titus than was never resolved. Therefore, when Domitian came to the throne following the death of his brother, it is possible that he felt that he had something to prove. Consequently the beginning of his reign was regarded favourably by Suetonius compared to the later stages.

The old maxim, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' would appear to be applicable in the case of Domitian. It is not easy to live in the shadow of great men, especially when they have been deified. Whether it was as a result of his childhood, or a sense of inadequacy borne out of resentment at his father's preference for Titus to succeed the throne, or being corrupted by having unrivalled power, Domitian reign's underwent a radical change. There is no reason why, with a healthy awareness of the problems involved in doing so, we cannot accept the position that Domitian changed into a tyrannical despot who terrorised the Roman aristocracy. Indeed it could be argued that Roman society faced the worst of all scenarios; a tyrannical despot endowed with

an extremely capable mind and blessed with excellent administration skills. Those who have sought to rehabilitate Domitian's character have failed to address this possibility. Instead their investigation into his character has revolved around his administration skills, concluding that he was a good administrator.

It is also reasonable to accept the record in the ancient sources that Domitian believed himself to be a god. Jones, Waters, and L.L. Thompson have failed to offer convincing arguments why Domitian could not have had delusions of grandeur. After all Gaius believed himself to be god, the Greeks had built temples to his genius and even Rome had defied several of its emperors. So why is it impossible for a man who had absolute power and was unrivalled in the ancient world to believe that he was a god? Is this specially relevant when one considers that he was the son of a god, the brother of a god and that the ancient sources record that he did believe himself to be a god? It is simply not adequate to minimise this issue. The comments of both Beale and Jenzen call for a reevaluation of the modern image of Domitian.

The attempt to rehabilitate the character and reign of Domitian has succeeded only in demonstrating that the emperor was a very capable administrator, many of whose policies were continued by his successors. It has failed to convincingly provide adequate reasons to reject the ancient picture of Domitian contained in the ancient sources and replace it with a picture of a 'moderately decent man'.