

The Early Struggle: Understanding the Persecution of the Early Christians

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## **Abstract**

### **The Early Struggle: Understanding the Persecution of the Early Christians**

Melissa Wiebe

Christianity is now one of the major world religions with millions of followers. There was a time, however, when this was not so. Between the so-called Neronian Persecution of 64 CE until the Edict of Milan of 313 CE, Christians suffered sporadic persecution from various groups including the Jewish community, the Roman authorities and pagan civilians. This thesis attempts to discover why the Christians were distrusted, ridiculed and sometimes killed. It also examines the Constantinian Revolution, when the emperor Constantine ended the persecutions, legalized Christianity and initiated a new relationship between church and state.

## **Dedication**

To my husband, Shadi, with love. This thesis would not have been possible without your love, patience and encouragement.

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## Introduction

Today, Christianity is one of the major world religions with millions of followers. Most people tend to forget or perhaps fail to realize that Christianity was once a struggling offshoot of Judaism, then derided as a superstitious cult by the Greco-Roman world in which it was born. As a new religious movement some 2000 years ago, Christianity faced at best ridicule and at worst severe persecution. There was a time when simply bearing the name 'Christian' was a crime punishable by death. While New Religious Movements (NRMs) today are not sought out and their members are not put to death, they are still met with suspicion and scorn. The word 'cult' is often associated with them, so much so that it has become a derogatory term in English. The Raelians and the Unification Church are modern examples of NRMs. Perhaps the mere mention of their names brings to mind images such as mass marriages or messages from outer space. The early Christians confronted this type of contempt and half-truths from those around them; from most of the Jews who rejected Jesus as the Christ and from the pagans who understood Christianity as atheistic and its followers cannibalistic. Present day society understands Christianity as an established religion tracing its roots to events and historical characters who lived long ago, but it was not always so. Christianity managed not only to survive the initial distrust, mockery and persecution, but continued to thrive and spread at an astounding rate.

Sociologist of religion Lorne L. Dawson argues that NRMs emerge because people are looking for "surrogate families" and due to changes in values, social structure and the role and character of religious institutions.<sup>1</sup> This theory makes sense for religions

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<sup>1</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49.

such as Christianity, which was a NRM some 2000 years ago. Biological families in the Greco-Roman world were often small and the members distant from one another. Marriage, for example, did not necessarily mean monogamy. The practices of abortion and infanticide were widely accepted. The pagan priests were not interested in providing people with moral guidance but in the performance of rituals in order to keep the gods happy and thus to avoid natural or unnatural disasters and maintain the relative peace and prosperity inside the empire. Many philosophers could speculate but ultimately concluded that all was left to fate or chance.<sup>2</sup> The need for something new was present. Rodney Stark writes in his work *The Rise of Christianity*: “New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities.”<sup>3</sup> The desire to find peace with the reality of suffering, sickness and death has existed since the beginning of time; to this day people are finding new ways to do so (although some revive old practices and ideas while others create original means to achieve this). Thousands of years ago, Christianity offered such an alternative.

Christianity’s success stems from the fact that it offered people what paganism could not: an answer to suffering and death, compassion for the sick and poor, equality, social stability and a loving god.<sup>4</sup> Before this took hold, however, Christianity had to surmount critical obstacles including misunderstandings and government discrimination.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say, however, that philosophy was amoral. On the contrary, philosophy was about the pursuit of wisdom and the pursuit of the good. Nevertheless, philosophic education was reserved for the more privileged classes.

<sup>3</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. (New Jersey: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1997), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Stark, 19.



This thesis will delve into the circumstances surrounding the persecution of the early Christians, investigating how they were perceived by neighbours and authorities, how persecutions began sporadically, then eventually became government approved, and how Christians found meaning in persecution. Theoretically, I will draw from the social-scientific theories of New Religious Movements (NRMs) and why some NRMs persevere while others flounder. Specifically, I will apply these theories of opposition, survival and growth to the relationships between Christians, Jews, Jewish-Christians and pagans in order to understand how a small Jewish sect that worshipped an unknown crucified Jewish man became one of the major world religions.

I will attempt to include all perspectives, including Christian, Jewish and pagan; those sympathetic to the Christians, those unsympathetic and those who were indifferent. Initially, I chose this topic because of my interest in the Diocletian Persecution. I wanted to understand why Christians were persecuted and the details of their suffering and terror. Upon further research, however, I discovered that what I was really exploring were the relationships between religion, politics and citizens (or slaves), between believer and non-believer. I intend to demonstrate that from early on many Jewish communities distinguished themselves from the Christians, while the Roman government, even at the height of the persecutions, never seriously sought to terminate Christianity.

It will be an interesting foray into the relationships between Christians and Jews, Christians and Jewish-Christians, and Christians and pagans. Even these categories can be further broken down into more complex networks and connections. Within the Jewish-Christians, for example, some believed that in order to be Christian one must be Jewish first, while others (such as James, the author of the Letter of James) argued for obedience to the Mosaic Law but not so far as to exclude non-Jews (see Jas. 2:24; 4:12). Among the

Christians, there were those who believed Jesus had usurped and superseded Judaism, that the Law had nothing to offer anymore. There were those (such as Paul) who believed that Christians had as their foundation the Jewish faith but that Christ had extended the invitation to all people (including non-Jews) without the need for circumcision or dietary laws such as those expected from Jews. These are but two examples of the variety of religious experience within earliest Christianity. The convergence of these cultures, religions and diverse identities was inevitable and I hope to discover the consequences of that interweaving.

### **Statement of the Question**

Why were the Christians persecuted in the first four centuries? This is a simple question that appears to have a simple answer: Christianity was new, distrusted and eventually accused of trespassing established taboos and of unforgivable crimes of a cultish persuasion. Yet to accept such an answer would do injustice to the complex social, cultural and historical circumstances in which the persecutions took place. The story of the persecuted Christian community invites an in-depth study into Jewish-Christian relations, Greco-Roman politics and religion, as well as social-scientific theories of New Religious Movements.

History has always been a personal pleasure of mine. There is a particular delight and satisfaction in connecting the dots of history. Even more so, to speculate, wonder and hypothesize what may have been. To “do history” lacks the exact precision of mathematics but it is this creative and imaginative side that draws me in. Furthermore, to understand one’s present situation, one must look back to what has already taken place

that has inevitably shaped the world into its present form. Likewise, to understand Christianity and how it is that it came to be so powerful and widespread, one must go back to its roots when it was in its infancy.

This thesis began as an interest confined to the Great Persecution but eventually expanded to include the first so-called persecution under the Emperor Nero in 64 CE until the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. Although three hundred years is a significant span of time to study, in order to understand the Great Persecution, it is necessary to seriously consider the earlier persecutions. Without the earlier persecutions we are left with a story without a beginning and middle, only with the end; without understanding them, we risk missing the point about the final persecution. It is similar to seeing a play in its last act without viewing the previous scenes: so much is missing and one is left feeling unsatisfied, with the nagging sensation that not everything has been revealed.

## **Methodology**

Historical criticism is essential to my thesis. I must determine the context in which the primary sources that I have used were written. The various cultures and religious beliefs must be taken into account. The political arena must be studied in order to understand how the Roman Empire functioned. For example, when I am studying the Neronian persecution, I will draw on primary sources that describe the fire in Rome in 64 CE. In doing so, I will discover who the author was (was he a Roman citizen? Was he in government? Was he a philosopher?), who his intended audience was (was it written for the Emperor? Was it for his personal use?), and what effect was that he desired to impart.

(Was it written purely for entertainment? Was it meant to communicate a moral lesson?  
Was it recorded as a historical account?)

The integral or organic model of church history will also prove most helpful in my research. The “integral model attempts a synchronous understanding of the development of the central ideas of Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> Developed primarily by historians of doctrine (e.g., Adolf Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg), this model proves a useful tool for both systematic theologians and church historians. In comparison with other methods, such as “the special history model” or “the great thinker method,” the “integral model” provides a broader and more complex view of the development of doctrine. With the support of historical criticism, this method shows that a certain doctrine appears as a consequence of interactions between theological topics and other issues, e.g., social concerns, politics, and ecclesiastical confrontations. Pertaining to my thesis specifically, the integral model illustrates what the persecutions meant for the early Christian community and its future. For example, the Emperor Diocletian ordered the persecution of Christians in 303 (thus starting what is now known as the Great Persecution) because he wanted to unify the empire as well as appease the gods. Here we can get a glimpse into the political issues at hand. With regards to the Christians, those who bought their way out of torture or a death sentence were problematic to those who had not. Here we see the ecclesiastic confrontations mentioned above. There is even more material to work with than this and with each new theme, more riches can be gleaned in order to understand the complexity of the persecutions.

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<sup>5</sup> James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller. *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods*. (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 31.

In addition, I will be using social-scientific models of New Religious Movement theories, predominately those presented by sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and Lorne L. Dawson. By discovering why people join NRMs, I will be able to ascertain why Christianity faced opposition, how it continued to grow despite persecutions and finally, how it came to be the religion of the Empire.

I must stress that when “doing history,” one is above all interpreting the events being studied. I cannot claim that “this is what *really* happened,” nor can I state exactly how many Christians were persecuted, or even indicate the exact reasons for that. This is especially the case when a historian deals with ancient sources, not all of which have survived. The findings of my thesis will be the fruits of research, studying, hypothesizing, wondering and reconstructing. Luke Timothy Johnson sums up my feelings as follows:

Because of the necessarily fragmentary character of all historical evidence, and because of the inevitable role of interpretive creativity on the part of the historian, serious practitioners of the craft are characterized by deep humility. They above all know how fragile their reconstructions are, how subject to revision, how susceptible to distortion when raised from the level of the probable to the certain.<sup>6</sup>

Bernard Lonergan advocates critical history, which employs his Four Levels of Cognition: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable and be responsible.<sup>7</sup> First, be aware of the data that are available and what has been said and written. Then, understand these data while at the same time being aware of oneself in the process. Next, one must judge and evaluate, settling matters of action. Lastly, with the knowledge that has been acquired, one must make a decision what to do with this knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2007.

