

Modern scholarly accounts of the Domitianic persecution has been extensive but often repetitive, fixating on the same issues, not least its concurrence with the Neronian persecution and the historical controversy concerning the identity of Domitian's victims. Historians have also long pointed to the salience and significance of persecution for patristic writers who were theorising about Christian relationships with the state. The point that writers quantified emperors as good for not persecuting Christians, and thus by extension delineated the characteristics of a bad emperor who did persecute, was an argument repeated in much Christian apologetical literature and has since been reiterated, often uncritically by modern commentators.

However, stressing this argument misses several important points which I will explore. It is possible to argue that Christian writers did not simply wish to point to distinctions between good and bad emperors. Rather, a more dynamic Christian engagement with the Roman state is conveyed by accounts of Domitian's persecution. In contrast with other recorded imperial persecutions, Christian narratives of this event indicate that the Christian church could be shown as intrinsic to the Roman state. Secondly, scholarly repetition of a single element of a patristic argument, that there were good emperors and bad emperors, also neglects the point that, where desired, Christian apologetics could also make good emperors out of the bad. Domitian, Tiberius and even Nero featured in Christian narratives as friends of Christians (including John the Baptist, Peter and indeed Jesus Christ) and as covert converts. While these writings stand out as conspicuously fanciful even for their age and context, their rhetorical purpose in bringing Christianity to the centre of the Roman state and in historicising Christian loyalty to that state can be identified.

Most of what is known about Domitian, whether as emperor or persecutor, comes from overwhelmingly hostile classical sources which present Domitian as the persecutor of individual senators and indeed the entire senatorial order, rather than of Christians.²⁵ The almost uniform condemnation of Domitian by classical writers, including Suetonius, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, Frontinus, Martial, Petronius and Pliny, is almost too familiar to require further elaboration.²⁶ Tacitus's writings were coloured by Tacitus's own sense that his father-in-law, Agricola, and the senatorial order in general had been mistreated by Domitian.²⁸ For Pliny, his animosity towards Domitian was similarly personal; he claimed to have narrowly avoided bolts of lightning of the emperor's wrath towards the senatorial order. For Suetonius, Domitian functioned as a convenient negative contrast to the preceding Flavian emperors, Vespasian and Titus.³⁰ Juvenal drew a contrast of a different sort and troped Domitian as the '*calvus Nero*', or the Bald Nero.³¹ Between them, these historians and writers established and consolidated a perception of Domitian which long endured in classical literature, as by the fourth century Herodian was making similar points and similar criticisms of the by then long-dead Domitian.³²

Systematic attempts to identify sources of information for the Domitianic persecution of Christians belong more to the renaissance than to classical writers or even the fathers of the church. Cardinal Caesar Baronius's *Ecclesiastical Annals*, written between 1588 and 1607, filled in details long missing, and accused Domitian of, among other things, the exile of John of Patmos and the executions of Cletus, bishop of Rome, Flavius Clemens and two Domitillas.³⁵ Baronius found the names of some of these victims in the church fathers, but also attempted to locate sources of evidence for the persecution. In particular, Baronius cited otherwise obscure and unknown sources such as Bruttius to substantiate his narrative of the

persecution.³⁶ The events Baronius discussed, if not his concern for source analysis, reflect the content of earlier Christian writers, as the events he recorded mirrored comments made by fathers of the church from the second to the fourth centuries. Melito of Sardis and Tertullian referred to a Domitianic persecution and Clement of Rome's first epistle emerged from the late-Flavian period. Orosius and later Sulpicius Severus made some reference to a Domitianic persecution.³⁸ These works and writers do not represent a random selection out of the patristic corpus. Often surviving in fragmentary form, many of these fathers' works (excluding of course some such as those of Sulpicius Severus) were systematised and synthesised by Eusebius in the fourth century, constructing from his research a narrative of a Domitianic persecution.³⁹ Orosius gave the Domitianic persecution a magnitude and scale lacking in Christian narratives of this event, as he referred to a general persecution of the Church being carried out by Domitian.⁴¹ Other sources were more modest in their claims against Domitian. Even so, the fullest accounts of these stories, Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* and his *Chronicum Canorum*, asserted the not inconsiderable scale of the persecution. Eusebius, as well as many of the sources that were his historiographic inspiration, presented the Domitianic persecution as a relatively minor event, albeit a savage one. Eusebius narrated that towards the end of Domitian's principate he embarked on a short-lived persecution of Christians in Rome, including members of the imperial household and the senatorial order.⁴² Eusebius also acknowledged that the Domitianic persecution was not as bad as the Neronian effort from earlier in the century, therefore suggesting some limits to the scale and consequences of Domitian's acts.⁴⁴ Eusebius's editorial activities gave coherence to the works of earlier writers, but even without his synthesis they shared a reasonably uniform record of Domitian's character and deeds.⁴⁶ Tertullian, in a source cited

