

CHRISTIANITY—THE FIRST 300 YEARS

The Persecutions

AN ILLEGAL RELIGION

While there were many religions in the Greco-Roman world, ranging from the traditional Greco-Roman pantheons of gods and goddesses to the mystery religions like the Cult of Isis and Mithraism infiltrating the empire from Persia and Egypt, the Roman government did have policies regarding them. It made a good deal of difference whether or not one's religion was legal. For the Jews, Judaism had been given legal status going all the way back to Julius Caesar. As such, unlike everyone else, Jews were permitted to observe the Sabbath and were exempt from military duty. Early on, Christianity was regarded by the Romans as a sect of Judaism (cf. Ac. 18:12-16). In time, especially after Christians did not support the Jewish revolt against Rome in the 60s, it became increasingly apparent that Christianity was a religion in its own right. Unfortunately, this left Christians in a sort of religious no-man's land. Since they did not worship the traditional deities and refused to join in the festivals and rituals to honor them (which often enough was taken as unpatriotic and even treasonous), they incurred suspicion and distrust. Eventually, the Roman state outlawed Christianity, which was viewed as a threat to the empire's power and unity.

Early Persecution



Youthful version of Nero prior to his reign as emperor from AD 54-68.

Detroit Institute of Arts

The earliest persecutions are recorded in the New Testament with arrests by the Jewish temple authorities (Ac. 4:1-3; 5:17-18; 8:1-3; 9:1-2), the lynching of Stephen (Ac. 7:57-60), and the execution of James (Ac. 12:1-2). On Paul's missionary trips, he periodically faced persecution by both Jews (13:50; 14:5, 19; 17:5-9; 18:12-13; 20:3; 21:27-32) and Romans (Ac. 16:19-24; 19:23-41; 21:33-36). In one of his letters, Paul describes his various persecutions:

Five times I received of the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times [by the Romans] I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned... (2 Co. 11:24-25a).

According to multiple early sources, both Peter and Paul, two of the most prominent Christian leaders, were martyred in Rome in the 60s under Caesar Nero, Paul by beheading and Peter by crucifixion. By the time of the composition of the Book of Revelation, the martyrdom of Antipas, who according to early tradition was ordained by John, had occurred in Pergamum as well (Rv. 2:13). According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero blamed Christians for the great fire of Rome in AD 64, which initiated the first wave of organized persecution. According to Eusebius, based on the witness of Melito of Sardis and Irenaeus, Nero's successor, Domitian, also persecuted Christians, though we possess no details other than possibly the banishment of John to Patmos (Rv. 1:9). Ignatius, writing in the early 2nd century while on his way to Rome after his arrest, indicated he fully expected to face wild beasts:

Early Christianity

What a thrill I shall have from the wild beasts that are ready for me! I hope they will make short work of me. I shall coax them on to eat me up at once and not to hold off, as sometimes happens, through fear. And if they are reluctant, I shall force them to it.... May nothing seen or unseen begrudge me making my way to Jesus Christ. Come fire, cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil —only let me get to Jesus Christ! (Ignatius, Letter to the Romans)



The Christian Martyr's Last Prayer
By Jean-Léon Gérôme (1883)

In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Polycarp, the disciple of John, was brought into the stadium in Smyrna (ca. AD 155). He may have been the last surviving person to have known an apostle personally. The Proconsul urged him to give allegiance to Caesar and reject his Christian faith, but Polycarp refused. “Eighty-six years have I served Him [Christ], and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” When they finished binding him for the burning, he prayed, “O Lord God Almighty...may I be received in your presence this day...’ When he had offered up the ‘Amen’ and finished his prayer, the firemen lighted the fire.

A general description of early Christian martyrdoms from the mid-2nd century reads:

All the martyrdoms which God allowed to happen (remember that the devout will ascribe all things to his sovereignty) were blessed and noble. Who could not admire their honor, their patience, their love for the Lord? They were whipped to shreds till their veins and arteries were exposed, and still endured patiently, while even those that stood by cried for

Early Christianity

them. They had such courage that none of them let out a sigh or a groan, proving when they suffered such torments, they were absent from their bodies – or rather that the Lord then stood by them and talked with them. By the grace of Christ, they despised all the cruelties of this world, redeeming themselves from eternal punishment by the suffering of a single hour. The fire of their savage executioners appeared cool to them, because they fixed their eyes on their escape from the eternal unquenchable fire and the good things promised to those who endure – things ‘which ear has not heard, nor eye seen, nor the human heart imagined’ but were revealed to them by the Lord. They were no longer men, but had already become angels. In the same way, those who were condemned to the wild beasts endured dreadful torture. Some were stretched out on beds of spikes. Others were subjected to all kinds of torments, all in the Devil’s attempt to make them deny Christ. (Martyrdom of Polycarp 2)

It is instructive that the word for “martyr” and the word for “witness” is the same Greek word (μαρτυς).