## Status Quaestionis

Sociology of religion provides much discussion about New Religious Movement (NRM) theories and one sociologist, Rodney Stark, has ventured to apply some of these theories to early Christianity. In his work *Comprehending Cults: the Sociology of New Religious Movements*, Lorne Dawson discusses Peter Berger's Theory of Religion and Theory of Secularization, as well as Stark and Bainbridge's Theory of Religion and Theory of Secularization. He argues that NRMs emerge due to changes in values, social structure and the role and character of religious institutions. I would agree with Dawson in that Christianity offered something new, which could not be found elsewhere. In his book entitled *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, Rodney Stark applies NRM theory to early Christianity, by arguing that NRMs succeed only if they remain open networks and that converts generally tend to be those who are unhappy with the *status quo*. I would agree and disagree with Stark on this particular point. I would argue that the Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah believed in the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. I would hesitate to say they were unhappy in their faith. The Gentiles, however, may have been unsatisfied with their belief system due to its lack of answers with regards to questions about life and death. Both scholars see opposition to NRMs coming from already established religions and governments; opposition stems from the concern for societal well-being. This makes sense to me for a number of reasons, such as Christianity's newness (not much was really known about it) and the potential it had for problems (competition for converts, for example, or the possibility of an uprising).

The relationship between Christians and pagans (non-Jews and mostly Roman authorities) has been studied by numerous scholars. I will list several authors who have greatly contributed to my understanding of this relationship. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, author of *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom and Orthodoxy* concludes that the charge against the Christians stems back to sacrifice and the Christians' refusal to do so. This is one explanation that most scholars have accepted as valid and one which I accept as well. The safety and stability of the empire was of utmost importance and anyone refusing to protect these things was problematic, to say the least. Furthermore, Christians posed a further threat because they hailed their god as greater than Caesar himself. Michael Gaddis in *There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* argues that this disobedience forced the emperors to punish the Christians in order to restore good relations with the gods and achieve future prosperity for the emperor and empire. Similarly, Clyde L. Manschreck has written in *A History of Christianity in the World: from Persecution to Uncertainty* that Christianity was persecuted because of its threat to imperial sovereignty – a profound struggle between the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of the empire.

From a different perspective, Paul Keresztes, author of *Imperial Rome and the Christians: from Herod the Great to about 202 A.D.*, suggests that the fire in 64 CE was the first occasion in which the Christians were persecuted simply for bearing the name 'Christian'; it did not matter whether or not they had made sacrifices to the gods. I agree that in this particular occasion, the Christians were punished for the name alone. However, I would not call this a persecution but rather a convenience. Nero needed scapegoats and the Christians served that need well. Anyone called 'Christian' was arrested.

However, during actual persecutions, oftentimes those interrogating accused Christians would allow them to live if they recanted being a Christian. In many cases when an accused denied Christ, this verbal admission satisfied the authority figure and additional proof was not considered necessary. This is a bit more perplexing because it is as though the name Christian in itself equalled the refusal to sacrifice, when in fact a repudiation of the name may have meant nothing except saving one's skin. I would argue that the authorities simply wanted to solve the problem as quickly as possible.

Yet another group of scholars have studied this relationship from the perspective of apologetics. W. den Boer, for example, in his article entitled "A Pagan Historian and His Enemies: Porphyry against the Christians," demonstrates that intellectual discussions pertaining to the beliefs of Christians led to ridicule and mockery. When pagan intellectuals dismissed focal points of Christian doctrine (the virgin birth, for example), Christianity faced academic belittlement as well.<sup>8</sup> This can be seen clearly enough in the writings of Justin Martyr, for example. Justin used philosophy in order to counter the intellectual attacks against Christianity and in doing so, strengthened Christianity as a whole. Defending Christianity meant not only using one's body (as in martyrdom) but also one's mind. Criticisms against Christian doctrine compelled some Christians to explain their beliefs, which helped crystallize Christianity.

Lastly, the relationship between Jews and Christians has largely been studied in relation to the Gospel of John and the Johannine community to whom it was written. In his book *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: the Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times*, Raymond E. Brown argues that the

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<sup>8</sup> Pagan philosopher Celsus, for example, questioned Jesus' divinity (if he was God, why did he have to flee Egypt? Why did he die a lowly death on a cross as a criminal? Why could he not save himself? Why didn't God punish anyone for killing his Son?). According to Celsus, Christianity was illogical and contradictory.



Johannine community split when not everyone agreed upon who should be welcomed into the community. Oscar Cullmann, in *The Johannine Circle*, agrees with Brown. Janis Leibig argues in “John and ‘the Jews’: Theological Anti-Semitism in the Fourth Gospel” that the anti-Semitic language in the Gospel of John is evidence of the schism that both Brown and Cullmann discuss. The Gospel of John presents an obvious tension between the Christians and “the Jews”, including numerous references to expulsion from the synagogue. It appears that the author of this gospel is responding to issues between those in the Johannine community and the Jewish community. Reuven Kimelman, who wrote about the *birkat ha-minim*, that is, the benediction concerning heretics, argues that the within the Jewish community there was an issue with the Jewish-Christians. According to Paul Billerbeck, the *birkat ha-minim* was an in-house way of dealing with the problems arising with the Jewish-Christians. It was not an “us” versus “them” but rather “we” have dissension that must be dealt with. I tend to agree with Billerbeck because I do not think that the differences between the Jews and the Jewish-Christians were so obvious in the beginning, especially when this gospel was written. I argue that eventually Christology became a more prominent feature for the Jewish-Christians, something that could not be ignored. The *birkat ha-minim* was indeed a way to force the Jewish-Christians to decide, even if it meant shunning them from the synagogue.

Therefore, after much research, my hypothesis is that the Christians were at first perceived by the Jewish community as a deviant group within it and quickly thereafter became a different faction all together. As for the pagans, I argue that they took up Judaism’s negative opinion of the Christians and along with misinformation, persecuted them. The pagan authorities, however, were intent on keeping the empire safe and stable and viewed Christianity as a threat to these endeavours.

## Chapter 1

### The Relationship between Christians, Jews, and Jewish-Christians<sup>9</sup>

#### Introduction

Now more than ever, scholars are reassessing the relationship between Christians, Jews, and Jewish-Christians.<sup>10</sup> With this seemingly newfound focus, aspects of early Christianity are becoming more enriched with new information and new perspectives. The same can be said for the study of the Christian persecutions. Whenever the phrase ‘Christian persecution’ is uttered, the image of pitiful yet triumphant Christians being eaten alive by lions in the Roman Coliseum springs to mind. This particular understanding of Christian persecutions has been ingrained in most people due to the hagiographic literature that has been read throughout the centuries.

Yet if Christianity stems from Judaism, where do the Jews fit in, if at all? Were they also persecuted? To complicate matters further, chapter 47 in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, written in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, describes the different kinds of Christians that existed during that time: 1) Christians who follow Jewish observances; 2) Jewish-Christians, that is Jews who became Christians; 3) Jewish-Christians who require Gentile-Christians to become Jews; 4) Jews who were Christians but renounced, and 5) Jews who understood Jesus as the Messiah but fully human.<sup>11</sup> These various types of Christianities confused things even further. What happened when some Jews found the

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<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical references will be taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Harper Catholic Bibles, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> I recognize that the term ‘Jewish-Christian’ is problematic and debated among scholars as to its validity. However, I understand that Christian Jews are a type of Jew whereas Jewish-Christians are Christians who are ethnically Jewish.

<sup>11</sup> Jack T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First 100 Years of Jewish-Christian Relations*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993), 53-54.

messiah they had been waiting for while others continued to wait? How did they interact with each other, some groups believing that they are devout Jews, the Chosen People? What happens when Gentiles become Christians? Are they now “Chosen” as well? In short, what was the relationship between Christians, Jews, and Jewish-Christians in the first three centuries of the Common Era? These questions and those relating to it will be addressed in this chapter in order to discover why the early Christian community was persecuted. The clarification of these issues will help advance my hypothesis that the Christians were persecuted because they were seen at first as a deviant sect within Judaism, but were quickly understood as a separate entity entirely.

### **Social-Scientific Theories of New Religious Movements (NRMs)**

Agnes Cunningham argues that Judaism opposed Christianity, specifically Gentile Christianity, because it deserted the Law of Moses, proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and partook in idolatrous practices. The problem with this idea is that “it was indeed Jews who accepted all those beliefs.”<sup>12</sup> What changed, then, in order for some Jewish-Christians to become simply Christians? Why did some Jews accept more radical Christian beliefs while others completely rejected them?

One social-scientific theory of New Religious Movements (NRMs) developed by Rodney Stark explains that “people will attempt to escape or resolve a marginal position.”<sup>13</sup> A marginalized person is a member of two separate groups who recognizes that she or he can no longer remain a part of both groups due to the fact that each party has its own distinctive characteristics, which conflict with the opposing party. The

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<sup>12</sup> Sanders, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. (New Jersey: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 52.

marginalized person realizes that she or he cannot belong to either faction without negating the other. Furthermore, the marginalized person tends to be shunned by both communities due to resentment for the person's position in the differing community.

Jewish-Christians were caught between Judaism and Gentile Christianity and were eventually forced to choose between them. They were accepted by neither Jews, who did not consider them "real" Jews, nor Gentiles, who did not consider them Gentile. By resolving their marginal positions, Jewish-Christians had to decide whether to return to their Jewish roots or become Christians that was no longer overtly Jewish. John Gager argues that "early converts did not represent the established sectors of Jewish society"<sup>14</sup>, those who felt themselves a part of a solid community, but rather those on the fringes, with little status or value.

As for the Jews who completely rejected Christianity, Stark explains this conundrum when writing "conversion is not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behaviour into alignment with that of one's friends and family members."<sup>15</sup> The Jews who denied Christian claims completely may have had close ties with family members and friends in Jewish society; the bigger payoff was to remain with them. Therefore, those Jewish-Christians who had more friends and family members in the church were most likely to become "full-fledged" Christians while those with strong attachments to the synagogue would renounce any Christian beliefs. A good example would be the author of the Letter of James. Clearly trying to maintain ties with his Jewish past, James is also finding ways of accepting changes within what was once a Jewish sect. The letter is addressed "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (Jas. 1:1),

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<sup>14</sup> John. G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: the Social World of Early Christianity*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Stark, 16-17.

which is odd considering James is head of the Jerusalem Church; he must have been in very close contact with non-Diaspora Jews. Why, then, write a letter to the Jews of the Diaspora? Ben Witherington III argues that James is responding to the letters of Paul, who emphasized contact and conversion of anyone but the Jews in Israel. “Part of the function of this homily called ‘James’ was to help the audience to not be misled or confused by some reports about or versions of Paul’s message as well as to confirm them in their commitment to various Jewish ways of viewing life and religious practice.”<sup>16</sup> For example, while Paul argues that the Mosaic Law is optional, James disagrees when he wrote, “faith apart from works is dead” (Jas. 2:26). He interprets the story of Abraham to underscore this idea: works make one’s faith complete. So while issues of circumcision and the like do not arise as they do in Paul’s letters, the tension between what once was and what is becoming is apparent. Like many Jewish-Christians, James “draw[s] upon the existing rules and resources available, simultaneously reproducing them and transforming them.”<sup>17</sup>

Opposition from Judaism was also due to the fact that Christianity was new. The typical response from already established religions is suspicion and scorn because the NRM does not have the same credibility as a religion that has been around for centuries, or in the case of Judaism, thousands of years. Judaism’s ancient history is one of the primary reasons why Rome tolerated its presence and made special exemptions with regards to emperor worship and Jewish rituals. While Christians were vilified as atheists

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<sup>16</sup> Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done With Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible*, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 195.