by Eusebius, reinforced the notion of the shortness of the persecution, suggesting that Domitian's efforts were brief, even half-hearted. Tertullian stated that because Domitian 'had something of the human about him, he soon put an end to what he had begun, even restoring again those he had banished.' 47 Eusebius also cited Hegissupus's account of the closing phases of the persecution. Hegissupus went into some detail, but the import of his work concurred with the general outlines of this event established by Tertullian and consolidated by Eusebius. Hegissupus, said Eusebius, recounted how the 'people of David' met Domitian and were able to convince him that they were no threat to the temporal realm in which the Roman government existed.⁴⁸

Further Christian writers asserted that the Domitianic persecution was a smaller adjunct of the Neronian acts. Melito's references to the Domitianic persecution, written from a Greek perspective, were made in his *Apology*, a work dated to c170. This work established the notion, later incorporated into Eusebius's work, of Domitian's persecution being a follow-on from Nero's. Melito's tract, as cited by Eusebius, described the two emperors as being depraved, aberrant and inspired by a similar motivation, namely the advice of malign courtiers, to attack Christian doctrines as well as Christians in person.⁵¹ Later Christian apologists owed a clear intellectual debt to Melito's ideas, as seen in Tertullian's insistence that Domitian became a 'second Nero'. This point may also be reasonably traced to classical responses to Domitian.⁵² For example, by identifying Domitian as a '*calvus Nero*', or a 'bald Nero', Juvenal drew a parallel between these two emperors which is subsequently found in many Christian texts.⁵³

A narrative of the Domitianic persecution therefore emerged from patristic writings from the second century onwards. Modern scholars who accept the tradition of a Domitianic

persecution argue that the period produced a body of literature, beyond the classical writers, which provides supporting evidence for the persecution. Riddle points to Domitian's reign as generating a corpus of sacred texts preoccupied with martyrdom. Riddle includes Clement's epistle among the literature generated by the Domitianic persecution; he also adds the Apocalypse of John the Divine, the Epistle to the Hebrews, I Peter and the Marcan Gospel.⁶⁰ Accepting both the veracity of the persecution and the origin of these texts in the tradition, Riddle interprets them as literature of martyrdom.

Riddle saw the literature immediately contemporary with Domitian's reign as martyrological. However, study of the Christian responses to Domitian illuminates aspects of the Christian church's attitude to the Roman state. It can be argued that the later Christian sources on Domitian were intended to syncretise the Roman state and the Christian church, and to set out the terms for the civil obedience of Christians. The Patristic allusions to the Domitianic persecution reveal how the early church conceived of its relationship with the state and how a persecuted church sought to explain its place in Roman civil society.

These writings drew upon Domitian as an example of a 'bad' emperor to show Christians' concomitant acceptance of the rule of a 'good' emperor. The narrative of Domitianic persecution becomes meaningful if it is considered to have served a purpose specific to the Roman context, both civil and imperial, of the early church. A common preoccupation of church fathers was the interaction between the Christian church and the Roman state; some Christian writers stressed that they were obedient citizens of imperial rule.

Christian writers addressed their analysis of the Domitianic persecution to the outside world in order to outline the circumstances under which the church could cohere with the Roman world. Melito's *Apology* indicates this strategy. It suggests that the pejorative Christian

response to Domitian was a means for Christian writers to demonstrate their willingness to accept Roman rule in the right circumstances. In a text which was addressed to Roman rulers, specifically Marcus Aurelius, this bishop presented Domitian as what could be described as a 'bad' ruler to demonstrate through a negative definition what the character of a 'good' emperor was. Melito argued that Domitian's character as a bad emperor was revealed by his persecution of Christians, while good emperors did not indulge in this activity. Melito addressed his comments to the Roman emperors using examples, both good and ill, from that office as the substance of his analysis. Melito indicated that Christians could be willing to accept the jurisdiction of Rome; using Domitian, Melito drew the crucial caveat that it was good emperors whom Christians would obey. Embodied in discussions of good and bad emperors were parameters of obedience.