Later Persecution

Roman persecution of Christians was sporadic. When Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan concerning how to handle the Christians in his province of Bithynia, the emperor’s response was that they should be punished only if they refused to worship the emperor and the gods, but he also stated that they were not to be sought out. According to Irenaeus, there was a mass-slaughter of Christians thrown to wild beasts in Lyon in the 2nd century. Also in the 2nd century, Justin Martyr wrote that Christians were punished if they did not deny and blaspheme Christ.

Several localized persecutions occurred during the emperorship of Marcus Aurelius (ruled AD 161-180), followed by a lull. Persecution resumed under Decius (ruled AD 249-251) and Trebonianus Gallus (ruled 251-253). The Decian persecution was extensive, since the emperor was attempting to restore the Roman golden age, and at least in part, this meant forcing Christians into pagan practices. Valerian (ruled AD 253-260) instituted yet another wave of persecution, but after he was captured and imprisoned by the Sasanian Empire during the



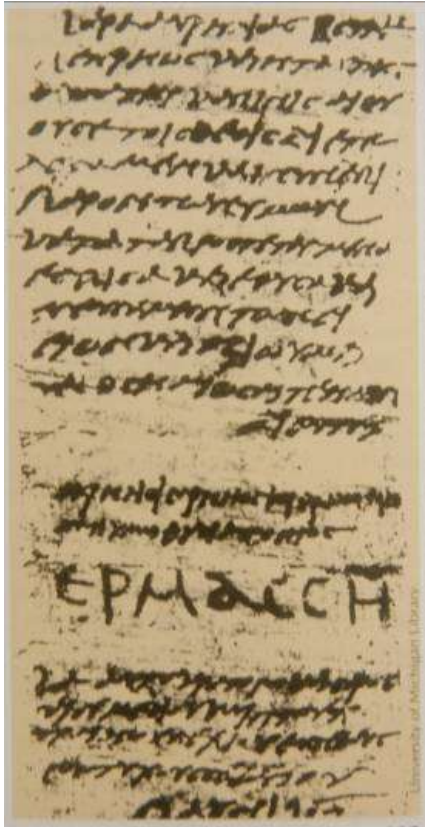
*Grafitto mocking Christians,
Palatine Hill, Rome*

Ἀλεξάμενος σεβετε θεον
(Alexamenos prays to [his] god)

Early Christianity

Battle of Edessa, his son Gallienus (ruled AD 253-268) who succeeded him issued the first ever decree of tolerance, even though it fell short of recognizing Christianity as a legal religion.

Diocletian (ruled AD 283-305) produced the last and most severe wave of Christian persecution, which was empire-wide. It was enforced by a *libellus*, a certificate verifying that the recipient had sacrificed to the Roman gods. Churches were destroyed, Scriptures confiscated and burned, and Christians imprisoned and forced to perform sacrifices to the pagan gods. Failure to do so resulted in arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution. The emergence of Constantine as the new emperor (ruled AD 306-337) finally brought an end to the state persecutions.



LIBELLUS: certificate proving that one had sacrificed to the Roman gods

University of Michigan
Hatcher Library

Beyond the reality of physical persecution, published mockeries of Christians called for their repudiation and destruction. This diatribe from Minucius Felix (d. AD 250) is a cogent example:

Beyond the reality of physical persecution, published mockeries of Christians called for their repudiation and destruction. This diatribe from Minucius Felix (d. AD 250) is a cogent example:

Excuse me for expressing my intense feelings so freely, but I think it is deplorable that attacks should be made upon the gods, by a gang, yes, I mean a gang, of discredited and proscribed desperadoes. This gang [the Christians] has been gathered from the lowest dregs of the population. They are ignorant men and women—and we all know women are naturally unstable. They are a rabble of impious conspirators. At their night-time meetings, solemn fasts, and barbarous meals, their bond of union is not a sacred rite, but crime. They are a secret tribe that lurks in the darkness and shuts out the light. They are silent in public but chatter in the corners. These conspirators must be utterly destroyed and cursed!

THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY

After each of the major persecutions, the church had to decide what to do with Christians who had succumbed to the demand to deny Christ, worship Caesar, and/or surrender their

Scriptures to the authorities. Some leaders held that after a period of penance, such persons could be readmitted. Others considered these acts to be blasphemy, and such people could never again be part of the church. The issue came to a head after the Diocletian persecution, when it became known that the Bishop of Carthage, under extreme duress, had turned over Christian Scriptures to the Roman soldiers. Donatus led the faction demanding that any church recognizing the bishop was a false church, and in the end, claimed that the Donatist churches were the only true church. Constantine, the new emperor, became involved, because though originally a pagan, he had begun to lean toward Christianity. In AD 313 he issued the Edict of Milan, which decreed tolerance for the Christian religion. Eventually, St. Augustine would provide the definitive theological response to the Donatists, which allowed lapsed Christians to be reconciled to the church.