<sup>17</sup> David G. Horrell, “Becoming Christian: Solidifying Christian Identity and Content,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Approaches*, Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime and Paul-Andre Turcotte, eds., (New York: Altamira Press, 2002), 311.

due to their monotheism, Jews were “licensed atheists”.<sup>18</sup> Yet as suddenly as Christianity appears as a sect within Judaism, it quickly becomes more than just a blip on the religious radar. Not only has Christianity become competition for obtaining new converts, it has claimed to be the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and Law. In short, it appears to be using Judaism for its ancient authority while altering or simply rejecting core Jewish beliefs and rituals. “Association with Judaism would then have had advantages, since Christians could move under the protective umbrella of Judaism”<sup>19</sup> as much as that protection would do any good. In the Jerusalem church, these changes probably took place at a later date and at a much slower pace, hence the gradual break between Jew and Jewish-Christian. Those Christians spread throughout the Empire, however, quickly became differentiated from the Jews around them, especially because many Christians outside Jerusalem were not Jews to begin with.

One argument of social-scientific theories is that “persons and groups tend to accept religious compensators for rewards that do not exist in this world.”<sup>20</sup> Before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the Sadducees operated as priests and did not espouse any particular view of the afterlife. The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed in the resurrection of the body. Neither group, however, offered a complete picture of life after death. Yet several texts from the Hebrew Bible hint at a hope for future redemption and happiness. Psalm 16:10 reads: “Because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption.” See also Job 19:25: “For I know that my redeemer lives and at last he shall stand upon the earth; and after my

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<sup>18</sup> Harold Remus, “Persecution,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Approaches*, Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime and Paul-Andre Turcotte, eds., (New York: Altamira Press, 2002), 436.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians: 70 – 170 CE*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Stark, 36.

skin has thus been destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God.” The book of Daniel offers the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where the phrase “everlasting life” occurs: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

Jesus, however, offered many thoughts and words about death and eternal life. Examples include Jesus’ conversation with the Sadducees about marriage in heaven and resurrection (Mk. 12:18-17) as well as the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk. 16:19-31). However, the focal point of the Christian notion of the afterlife is, of course, Jesus’ resurrection. He is portrayed as conquering death, returning as an immortal in glory and power. Followers of Christ can expect the same when the resurrection of the dead takes place. Christianity offered a clear explanation of death and the afterlife in comparison with that of Judaism, which could not boast the same certainty. These answers would have been attractive to some people.

Also in comparison to Judaism, “Christianity was unusually appealing because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large.”<sup>21</sup> The Acts of the Apostles, as well as Paul’s epistles reflect the trend of women in leadership roles in early Christianity. In Acts, Luke tells us that a “disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas or Gazelle” had passed away and she was noted for her “good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36) and also Priscilla, who had the authority to teach a man “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). In the closing section of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Paul mentions Phoebe, “a deaconess of the church” (Rom. 16:1), Mary (16:6) and Julia (16:15). Prisca, who is suspected to be the Priscilla from Acts, is found in Romans (16:3), first Corinthians (16:19) and second

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<sup>21</sup> Stark, 95.

Timothy (4:19). “Those who previously held no status or value [such as women] now claim exclusive privilege of both.”<sup>22</sup>

Judaism and Christianity obviously had many similarities and were attractive religions to join. Yet one of the ways in which Christianity appeared more appealing to the God-fearers and other converts was that it offered “a coherent culture that was entirely stripped of ethnicity.”<sup>23</sup> Almost everything that had been alluring in Judaism could be found in Christianity but as an added bonus, for example, one did not need to be circumcized or follow the Mosaic Law if one so desired. “This form of Christianity preserved all the advantages of its Jewish heritage but without the only two factors that might otherwise have inhibited its growth – the obligation of ritual law and the close connection between religious and national identity.”<sup>24</sup> Paul put it best, when he wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In order to become a Christian one was not prevented from doing so because of gender or ethnicity.

### **In the Beginning (c. 30 – 49 CE)**

Flavius Josephus (63 – 100 CE), a Jew turned Roman historian, wrote about Jesus in his *Antiquities*: “And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him.”<sup>25</sup> Most scholars have rejected this fragment as a later Christian interpolation or at least deemed it problematic. Louis H. Feldman argues that the original text must have read

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<sup>22</sup> Gager, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Stark, 213.

<sup>24</sup> Gager, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Flavius Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*. XVIII, 3.3, in *Josephus: Complete Works*, translated by William Whiston, (Michigan: Kregel Publishing, 1960), 379.



something like this: “And when, on the indictment of the principal men among us, Pilate had him [Jesus] sentenced to the cross, still those who before had admired him did not cease (to rave).”<sup>26</sup> It has been argued that the content had been altered sometime between 280 and 324 CE, perhaps by Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote in his *Church History* that Josephus was in fact a believer in Christ (Book I, 11), while Origen, who wrote years earlier in *Against Celsus*, said that Josephus was not (Book I, 47). It is important to note, however, that Josephus understands himself as a Jew, so when he writes “the principal men amongst us,” he is saying that some high standing Jews pushed Pilate to crucify Jesus. The canonical gospels also confirm that Jesus’ death was directly related to the hostility from some high-ranking Jews but such a statement holds more weight when coming from a non-Christian source. Further on, Josephus writes

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike the previous extract about Jesus, “few have doubted the genuineness of this passage.”<sup>28</sup> James was executed in the early 60s, around the same time as Peter and Paul. Unlike Peter and Paul, however, James was put to death by elite members of the Jewish community. Eusebius writes that James was thrown from the highest pinnacle of the Temple, then stoned and finally clubbed (Book II, 23). It would appear that some 30 years after the death of Jesus, opposition was still coming from some powerful members of the Jewish community, so powerful that they could sway local Roman authority.

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<sup>26</sup> Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus in Nine Volumes: IX Jewish Antiquities, Books XVIII-XX*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 48.

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*. XX, 9.1, Whiston, 423.

<sup>28</sup> Feldman, 496.

In the year 49 CE, the Emperor Claudius (41 – 54 CE) expelled the Jews and Jewish-Christians from Rome. Suetonius (c.69 – c. 150 CE), Roman biographer and historian, simply states, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus<sup>29</sup>, [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.”<sup>30</sup> The Acts of the Apostles supports this statement, indicating that Paul met future disciples Aquila and Priscilla because they had been expelled from Rome along with all other Jews (Acts 18:2). Ben Witherington III claims that both Jews and Jewish-Christians were exiled.<sup>31</sup> This is not an unreasonable assumption, given that any rebel rousers causing major disturbances would most likely be silenced quickly, whatever side they happened to be on. Claudius is often portrayed as the saner and more stable emperor nestled for a short time between two emperors lacking those qualities. Rather than promote a violent solution to the problem, expulsion of both parties seems more fitting with Claudius’ style. The important idea to consider is that at this point in time, both groups were most probably considered a single entity, namely, Jewish, by the Roman government.

### **Persecution in the New Testament (c. 50 - 80 CE)**

It appears that even at the very early stages in Christianity, the ties that bind it to Judaism are already starting to snap under the tension.

The Acts of the Apostles is widely accepted as having been written sometime in the 80s; it recounts what happened from the time of Jesus’ resurrection (early 30s) until

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<sup>29</sup> There has been a debate as to whether Chrestus meant Christ. In his *Apology*, Tertullian mentioned that the Romans sometimes mispronounced the word “Christians” (3.5). However, in the *Life of Nero*, Suetonius does not make this mistake. Chrestus was also a common name in antiquity; “chrestos” means “good” in Greek. See Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars* 5, 25 in *Suetonius*, translated by J.C. Rolfe. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Witherington III, 187.

Paul's death (early 60s).<sup>32</sup> When this document was written, the fall of the Temple in 70 CE had already occurred while the Bar Kokhba revolt had not. In this testimony, can one find the portrayal of the Sanhedrin and a mob of Jews as persecutors of the Christians trustworthy? The Sanhedrin clearly distinguishes itself from the Christians, harassing them in order to get them to stop spreading their alleged blasphemy (Acts 5:40). A Jewish mob was provoked and riled up into stoning a Greek Christian, Stephen (Acts 7: 58), whom the liturgical texts of the Church and modern scholars now refer to as the first martyr or proto-martyr. We are told three different times in Acts (8; 22; 26) that Paul, a Pharisaic Jew sought out Christians to persecute them, although the reader is not told why. Paul admits to his fledgling communities in Corinth (1 Cor. 15:9), Philippi (3:4-6) and in the province of Galatia (Gal. 1:13, 23) that he did indeed pursue those who called themselves Christians.<sup>33</sup> Once Paul heard the call or underwent a conversion (scholars debate this detail) on the road to Damascus, he experienced intense suffering for the sake of the gospel message, which he lists in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often gone without food, in cold and exposure.

Particularly poignant is Paul's linguistic turn from "the Jews" to "my own people." Paul's words testify with other early Christian sources that Christianity and Judaism have already begun disassociating themselves from one another.

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<sup>32</sup> "Acts of the Apostles" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Ed. E. A. Livingstone. Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Even before God blinded him, Paul was spreading the message across the Diaspora because he forced the disciples out of Jerusalem for fear of persecution. Ironically, the more Paul persecuted the Christians, the more Christianity spread.

The Gospels also indicate friction between Jew and Christian. Stephen G. Wilson divides the canonical Gospels according to the time period in which they were written and gives titles that describe certain events that spoke to both Jew and Christian. For example, the Gospel of Mark is the “shadow of war – apocalypse and crisis,”<sup>34</sup> speaking of a foreshadowing of the Jewish Wars as well as the fall of the Temple. Matthew is “the shadow of Yavneh – authority and praxis,”<sup>35</sup> which points to the city of Yavneh where a rabbi opened a centre for learning after 70 CE thus securing the survival of the Jews by underlining the importance of the Law. Luke and the Book of Acts are joined and named “the shadow of Rome – synagogue and state,”<sup>36</sup> which identifies the difficulties experienced between Jews, Christians and the Roman Empire. Finally, John is entitled “the shadow of orthodoxy – from messianism to ditheism,”<sup>37</sup> which speaks of the struggle for some to accept the issues of Christology and the changed meaning of the word ‘messiah’. By dividing and naming the Gospels, Wilson is simply demonstrating in abbreviated form the complexities that the Jews and Christians shared and those hardships which initiated tension and hostilities between both groups.