The idea that only bad emperors persecuted Christians is an idea whose that many modern scholars have found appealing. However, while they have identified Christian distinctions between good and bad emperors, scholars have not asked why Christians would seek to provide advice on conduct to Roman emperors; or rather, they have not considered how dividing emperors into good and bad provided a means to legitimate Christian obedience to the Roman state and to demonstrate Christianity as integrated with the state.

This dimension of Christian apologetics can be taken in two further directions. It is not enough to say that Christians distinguished between good and bad emperors; from the persecutions of the second century emerged patristic writings, among them Tertullian and Melito, which presented the tradition of a Domitianic persecution and emerged from an intellectual context more likely to condemn Roman rule entirely than to care to distinguish

between good and bad rulers. Yet the records of the Domitianic persecution meaningfully engage with a more dynamic reading of Roman imperial power. Christian writers, if they were to obey the state at all, turned bad emperors into good.

Professions of loyalty can be found in patristic texts, although these protestations were often complex and qualified.⁷³ In particular, Tertullian made nuanced and shifting arguments on citizenship, such as his insistence on the social usefulness of Christians.⁷⁴ His work corresponds with ideas expressed by Justin Martyr, who addressed the civic duties of Christians, although he also admonished rulers.⁷⁵ Tertullian's writings also reveal a preoccupation with the conduct of the church within Roman society. His *Ad Nationes* drew out the implications of Melito's argument, for its principal aim was to refute the 'calumny' made against the practices of the church.⁷⁸ Tertullian insisted that 'we [Christians] acknowledge the fealty of Romans to the emperors. No conspiracy has ever broken out from our body'.⁷⁹

These writers shared a common background of a church experiencing varying degrees of political ostracism or persecution; it is reasonable to propose that they wished to theorise about its place in the Roman world and, more importantly, to suggest how a persecuted Christian body could in fact accommodate and be accommodated by a pagan hegemony. Their efforts to do so were intellectually imaginative, as they condemned aspects of Roman rule, only to show the characteristics of the polity that could be suitable to the church.

But it is not enough to say that Christian apologists distinguished between good and bad emperors; Christian writings also turned bad emperors into good ones. A tradition dated to several centuries before 799, whereupon it appears in an Arabic manuscript, cast Nero and

his entire court as Christians. The manuscript 'Preaching of Peter' recorded that Saint Peter baptised Nero, Nero's offspring and members of the imperial court.⁸⁵ Other Roman emperors received similar treatment. Tertullian repeated and amplified the story that Tiberius accepted the divinity of Christ in front of the senate.⁸⁶ Barnes stresses the 'utter implausibility' of the story and Crake argues that it is difficult to take Tertullian's tale (one enriched later by Jerome) at all seriously. These comments reveal how scholars have usually been concerned with establishing historical veracity or authenticity of Christian accounts of Roman rulers, rather than with questioning why such apparently implausible stories were advanced.⁸⁷ The reports of Tiberius's actions yield further meaning, as they made Christians out of pagan emperors. Tertullian's ideas can be contextualised amongst other expressions of Christian thought; it is possible to place these ideas in an intellectual context which stresses the concern of some Christian writers to theorise about the church's place in the Roman state. By the sixth century John Malalas, a chronicler, was concerned with the relationship between Roman and Christian leaders, as well as with the conduct of Christianity's leaders at these centres of power. How else should we interpret the peculiar stories found in Malalas's chronicle, recounting meetings between Tiberius and Christ, and between Domitian and John the Baptist? These stories stressed the favourable impression made by Christ and John on the rulers of Rome; indeed, Malalas believed that these emperors were moved to privately convert.⁸⁸ However, given that Malalas did not then record that either emperor was openly moved to help the church, or that the Christians gained any material benefits from these meetings, it seems likely that the reason for these stories in Christian historiography was to give a patina of respectability to Christianity. Malalas's

stories, eccentric by any standard, attempted to integrate the Christian faith with the Roman state.