### **The Neronian Persecution 64 CE**

In the year 64 CE, the city of Rome caught fire and a vast portion of it was burned to the ground. Rumour had it that Nero himself set fire to the city so that he might rebuild Rome to his liking, his own “Neropolis.” Who has not heard the expression, “Nero fiddled while Rome burned”? Rumour eventually turned to legend and most of Nero’s

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, 71.

antics described by ancient historians generally support it. In any case, the people began to demand retribution in some shape or form. The historian and Roman senator Publius or Gaius Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56 – c. 120 CE) reports that Nero chose as his scapegoats the Christians. Tacitus explains that, while the Christians were “hated for their abominations,” the tortures inflicted on them were so much that “there arose a feeling of compassion” for them.<sup>38</sup> Ronald Martin writes that “as an ex-consul and former governor [Tacitus] shared the belief of his contemporary Pliny the Younger that Christianity was a subversive foreign belief not deserving of that general tolerance that Rome showed to other religions.”<sup>39</sup> It would seem, then, unlike Tacitus to write of any sympathy toward the Christians. Could it be that despite Tacitus’ feelings of contempt for the Christians, he felt pity for them during the unusually brutal punishments of Nero? Why else would he mention these sentiments? Nero’s cruel genius included dousing Christians with oil and hanging them in his garden then lighting them on fire, dressing them up in animal skins and setting wild dogs on them, and of course, crucifixion. Tacitus emphatically describes how hated and mocked Christians were for their superstitious beliefs but admits that Nero seemed to be appeasing his own love of death and carnage.

Oddly enough, despite the rather detailed account given by Tacitus, other Roman historians fail to mention the Christians at all. Suetonius records the fire in his *Life of Nero* but does not make any connection with the Christians: “Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.”<sup>40</sup> Suetonius does not clarify what the Christians were punished for, only that “many abuses were

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<sup>38</sup> Tacitus. *The Imperial Annals of Rome* 15, 43 in *Tacitus: The Annals of Imperial Rome*, translated by Michael Grant, (Markham: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), 365.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Marin. *Tacitus*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 183.

<sup>40</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, 16, 111.

severely punished and put down.” Likewise, yet many years later, historian and Roman consul Cassius Dio (c. 164 – c. 229), also mentions the fire in Rome yet does not refer to the Christians but instead blame is laid at Nero’s feet: “There was no curse that the populace did not invoke upon Nero, though they did not mention his name, but simply cursed in general terms those who had set the city on fire.”<sup>41</sup> Noted equestrian and author of *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder (24 – 79 CE) alludes to the fire of Rome in passing in Book XVII, when he discusses a particular type of tree that could be seen in Rome until “the Emperor Nero set fire to the City.”<sup>42</sup> Again, the Christians are in no way connected to the fire, but this could simply be because Pliny was solely interested in botany rather than history. The only other ancient source that does relate the fire to the Christians is Sulpicius Severus (c. 360 – c. 430 CE), an advocate turned Christian historian in his *Sacred History*. “[Nero] therefore turned the accusation against the Christians, and the most cruel tortures were accordingly inflicted upon the innocent.”<sup>43</sup> This account, however, was written in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, some 350 years after the fire had taken place. When Severus was writing his *Sacred History*, Christian martyrdom had already become a fundamental part of what it meant to be Christian. The first martyrs to die for being Christian would no doubt be venerated and their memory honoured. In any case, it is obvious that those alleged scapegoats had a huge impact on future Christians.

We must return to the question, “Why do some ancient sources mention the fire and the accused Christians, while others do not?” Was it really a persecution or merely a convenience? If the Christians were indeed singled out, this means the Roman

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<sup>41</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 52, translated by Earnest Cary, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 117.

<sup>42</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 17, 1.5, translated by H. Rackham, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *The Sacred History*,

government along with its citizens, viewed this group as a separate entity from the Jewish people. W.H.C. Frend suggests that “the likelihood, however, is that Nero tried to make the Jews scapegoats and the latter diverted the odium on to the upstart synagogue of the Christians.”<sup>44</sup> If this is true, then the Romans did not yet know enough about the Christians in order to make them scapegoats but the Jewish population did. If the Jews were merely tolerated but still abused “as the dregs of society”<sup>45</sup> it would be plausible that some Jews would surrender a sect within Judaism as a means of escape – especially if that sect were viewed as subversive. Michael Bland Simmons disagrees when he writes: “both the pagan intelligentsia and the political administration of the Roman empire were able, beginning with Nero (54-68), to distinguish between Judaism and the Christ-movement as separate religious entities.”<sup>46</sup> In order for scapegoating to work there needs to be popular resentment against the Christians. In order for there to be popular resentment, the Christians must be known as a separate religion from Judaism or at least a distinct sect within it. The only flaw with this idea is that Pliny the Younger (c. 61 – c. 113 CE), governor of Pontus and Bithynia in 112 CE, corresponded with the Emperor Trajan (98 – 117 CE) inquiring how to deal with a group called Christians. If the Roman government knew the Christians well enough to differentiate them from the Jews in 64 CE, there would have been no need to discuss the issue 48 years later. Either way, the Jewish people may have felt relieved to find someone else to take the blame. It may well have been a survival tactic, a malicious plot to rid Rome of Christians, or both.

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<sup>44</sup> W.H.C. Frend, “Martyrdom and Political Oppression” in *The Early Christian World Vol. II*, ed. Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 2000), 820.

<sup>45</sup> B. Walker. *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1960), 244.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Bland Simmons, “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Oppression,” in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler Vol. II., (New York: Routledge, 2000), 840.

Another question worth considering is if the Christians had indeed been scapegoats for the fire, how many in total were martyred? Furthermore, it is unclear whether they had been condemned for arson or simply for being Christian or both. If the number of Christian deaths was small, it was most likely not a persecution but rather a ploy to appease the fire victims of Rome. Also, if the Christians were charged with arson, it was clearly about needing a scapegoat rather than a determined effort to rid the city of Christians. Or, perhaps, it was “killing two birds with one stone”: find someone to pay for the fire and at the same time put down a sect apparently subversive and superstitious.

One must remember that Christianity was never a monolithic entity (the same can be said still today). Different regions produced different practices and beliefs within Christianity. Some of these differences were subtle while others were irreconcilably vast. Similar to its offspring, Judaism had to deal with its own splinter groups; the Essenes are probably one of the most well-known of these. The Essenes were an ascetic and strict Law-observing community for whom the high priests of the Temple were scorned and distrusted. Therefore, Christianity was not the first sect but it appeared to be one of the more problematic for Judaism. It is still unclear, therefore, whether at this point in time Judaism saw Christianity as a sect or independent competitive religious group.

### **The *Birkat Ha-Minim* (c. 85 CE)**

One of the more popular pieces of evidence scholars use when describing the schism between Jewish-Christians and Jews comes from the *birkat ha-minim*, which means “benediction concerning heretics.” This benediction comes from the late first



century and is a part of the *Amidah* (literally, “standing”), eighteen benedictions that were regularly recited in the synagogues. The *birkat ha-minim* reads as follows:

For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the *nosrim* and the *minim* be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.<sup>47</sup>

Reuven Kimelman explains that a *min* (the singular of *minim*) simply refers to a deviant Jew, while *nosrim* is the term for Nazarenes. He notes, however, that *nosrim* was added after the original benediction had been formulated and that the change signified a direct involvement of Jewish-Christians but not Gentile Christians.<sup>48</sup> As far as Jewish leaders were concerned, Jewish-Christians were Jews who had strayed from the fold. “After all, there was no sin in making the error (as it was to the Tannaim) of believing someone to be the Messiah.”<sup>49</sup> Paul Billerbeck explains his take on the curse:

On the contrary, the ban is designed as an *inner-synagogue* means of discipline, the purpose of which is to correct a member of the synagogue by bringing him to a state of obedience to Torah and to Torah’s representatives. This shows that the ban is intended to hold a man to synagogue. It is never employed to expel one from the synagogue.<sup>50</sup>

Lawrence Schiffman goes even further by differentiating between apostate and heretic: “A heretic is one whose *beliefs* do not accord with those of the established religion to which he claims adherence. An apostate is one whose *actions* are not consonant with the standards of behaviour set by his religious group.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, according to Schiffman, the Jewish-Christians are being singled out for their actions and beliefs. Perhaps the Jewish-Christians were becoming more and more lax with the law, influenced by their

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<sup>47</sup> Reuven Kimelman, “*Birkat Ha-Minim* and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition: Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period*. Vol 2. ed. E.P. Sanders, A.I. Baumgarten and Alan Mendelson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 226.

<sup>48</sup> Kimelman, 232.

<sup>49</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, “At the Crossroads: Tannaitic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition: Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period Vol 2*, ed. E.P. Sanders, A.I. Baumgarten, Alan Mendelson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 147.

<sup>50</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 25.

<sup>51</sup> Martyn, 139.

Gentile cousins. As for heretical beliefs, James Dunn argues that Christology was becoming more and more emphasized, forcing those sitting on the fence to choose between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps believing Jesus to be the Messiah could be tolerated but perhaps his divinity and relationship with God could not. It appeared that the Jewish-Christians “had abandoned the fundamental confession that God is one.”<sup>53</sup>

Schiffman defines “Jew,” arguing that “when the adherents of Christianity no longer conformed to the halakic definitions of a Jew,”<sup>54</sup> Christianity and Judaism divorced. He defines a Jew as the offspring of a Jewish woman, or a convert. A proselyte must live according to certain stipulations: 1) acceptance of the Torah 2) circumcision of males 3) immersion, and 4) sacrifice at the Temple (before 70 CE). Eventually, as Gentile Christians outnumbered Jewish-Christians, these requirements became less important for being a Christian and more to do with being a Jew. A Gentile Christian would see no reason to adhere to most of these. Eventually, only two, Torah and baptism, would become the norm for Christianity. It is likely that the Jewish-Christians slowly ceased enforcing these requirements, especially when leaders such as Paul fought against such things as circumcising new converts to Christianity (Rom. 2: 25-29, 1 Cor. 7:9, Gal. 5:6, Phil. 3:3, Col. 2:11). Furthermore, writes Schiffman, “by the time the temple was destroyed, the Jewish-Christians were a minority among the total number of Christians, and it was becoming clear that the future of the new religion would be dominated by Gentile Christians.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the Jewish authorities could have accepted Christianity as a sect of Judaism had it not been so clearly influenced by the Gentiles and eventually

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<sup>52</sup> James Dunn. *The Parting of Ways: Between Christians and Jews and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 222.

<sup>53</sup> Dunn, 228.

<sup>54</sup> Schiffman, 122.

<sup>55</sup> Schiffman, 149.

pagans. Dunn notes that after 70 CE Judaism grew inward, drawing in its boundaries while Christianity grew outward, pushing out those boundaries which Judaism sought to keep.<sup>56</sup> Unsurprisingly, the utter failure of the Jewish Wars had embittered many Jews who severed ties with the Greco-Roman world as much as possible. Christianity on the other hand, embraced Hellenism and used it to its advantage (particularly philosophy as demonstrated by Justin Martyr). Whereas “Judeans sensed that their survival depended upon their ideological (or religious) and social separation from the outside world”<sup>57</sup>, Christians did not feel the same need for their own self-definition and ultimate survival.

Both Christianity and Judaism were struggling to define who they were and what they believed in; Christianity because it was new with shallow roots and Judaism because of the destruction of the Temple. Daniel Boyarin argues that “orthodoxy/heresy [was] their favoured mode of self-definition in these two centuries.”<sup>58</sup> It makes sense, then, that both groups pitted themselves against one another pointing out each other’s differences in order to discover who they were by what they were not. According to Steven C. Muir, “the boundaries set through conflict may strengthen and maintain the group, uniting it over and against other groups.”<sup>59</sup> The same can perhaps explain the issues found in the Gospel of John.

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<sup>56</sup> Dunn, 222.

<sup>57</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginning of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 261.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>59</sup> Steven C. Muir, “Mending Yet Fracturing: Healing as an Area of Conflict,” in *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed., Ian H. Henderson and Gerbern S. Oegemo (Munich: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 58.

## The Gospel of John (c. 90 CE)

When discussing the relationship between Jews, Jewish-Christians, and Christians, the Gospel of John is essential reading. It is one of the more problematic texts in the New Testament, especially when it is read after the horrors of the Shoa. It is also a paradox. How is it that a Jew could be so anti-Semitic? Can it then be called anti-Semitism?

First, the use of “the Jews” should be discussed, as it is used seventy times and almost always in a negative way. Raymond Brown explains that “the Jews” is “almost a technical title for the religious authorities, particularly those in Jerusalem who are hostile to Jesus.”<sup>60</sup> Janis Leibig argues that John “intentionally obscures all identities and inflicts indiscriminate hostility upon all Jews—both of Jesus’ time and of his own.”<sup>61</sup> Rudolph Bultmann writes:

The Jews are spoken of as an alien people... Jesus himself speaks to them as a stranger and correspondingly, those in whom the stirrings of faith or of the search for Jesus are to be found are distinguished from “the Jews,” even if they are themselves Jews.<sup>62</sup>

A striking contrast to John’s Jesus and his relationship to “the Jews” is Matthew’s Jesus. In chapter 15 of Matthew’s gospel, a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus and begs him to save her daughter. Jesus answers “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.” (Mt. 15: 26-28). While Matthew’s Jesus does heal the woman’s daughter in the end, it is clear that he is more

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<sup>60</sup> Janis E. Leibig, “John and “the Jews”: Theological Anti-Semitism in the Fourth Gospel.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983) 2: 213.

<sup>61</sup> Leibig, 215.

<sup>62</sup> Leibig, 213.

interested in God's Chosen than in the Gentiles. John's Jesus, however, appears to be constantly at odds with the Jews.

J. Louis Martyn's in-depth study of the Fourth Gospel attempts to tease out the context in which it was written, explaining the author's hostility toward the Jews. He points out three passages (9:22, 12:42, and 16:2) that clearly indicate a rift between the Johannine community and "the Jews"; the common factor in each episode is threat of expulsion from the synagogue.

In John 9, Jesus heals a blind man and the Pharisees are divided in their response. Some are upset that Jesus healed on the Sabbath while others are in awe. Others yet refuse to believe that the man had been blind at all until they meet with the man's parents. When they are asked how it is that their son now sees they claim ignorance. Jn. 9:22 reads "His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue." This does in fact come to pass to the son, who is "cast out" (v. 34) and after conversing with Jesus after his ejection, confesses Jesus as Lord (v. 38). Martyn thinks that this passage indicates that a group of Jews, prior to John's writing, had already decided to expel Jewish-Christians from the synagogue and prior to this decision, confessing Christ was compatible with going to synagogue.<sup>63</sup> In relation to this story, John 5 tells us that Jesus heals another man, this time one that is lame. After he is healed, the man is confronted by "the Jews" (v.10) who demand to know who healed him on the Sabbath. The man does not know, however, but later discovers that it was Jesus and deliberately returns to "the Jews" (v.15) to tell them. John tells us that Jesus was then persecuted by "the Jews" (v. 16) because he healed on the Sabbath. Martyn writes "the blind man represented for John

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<sup>63</sup> Martyn, 18-19.

the Jew whose experience of healing inclines him fundamentally toward faith in Jesus. The lame man, on the other hand, represents the Jew who, though presumably thankful to be healed, nevertheless remains wholly loyal to the synagogue.”<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, the author of this gospel is alluding to the different types of Jews within the community: those who fully accepted Jesus as the Christ and those who believed Jesus to be a wise teacher and miracle worker but nothing more.

The next passage that gives evidence of a schism and expulsion of the Jewish-Christians from the synagogues is Jn. 16:2: “They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.” Martyn contends that John is simply writing about events happening in the present and projecting them back into the time of Jesus. Adele Reinhartz, however, argues that the “withdrawal was the result of the dissidents’ choice and not of a forceful exclusionary ban issued by the sages.”<sup>65</sup> While this might very well be true, it still stands to reason that if one is feeling intimidated and/or unwelcome, the obvious result would be to leave such an environment. Jack Sanders writes that the *birkat ha-minim* as discussed above “impels adherents of the heresy to form an alternative social movement; [it was] social ostracism.”<sup>66</sup> It would also be reasonable to think that the authorities would see this as inevitable and perhaps their objective all along.

The final passage that indicates expulsion from the synagogues is Jn. 12:42: “Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogues.” The author is

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<sup>64</sup> Martyn, 55.

<sup>65</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*. (New York: Continuum, 2001), 39.

<sup>66</sup> Jack T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First 100 Years of Jewish-Christian Relations*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993), 60.

telling the reader that there were Jews, leaders in fact, who were “closet Christians.” This secrecy was supposedly due to pressure from other Jewish authorities. One example is Nicodemus, “a ruler of the Jews” (3:1) who met with Jesus by dark of night to profess his belief that “God is with him” (3:2). However, he does not seem to understand or cannot accept what Jesus is saying. In any case, John uses the character of Nicodemus to prove that Jesus’ message is powerful and offers something that Judaism does not-- so much so that a leader within the Pharisees would risk everything to converse with Jesus. The expulsion from the synagogue “changed the Johannine circle –against their will—from a messianic group within the synagogue into a separate community outside that social and theological setting.”<sup>67</sup>

The Gospel of John is not the only source that suggests that the Jewish-Christians had been forced out of the synagogue. Justin Martyr mentions issues with the Jewish community twice in his *Dialogue with Trypho*: “and now you reject those who hope in him and in him who sent him – God the Almighty and Maker of all things – cursing in your synagogues those that believe on Christ.”<sup>68</sup> Kimelman argues “there were undoubtedly Jews in Rome in Justin’s time who cursed Christ to avoid suspicion by the Roman authorities of any illegal connection with Christianity.”<sup>69</sup> This means that rather than badmouthing the Christians for religious reasons, many Jews may have ensured their safety by distancing themselves as much as possible from their deviant brothers and sisters. Perhaps Frensdorff’s hypothesis that the Jews turned on the Christians in 64 CE to save themselves is not far from the truth. The following passage from the *Dialogue* indicates

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<sup>67</sup> Leibig, 218.

<sup>68</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 16, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc., 1948), 172.

<sup>69</sup> Kimelman, 235.

even more aggression: “each Christian has been driving out not only from his own property, but even from the whole world; for you permit no Christian to live.”<sup>70</sup>

Reinhartz does, however, make a good point when she discusses the characters of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In Jn. 11:1-44, Lazarus is deathly ill so Mary and Martha send for Jesus. Verse 5 reads, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” The reader understands that the sisters have faith in Jesus and that in turn Jesus favours them. When Jesus tells his disciples that he will go to his beloved followers, they worry, reminding him that “the Jews” (v. 8) wanted to stone him. When they do eventually arrive after Lazarus’ death, the sisters are surrounded by “the Jews” (v. 19) who are comforting them. If there is such hostility between the Jews and the Jewish-Christians, as John has taken great pains to demonstrate, why would the Jews bother to console their enemies? As with most questions pertaining to the life of Jesus, it is a question that cannot be answered with utmost certainty.

The characters in the Gospel of John range between those who accept Jesus as Messiah (the blind man, Mary, Martha and Lazarus), those who refuse (“the Jews,” the lame man) and those moving toward acceptance (Nicodemus).

Reinhartz states that the readers of John’s community, reading the gospel would look down on the Jews and also fear them – promoting anti-Jewish hostility.<sup>71</sup> Kimelman argues that the Gospel of John was written to persuade Christians to stay away from the synagogue, to convince Jews who confessed Christ that there was no turning back and finally to address the Gentiles who knew nothing of Judaism and Jews.<sup>72</sup> Whatever the

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<sup>70</sup> Justin Martyr. *Dialogue*, 110, 318.

<sup>71</sup> Reinhartz, 70-71.

<sup>72</sup> Kimelman, 235.



case may be, clearly the Gospel of John reflects tension between Jewish-Christians and Jews to a degree that is not really known.

### **Confusion and Taxes**

Suetonius writes in *The Life of Domitian* about specific taxes that had been levied against the Jews some years before. The concern during the reign of Domitian (81 – 96 CE), however, was the confusion between Jew and Christian. “Besides other taxes, that on the Jews<sup>73</sup> was levied with the utmost rigour, and those were prosecuted who without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people.”<sup>74</sup> Why would some Jews not publicly acknowledge their faith yet at the same time go to synagogue and adhere to the Law? Why did some Jews attempt to hide their origins? Was it to evade the tax or was it because they were no longer practicing? Perhaps it was because some of these Jews were in fact Jewish-Christians who saw themselves as increasingly distinct from their Jewish brothers. Going to synagogue on Saturday and to church on Sunday made them Jewish-Christians, not Jews; this is most likely why they would not publicly admit to being Jews. Of course, sparing yourself from taxes would probably be a motivating factor as well. If this is the case, then this is additional evidence that from very early on, as early as 64 CE, Jews and Jewish-Christians distinguished themselves from one another.