Malalas noted that Domitian was impressed with John's learning.⁸⁹ But Malalas's analysis of their relationship followed a different trajectory to Melito's thought, as Malalas's chronicle influenced the *Chronicon Paschale*, George Monachus and Cedrenus, whereas the ideas of Melito influenced the work of Eusebius.⁹⁰ More significantly, in Malalas's chronicle, the reconciliation of the church and Rome was retarded. Malalas recorded that John lost his temper at the emperor; the implication was the failure of John's mission to the emperor.⁹¹ Melito pursued his conception of the relations between church and state to a fuller conclusion, as he developed a framework for the relations of Rome and the church, using Domitian's alleged persecution to do so.

Even though Tiberius and Nero appeared in some sources as sympathetic to Christians and even as Christians themselves, Domitian rarely appeared in patristic writings as a Christian. Yet the few details offered by Christian writers of his persecution lend a distinctive character to the deeds ascribed to his name; these details allow the Domitianic persecution to stand forth distinctively for what it reveals of Christians' attempts to locate their faith at the heart of the Roman state. Although Tertullian discussed a number of Roman emperors, his work offers several indications that he saw Domitian's persecution as distinctive. In fact, Tertullian's responses to Domitian are complex; he drew the familiar comparison between Nero and Domitian, yet elsewhere in his writings a particular rhetorical strategy is apparent in that the actions of Domitian disappeared from sight. When Tertullian did mention Domitian, he pointed to a significant distinction between Nero and Domitian; Nero executed Christians, whereas Domitian merely exiled them.⁹²

The point of significance which can be drawn out here relates to the status of Domitian's victims. Among the few details in either classical or Christian sources of the Domitianic persecution, the senator Flavius Clemens and a female relative, Domitilla, are frequently mentioned as having been among Domitian's victims. L W Barnard indicates that the identity of any Christian Domitianic victims is a 'vexed question', a point of complexity derived from the ambiguous accounts of Domitilla.⁹³ There are two possible Domitillas: Dio Cassius referred to a Domitilla who was the wife of Flavius Clemens, a Roman senator,⁹⁴ whereas in the fourth century Eusebius referred to Domitilla being the niece of this senator.⁹⁵ Suetonius referred to an accusation of atheism being made against a woman with this name, but he did not refer to Domitilla's alleged Christian faith.⁹⁶

The tradition concerning Flavius Clemens is equally vague. A A Bell speculates that Flavius Clemens, known to have been a victim of Domitian's senatorial purges, may have been a 'God-fearer' akin to the centurion in Luke's Gospel.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, this is only a tentative suggestion, as neither husband nor wife can be confidently located in the Christian tradition. Mommsen offered a stimulating but largely fanciful reading of the Domitilla stories, turning her into a sister of Clemens.¹⁰⁰ Keresztes comments on a layer of significance in the stories of Domitilla, pointing out that they located Christians in the imperial household and the senatorial order.¹⁰¹ Keresztes takes this point no further than speculating on its historical actuality. However, it is possible to draw out a further point of significance. Domitian as a persecutor exiled but did not execute the victims who were named in the patristic tradition; the naming of these victims, who were members of the senatorial order, allowed patristic writers to locate Christianity at the centre of the Roman state and in the imperial household.

While precise identity remains obscure, patristic efforts to integrate church and state become clear.

The narratives of Domitian's persecution by Christian writers were informed by a strand of thinking of the early church which attempted to define its relationship with the Roman state. Certain conditions were placed upon this relationship, conditions that were delineated by the deployment of Domitian's reputation as a persecutor. His poor reputation in classical sources allowed Christian writers to discuss the terms under which Christians could obey the state, and to inform Roman rulers of those terms.

Patristic scholarship asserted that good emperors could be identified by their reluctance to persecute, and Christians could be loyal subjects of these emperors. Historians have long been alert to this point of argument, but a more dynamic engagement with the state by patristic writers can also be reconstructed. Bad emperors could become good emperors, and Domitian himself eventually became a Christian according to Christian tradition.

Writers, classical and modern, have identified Domitian as a persecutor of the senatorial order; this reputation appears in works by the fathers of the church, which stressed the identity of Domitian's victims to reveal Christians at the very centre of imperial power. The desire to delineate this circumstance determined the use made by the fathers of the church of the last Flavian emperor.