To further substantiate this claim is Celsus, a bitter critic of Christianity, who wrote sometime in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century about what he claimed were severe flaws in

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<sup>73</sup> This was an annual tax of two drachmae that had been issued by the Emperor Titus (79 – 81 CE), after the Jewish War of 66-70 CE, which he put down. See Josephus, *The Jewish War*. VI, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Suetonius. *The Lives of the Caesars*, 12, 367.

Christian belief. Most importantly for this chapter, however, is that he believed that Christians were simply apostate Jews who had corrupted Judaism.<sup>75</sup> One might understand this criticism as proof that Jews and Christians were seen as one entity; however, it actually confirms the opposite. Celsus is arguing that Christianity is *not* distinct from Judaism but merely a distorted version of it. If this is his argument, it stands to reason that the Christians were indeed promoting themselves as something unique from Judaism (although admitting their ancestry) and Celsus felt compelled to react to this.

### **The Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE)**

The Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 CE) was cause for further schism between the Jews and the Jewish-Christians. Simeon bar Kosivah was the leader in a revolt against the Emperor Hadrian in 132 CE when it was discovered that the emperor wished to install a temple dedicated to the god Jupiter on the site of the former Jewish Temple. Some believed Kosivah to be the Messiah and he was renamed bar Kokhba (“son of the star”), which stemmed from a passage from the book of Numbers (24:17):

I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near.  
A star will come out of Jacob;  
a sceptre will rise out of Israel.  
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,  
the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.

Some saw in Bar Kokhba a prophecy fulfilled, a Messiah that would end the tyranny of Roman government. “Their goal was not only to enthrone the King-Messiah, their general, but also to rebuild the Temple, re-establish the priesthood, and restore the sacrificial cult.”<sup>76</sup> Eusebius describes the revolt:

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<sup>75</sup> See Michael Bland Simmons, 858.

<sup>76</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 36.

The leader of the Jews at this time was a man by the name of Barcocheba (which signifies a star), who possessed the character of a robber and a murderer, but nevertheless, relying upon his name, boasted to them, as if they were slaves, that he possessed wonderful powers; and he pretended that he was a star that had come down to them out of heaven to bring them light in the midst of their misfortunes.<sup>77</sup>

Cassius Dio also mentions the war in his *Roman History*: It was “a war of no slight importance nor of brief duration, for the Jews deemed it intolerable that foreign races should be settled in their city and foreign religious rites planted there.”<sup>78</sup> Despite their efforts the revolt ultimately failed and ended in a siege on Beth Thera where most of the followers of Bar Kokhba eventually starved to death.

The Jewish-Christians, caught between allegiance to their ancestry and to Jesus as the Christ, chose not to fight with Bar Kokhba. Aligning with Bar Kokhba was tantamount to professing him as the true Messiah. Justin Martyr writes in his *First Apology* that “in the Jewish war which lately raged, Barchochebas, the leader of the revolt of the Jews, gave orders that Christians alone should be led to cruel punishments, unless they would deny Jesus Christ and utter blasphemy.”<sup>79</sup> To recognize another as the Messiah was equivalent to treason and would demand punishment. Yet perhaps another reason why the Jewish-Christians rejected the notion of rebellion was because they were by and large pacifists and more importantly, understood the coming Kingdom of God differently than those who followed Bar Kokhba. It was no longer about nationality or a free Israel but about self-sacrifice and love of God and neighbour.

After the failed revolt, the Emperor Hadrian expelled the Jews from Jerusalem and anything having to do with Judaism had become a crime punishable by death; the Torah

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<sup>77</sup> Eusebius. *Church History* 4, 6 translated by Roy J. Deferrari, *Eusebius Pamphili: Ecclesiastical History Books 1-5*, (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 213.

<sup>78</sup> Cassius Dio. *Roman History* 69, 12, 447.

<sup>79</sup> Justin Martyr. *First Apology* 31, 67.

was forbidden as was circumcision (although scholars believe circumcision had actually been forbidden before the revolt).

## **After 135 CE**

While the destruction of the Temple and the Bar Kokhba revolt clearly had a serious impact on relations between Jewish-Christians and Jews, this does not mean that dialogue between the two groups ceased completely after 135 CE. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, written sometime between 150 and 160 CE, suggests that some Jews and Christians were in deep conversation with one another. "Justin has some kind of first-hand awareness of the kinds of objections that knowledgeable Jews would bring to such Christian interpretation."<sup>80</sup> Dunn asks, was the *Dialogue* written to give ammunition for arguments with Jews or was it directed to Jews? While the truth remains unknown, this text is proof that Jews and Christians did not completely avoid each other.

### *Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity*

From the Jewish perspective, evidence of Christian and Jewish encounters comes from the Talmud and Midrash writings. *The Case of R. El'azar ben Damah* was written before 132 CE:

The case of R. El'azar ben Damah, whom a serpent bit. There came in Jacob, a man of Chephar Sama, to cure him in the name of Yeshua' ben Pandira, but R. Ishmael did not allow it. He said, 'Thou art not permitted, Ben Damah.' He said, 'I will bring thee a proof that he may heal me.' But he had not finished bringing a proof when he died. R. Ishmael said, 'Happy art thou, Ben Damah, for thou hast departed in peace, and hast not broken through the ordinances of the wise; for upon every one who breaks through the fence of the wise, punishment comes at last, as it is written [Eccles. 10.8]: 'Whoso breaketh a fence a serpent shall bite him.'

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<sup>80</sup> Dunn, 50.

Jacob is clearly a Christian, a follower of Yeshua, the Hebrew name for Jesus. Jacob offers to heal R. El'azar in the name of Jesus but the Rabbi Ishmael refuses. R. El'azar dies and Rabbi Ishmael says that it was better for him to have died "in peace" rather than having become a heretic and accepting Christian healing. This text suggests the continued misgivings between the Christians and the Jews and also that "mainstream Jews considered the Christians pariahs, not suitable for regular contact."<sup>81</sup> Further evidence of this attitude is found in the writings that refer to dealing with *minim* (heretics):

Flesh which is found in the hand of a Gentile is allowed for use, in the hand of a Min it is forbidden for use. That which comes from a house of idolatry, lo! This is the flesh of sacrifices of the dead, because they say, 'slaughtering by a Min is idolatry, their bread is Samaritan bread, their wine is offered [to idols], their fruits are not tithed, their books are books of witchcraft, and their sons are bastards. One does not sell to them, or receive from them, or take from them, or give to them; one does not teach their sons trades, and one does not obtain healing from them, either healing of property or healing of life.'<sup>82</sup>

R. Travers Herford's commentary on this passage notes that the heretic is distinguished from the Gentile, indicating that the heretic is indeed worse than the Gentile, "presumably on the ground that the ceremonial law in regard to food is unknown to the former, and wilfully violated by the latter."<sup>83</sup> This may be in reference to Paul's advice not to worry about eating meat that had been sacrifice to the pagan gods and idols (1 Cor. 10:25-33).

### *Melito of Sardis*

In the earliest of times it was necessary for Christianity to keep the connection with Judaism alive and well in order to receive the ancient authority that had kept the Jewish people in relative independence. Eventually this ceased to be true; evidence of this

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<sup>81</sup> Sanders, 61.

<sup>82</sup> R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*. (New Jersey: Reference Book Publishers, Inc., 1966), 177.

<sup>83</sup> Herford, 177.

can be found in the blatant condemnation of the Jews in the *Epistle of Barnabas* as well as in Melito of Sardis' *Peri Pascha*.

Around the year 170 CE, Melito wrote a homily on the *pascha* in which he retells the story of the Exodus from the Hebrew Bible and the Passion of Christ. The heart of the message is that the Passover has an important connection with the story of Jesus; in fact, Christ's death and resurrection is the "true" Passover. The Exodus in the Hebrew Bible was a coded sign of what (or rather who) was to come: Jesus. The last section blatantly criticizes Judaism and blames Israel for the death of Christ: "You dashed the Lord to the ground; you, too, were dashed to the ground, and lie quite dead."<sup>84</sup> Melito also wrote a letter to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161 – 180 CE) in which he argued that Christianity should be made the religion of the empire. He clearly knew the most fitting methods of persuasion for his particular audience: "Our philosophy first grew up among the barbarians (Jews), but its full flower came among your nation..."<sup>85</sup> W.H.C. Frend explains Melito's approach to Judaism:

Like Justin, he [Melito] exemplified the transition that was taking place, both among the Gnostics and orthodox in the last quarter of the second century, from a Christianity still tied to its Jewish past to a Christianity of "the third race," increasingly Gentile in outlook and ready to absorb and adapt what could be accepted from its pagan surroundings.<sup>86</sup>

Judith M. Lieu, author of *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century*, argues that Melito's homily reflects the situation in which he was living, much like John's gospel and the Johannine community. His reality was a "powerful synagogue, [a] struggling church, [and] a battle for possession of the past and

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<sup>84</sup> Melito, *Homily of the Pascha*, 99-100, translated by Stuart George Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 57.

<sup>85</sup> W.H.C. Frend, "Early Christianity and Society: A Jewish Legacy in the Pre-Constantinian Era," *HTR* 76 (1983) 1, 63.

<sup>86</sup> Frend, 63.

for identity.”<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, the anti-Semitism found in early Christian documents tarnished the important relationship that Christianity and Judaism share.

### *A Bond Remembered*

In Santa Sabina in Rome on Aventine Hill there stands a church with two important mosaics that date to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Side by side, they each depict a woman. Underneath one woman an inscription reads “Church of Circumcision” while under the other woman it reads “Church of Gentiles.” The bonds may have been broken between Christian and Jew by the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but there was obviously a conscious community made up of Jews and Gentiles believing in Jesus who remembered Christianity’s roots and its continuing link with Judaism.<sup>88</sup> Thankfully in recent years new light has been shed on Christianity’s powerful connection to Judaism and the continuation in this vein is looking bright.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that from very early on Christianity was seen as a deviant sect within Judaism and quickly thereafter as a separate entity entirely by the Jewish people. It was this understanding of Christianity that led to its discrimination by Judaism and paganism alike.

The fall of the Temple, the issues within the Johannine community, as well as the Bar Kokhba revolt, caused further enmity between Jewish-Christian and Jew. The Gentile

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<sup>87</sup> Judith M. Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 234.

<sup>88</sup> Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Co., 2007), 216.

Christians were thus even further removed from their ancestry and understanding of the Jewish people. Despite the attempts by some Jewish-Christians such as the author of James, to keep the bond with Judaism alive, theology and Gentile Christianity ultimately drove them apart. Christology was slowly becoming a prominent fixture in Christianity, something that could not be ignored by Judaism. Gentile Christians, who did not need a Jewish heritage in order to belong, began to outnumber Jewish-Christians. Since there remained a strict understanding of what it meant to be Jewish, which could not be altered, Jewish-Christians had to decide what their faith meant.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Christianity and Paganism**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter investigated the relationship between Christian and Jew and discovered that almost from the beginning Christianity was understood to be something other than Judaism or at the very least, a subversive sect within Judaism. It was this distinction that brought the Christians to the attention of the Roman authorities.

This chapter will argue that the Roman government and its civilians took up Judaism's stance on the Christians and that due to this understanding of Christianity as a perverted Judaism, persecuted them from the 60s up until the Diocletian Persecution in 302 CE. I will be looking at various issues that relate to the persecution of the Christians, such as popular opinion of the Christians, Christianity's opponents, the martyrs and the major state-sponsored persecutions and their contexts. These subjects will help discover why persecutions of the Christian community persisted and what these persecutions meant for the future of the Church.

#### **Christians and Pagans in the New Testament**

The earliest documented instances of Christian-pagan relations come to us from the New Testament. Paul's epistles speak of an extended hand reaching out from the Jewish-Christians to the Gentiles. The message of Christ was meant to be spread across the world to everyone, not only to the original chosen people according to Paul: "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9) and "the Gentiles are heirs together with

Israel” (Eph. 3:6). The many churches that he founded in the province of Galatia, in the cities of Thessalonica, Colossae, Corinth, Ephesus and Rome comprised a Gentile majority and it was in these places that Christianity thrived and remained active outside of Jerusalem. Paul’s ministry attests to those pagans who were called to the life of a Christian. It was not an abandonment of the Jewish people but rather a unique assignment to bring all people under one God.

The Gentile mission, far from being a contingency plan or reaction to the gospel’s failure among the Jews, stands at the heart of the affirmation of the righteousness of the God who “has consigned all of humanity to disobedience, in order that his mercy may extend to all humanity” (Rom. 11:32). The Gentile mission is a natural concomitant of the unity of God and of his grace.<sup>89</sup>

There were, however, those who rejected Paul’s undertaking and whom Paul dealt with on more than one occasion. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the hardships he has endured in order to teach about Christ:

I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23-28).

In short, the mission he undertook was not easy and was ignored or violently rejected many times by those who did not see eye to eye with his message. Resistance and hostility came from many sides, including both Jew and Gentile.

The four canonical gospels offer various examples when Jesus meets a Gentile and more specifically a pagan. Depending on the author, Jesus reacts accordingly. For example, in the Gospel of Luke (7:1-10), a centurion approaches Jesus and begs him to heal his servant. Filled with compassion, Jesus complies and turns to go cure the servant.

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<sup>89</sup> D.R. de Lacey, “Gentiles,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 338.

Instead, the centurion says, “Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed” (v. 7). Astonished at his faith, Jesus restores the servant back to health and praises the Roman soldier: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (v.9). Since the author of Luke-Acts was a Gentile it comes as no surprise that a pagan was described as having more faith than a Jew.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew is largely accepted by scholars to have been a Jewish-Christian, which may explain the story (15:21-28) in which Jesus heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman. Although this passage has already been described in the previous chapter, I think it important to refer to it again in order to point out Jesus’ interactions with non-Jews according to each Gospel author.

Despite the woman’s desperate pleas, Jesus ignores her. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away. Begging on her knees before him Jesus finally acknowledges her: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v.26). Undeterred, the woman humbles herself further by accepting this label and at last Jesus heals her daughter. This pericopae stands in stark contrast to Luke’s Jesus. Whereas the Lucan Jesus immediately turns to heal the centurion’s servant, it appears the Matthean Jesus must be persuaded. Although Matthew no doubt took this story from Mark’s Gospel (7:24-30), it is important to note that Luke did not, just as Matthew did not include the story about the centurion, also found in Mark. The intended audience must have had a particularly important influence on what the authors decided to include and exclude in their texts. The time when the Gospels were written also plays an important role. For example, Mark includes both “types” of Jesus, which may have something to do with the fact that he wrote before the Temple fell in 70 CE. Matthew’s audience was most likely

predominantly Jewish and therefore may have necessitated a more “pro-Jew” Jesus whereas Luke’s audience necessitated a more “pro-pagan” Jesus.

Jesus’ trial and crucifixion as related in the gospels illustrate how the early Christians perceived Roman-Christian affiliation. The Roman soldiers “mocked” (Mk 15:30), “ridiculed” (Lk 23:11), “struck” (Jn 19:3) and “spat on” (Mt 27:30) Jesus once he had been arrested. Was this because they truly hated him or was it simply because they thought him a threat to Roman stability? It is debatable whether these accounts accurately describe the type of relationships pagans and Christians had at that time and whether they foreshadowed the tensions to come. The treatment of Jesus, as an arrested and convicted criminal, does not necessarily prove that pagan and Christians were hostile toward one another during that time. It may give evidence, however, of hostility between Christian and pagan when the gospels were written, some 30 years and more after Jesus’ death.

### **The Deaths of James, Peter and Paul (ca. 60s CE)**

Three of Christianity’s great leaders were all put to death within the same decade of the 60s. According to Josephus, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, was stoned to death by a group of Jewish authorities<sup>90</sup>. The lives of Peter and Paul, however, were taken by Roman authorities. Eusebius records in his *Church History* that “Paul was beheaded in Rome itself and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero.”<sup>91</sup> Writing in the early third century, Tertullian makes mention of their deaths in his *The Prescription against Heretics*: “How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! Where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! Where

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<sup>90</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200.

<sup>91</sup> Eusebius. *Church History* 3, 138.

Paul wins his crown in a death like John's!"<sup>92</sup> The apocryphal books of the *Acts of Peter* and the *Acts of Paul* written circa 180–190 also record that “[Nero] insisted that he [Paul] should be executed”<sup>93</sup> and that Peter, when faced with crucifixion said, “of you, executioners, I ask to crucify me with head downwards, and not otherwise”<sup>94</sup> because he was not worthy. Rather than dissuade Christians, the deaths of Peter, Paul and James had the opposite desired effect. “That Peter would gladly follow his Savior to the cross, despite the fact that the end of times was delayed, must have been a powerful reinforcement of faith for Christians not asked to pay such a price for belonging.”<sup>95</sup> Evidently, at this point in history there were definite and specific plans to go after particular Christian figures. In order to determine why these leaders were sought out and killed, one must find out how the Roman authorities and civilians perceived the Christians.

## **Popular Opinion of the Christians**

As discussed in chapter one with regards to the Jews, one social-scientific theory of New Religious Movements posits that neophytes to the religious scene are automatically branded as “cult” or “sect.” They are regarded with suspicion, denounced to authorities, opposed by existing religious groups who feel that the newcomers are trespassing on their turf, and sometimes opposed by government authorities. “Christianity was a newcomer, with no land to call its own, no history, no book recording this history,

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<sup>92</sup> Tertullian. *The Prescription against Heretics*.

<sup>93</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, 11.4, quoted from *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, J.K. Elliott, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 387.

<sup>94</sup> *The Acts of Peter*, 37.8 quoted from *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 425.

<sup>95</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the West World in a Few Centuries*. (New Jersey: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1997), 187.

and little to win admiration.”<sup>96</sup> To the ordinary Roman citizen, what little was known about Christianity was probably not good. Tacitus called Christianity “deadly”<sup>97</sup>, Suetonius “novel and vicious”<sup>98</sup>, Pliny “degenerate” and “extravagant,”<sup>99</sup> and many apologists including Justin Martyr reacted to the label “atheist.” If Christians refused to worship the gods, they must not have believed in those gods or they considered them to be evil gods. The monotheist god of their religion was irrelevant. Other accusations against the Christians included cannibalism due to the celebration of the Eucharist, incest, and “overturning the lamp,”<sup>100</sup> which referred to the darkness at their meetings that hid their alleged sexual promiscuity with one another. Another label that Christianity was given was *superstitio* (superstition). In our modern times, this accusation does not hold much weight but in that period “*superstitio* designated practices and customs foreign to Rome. Coupled with this was the further idea that such religions nurtured vulgar and base conceptions about the gods, encouraged irrational and bizarre practices, and generated fanaticism.”<sup>101</sup> Therefore, not only was Christianity alien to the pagans, it was also corrupt, without scruples.

Archaeological evidence also points to perhaps popular opinion of the Christians. A wall near Palatine Hill in Rome was found in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with ancient graffiti, which dates back as early as the late first century and as late as the early third century. It has been entitled the *Palatine Graffito* or the *Graffito Blasfemo*, which depicts a man crucified on a Roman cross but with the head of an ass. To his left is an image of a man,

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<sup>96</sup> Robert L. Wilken, “The Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) Saw Them,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition: Vol I. The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, ed., E.P. Sanders (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 104.

<sup>97</sup> Tacitus. *Imperial Annals of Rome* 15.44.

<sup>98</sup> Suetonius. *Life of Nero*. 16.2.

<sup>99</sup> Pliny the Younger. *Letter* 10.96.8.

<sup>100</sup> Justin Martyr. *First Apology*.

<sup>101</sup> Wilken, 105.

facing the crucified with an arm raised. Underneath, in crude Greek, it reads, “Alexamenos worships [his] god.”<sup>102</sup> Scholars interpret the crucified man as Jesus (although the guilty party may not have known this specifically—only that it was Alexamenos’ divinity) with the head of an ass because it was commonly believed that Jews worshiped donkeys; this erroneous belief remained with the Christians, as did the idea that Christians worshipped “the sun or the wooden cross as their deity.”<sup>103</sup> Therefore, the “artist” was mocking Alexamenos (and all Christian believers) for two reasons: their savior suffered crucifixion, the most humiliating execution, which was reserved for the worst criminals, and also that their savior was supposedly partly animal, an ass no less.

### **The Reign of Domitian (81-96 CE)**

During the administration of Domitian, taxes were levied upon the Jewish people. It was the “consistent aim of the Roman government to confine Judaism within racial boundaries.”<sup>104</sup> No doubt the same tactic was attempted with the Christians. The problem with this method, however, was that “the Christians spread through all classes and throughout the Mediterranean world, and carrying no distinctive marks or emblems.”<sup>105</sup> It was important to Roman authorities to try to define and confine the Christians in a particular mold because they wished to keep a close watch and rein on them. The reason for this is explained by observers of New Religious Movements which have noticed similar attitudes in modern times.

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<sup>102</sup> Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, eds., *Religions of Rome, Volume 2*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58.

<sup>103</sup> Beard, 57.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Keresztes, *Imperial Rome and the Christians: from Herod the Great to about 202 AD. Vol. I*. (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 85.

<sup>105</sup> W.H.C. Frend, “Martyrdom and Political Oppression,” in *The Early Christian World Vol II*, ed., Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 2000), 835.

Opposition to NRMs comes from many angles and one of them is from governments struggling to balance religious freedom with public safety. Even in these early times, the Roman authorities desired above all stability for the empire. One of the ways in which this was carried out was through emperor worship and deification as well as making sacrifice to the gods. While Rome did not particularly care about a citizen's ethical practices or whether or not the person actually believed in the powers of sacrifice, it did care that everyone did their part by partaking in pagan temple rituals. These customs ensured a prosperous and peaceful empire. By refusing to sacrifice, Christians were threatening the *pax Romana* or the *pax deorum* ("the right harmonious relationship between gods and men"<sup>106</sup>). G.E.M. de Ste Croix explains that "emperor-worship was enforced in Asia Minor, and that the Christian sect was proscribed when Christians refused to take part in it, the charge being really political disloyalty."<sup>107</sup> Particularly important is to understand what is happening in the Empire at the time. Domitian fought battles against the Chatti, the Dacians and the Marcommani and also had problems with the Senate.<sup>108</sup> It should come as no surprise that Domitian was most probably desperate to keep stability and control. Writing some two centuries later, Eusebius had this to say about the emperor of the period:

Domitian, having shown great cruelty toward many, and having unjustly put to death no small number of well-born and notable men at Rome, and having without cause exiled and confiscated the property of a great many other illustrious men, finally became a successor of Nero in his hatred and enmity toward God.<sup>109</sup>

At this point in history, Christianity had become something of an enemy of the empire.

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<sup>106</sup> G.E.M. de Ste Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?" *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 24.

<sup>107</sup> Ste Croix, 10.

<sup>108</sup> "Domitian," Ed. John Roberts, in the Oxford Reference Online, *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>109</sup> Eusebius, *Church History* 3.17.



## **Pliny the Younger and the Emperor Trajan (112 CE)**

The persecution of the Christians by the Emperor Nero in 64 CE has already been discussed at length in the previous chapter. What is important to remember for this chapter is that Nero differentiated the Christians from the Jews. He chose them as scapegoats rather than the Jews or any other NRM. Primary sources tell us that no one was shocked by this decision; in fact it was sanctioned by the attendance of Roman citizens at the local arena. This is why it is somewhat surprising when one reads a letter written by Pliny the Younger to his boss, Emperor Trajan (98 – 117 CE), in the year 112 CE.<sup>110</sup> Pliny was governor of Pontus and Bithynia and nephew of Pliny the Elder. In this letter addressed to Trajan, Pliny inquires about the punishment of a group of people called “Christians.” Pliny informs Trajan that he has interrogated these supposed Christians (i.e. tortured them) and those who confessed their belief in God were “interrogated” a second and third time. If they persisted in their confession, he executed them. Was this the proper procedure, Emperor? This letter has given scholars of early Christianity information about what the Christians did as a group: meeting on a fixed day every week, singing hymns, making oaths to lead moral lives and sharing a time of commensality together. Also of note is the mention of two deaconesses whom Pliny tortures, giving evidence of the ministerial roles women held in the early Church. Roman authorities often went after the leaders of the churches in hopes of dissolving the fledgling religious movement. Pliny concludes by stating that Christianity is nothing but “excessive superstition” that has made its way from the city to the countryside but does not worry too much. It should be easy to “reform” any who are in need of it.

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<sup>110</sup> Pliny the Younger. Letters

The Emperor Trajan's response is brief and to the point: Pliny is commended for following protocol. However, Christians are not to be sought out nor are any anonymous accusations brought against them to be taken seriously. Furthermore, if a Christian is proven to be guilty (i.e. of being Christian) he or she can obtain pardon by renouncing Christ and making sacrifice to the gods. "That was to become the standard test of allegiance to the gods of the empire."<sup>111</sup>

The fact alone that Trajan was willing to absolve people if they made sacrifices speaks to the perception of Christians by pagans. Christians posed no real threat so long as they worshipped the emperor and the gods. "The Christians were punished for the Christian name *alone* and without any relation to any of the *flagitia* ['disgraceful acts']."<sup>112</sup> After all, Pliny found no scandalous deeds to speak of so their only true crime would be failure to worship the gods.

So the question remains: if the Emperor Nero had already encountered Christians in 64 CE, why did Pliny need to ask the Emperor Trajan forty-eight years later about a group who called themselves Christians? A reasonable explanation would be that the Neronian persecution was in fact more of a convenience than a fervent desire to rid the empire of Christians. Perhaps the number of Christians who had died at the hands of Nero was so small that it failed to make ripples outside of Rome and thus quickly forgotten. Whatever the case may be, clearly the Christians were not widely known after Nero, only cropping up again on the Empire's radar during Trajan's reign. In addition, Trajan's response to Pliny ultimately set procedure when it came to dealing with Christians in the future.

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<sup>111</sup> Henry Chadwick, ed., *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 83.

<sup>112</sup> Keresztes, 117.

## The Heyday of the Martyrs

Between Pliny's letter and the first state-organized persecution under Decius (249-251 CE) there were many Christian martyrs. In his *Apology* (197 CE), Tertullian wrote "we [Christians] spring up in greater numbers the more we are mown down by you: the blood of the Christians is a seed of a new life,"<sup>113</sup> which falls in line with the theory of NRM that "martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom."<sup>114</sup> The Christian martyrs of the second century were elevated to what today we would call a "rock star" status, that is, they would be venerated, idealized and imitated. Well-known examples include Polycarp and Justin Martyr as well as lesser-known figures such as the female slave, Blandina.

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna in the mid-second century. In 155 CE, a crowd at the local stadium, no doubt worked into frenzy by the previous gladiator presentation, shouted, "Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for."<sup>115</sup> Leonard Thompson notes the probability that Polycarp had lived in peace as a Christian all his life in Smyrna up until that point. It is unclear why the people spoke up at all.<sup>116</sup> In any case, rather than flee, Polycarp awaits his arrest and openly admits to being a Christian. According to the narrative, the proconsul attempts many times to get Polycarp to recant but Polycarp persists. "When a recalcitrant person such as Polycarp was brought before the proconsul and, like his god, refused to negotiate on any terms, the governor had no choice but to

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<sup>113</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 50.

<sup>114</sup> Stark, 174.

<sup>115</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games," *The Journal of Religion* 82 (2002) 1: 34.

<sup>116</sup> Thompson, 34.

condemn him to the arena.”<sup>117</sup> He was killed by the sword and his body burned. His fellow Christians reportedly collected his bones afterward. The death of Polycarp is evidence that Christians in this time and place, were not persecuted or sought out, for if this were true, the local authorities would have arrested all those who came forward for Polycarp’s remains. It appears that some cases were isolated and circumstantial; as in 112 CE when Pliny gave Christians the opportunity to renounce their faith so too did this particular proconsul in Smyrna.

Justin Martyr is widely known for his *First Apology*, written about the same time that Polycarp was put to death. Since he was born to pagan parents, scholars guess that Justin converted to Christianity around the year 130 CE. Justin is celebrated as one of the first Christians to use philosophy to defend Christianity and is remembered in particular for his use of the Logos theory.<sup>118</sup> In the year 165 CE, Justin and his followers were accused of being Christian and refusing to sacrifice, were beheaded.

It is worth noting that Justin was martyred during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE) and yet attached to his *First Apology* as an appendix of sorts is a letter to the Senate, in which Aurelius recounts the battle against the Germans. Desperate for divine intervention of any kind, the Emperor gathers together the Christians in his army for prayer. Having won the campaign, Aurelius writes, “I counsel that no such person be accused on the ground of his being a Christian.”<sup>119</sup> This epistle is obviously spurious for a number of reasons, one of which is that an edict was enforced between 161-168 CE stating that all must sacrifice. It is this edict that brought Justin to his grave. Paul

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<sup>117</sup> Thompson, 40.

<sup>118</sup> In the Logos Theory, Justin explains that Christ is the incarnation of the Word or Reason of God but that portions of the Logos are disseminated in all people.

<sup>119</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*.

Keresztes argues that this edict was by no means anti-Christian but rather a political and social tactic to ensure peace (war was at hand) and health (the plague ran rampant) in the Empire.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, Aurelius may not have been instituting a Christian persecution but rather an attempt to bring stability to the empire.

Blandina is one of the more inspired and vivid of the martyr accounts. According to Eusebius, she was a Christian slave in the late second century. After having been arrested in Lyons along with her Christian mistress, she was tortured but refused to renounce Christ. The torturers “were astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken; and they testified that one of these forms of torture was sufficient to destroy life, not to speak of so many and so great sufferings.”<sup>121</sup> Blandina was then subjected to beasts in the amphitheatre but they did not approach her. Finally, after days of watching her fellow Christians die, she was scourged and thrown before a bull and was gored to death.

For the Roman authorities, whether a governor or proconsul, “the essential aim was to make apostates, not martyrs.”<sup>122</sup> In addition, the death of a Christian had more often to do with an uncontrollable mob rather than a proper trial and sentencing. It would be far easier to let a crowd run rampant than it would be to protect alleged criminals and follow protocol. Furthermore, if one wanted to keep a prominent position within the empire, control of the populace would be of utmost importance. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix explains:

If a governor, indeed, refused to do what was expected of him in this way, not only would he become unpopular: the general indignation against the Christians would be only too likely to vent

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<sup>120</sup> Paul Keresztes, “Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968) 3: 330.

<sup>121</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, V, XVIII.

<sup>122</sup> Ste. Croix, 20.

itself in riots and lynching, as we have evidence that it did on occasion; and once violence began, anything might happen.<sup>123</sup>

On the other hand, for Christian followers to know that someone gave themselves up to certain death “must have been a powerful reinforcement of faith.”<sup>124</sup> Moreover, the core of the Christian group was strengthened by the blood of the martyrs because people had to choose if they too were willing to die for their faith. The end result was that those freeloading off of Christian charity quickly moved on and those who remained were the stalwart adherents and promoters of the faith.

### **Celsus (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century)**

Between the years 175 and 181 CE, a Greek “eclectic Platonist”<sup>125</sup> wrote *The True Doctrine*, a scathing diatribe against Christianity. The work itself no longer exists but a large portion of it is quoted in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, written in the mid-third century. Celsus documents numerous issues with Christianity, including the virgin birth, the humanity of God and the alleged undermining of Jewish heritage. Particularly significant for this chapter, however, is his annoyance with Christian refusal to participate in feasts dedicated to the gods and also with Christians attempting to convert women and children.

When they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements, to the effect that they ought not to give heed to their father and to their teachers, but should obey them; that the former are foolish and stupid.<sup>126</sup>

In short, Celsus argues “that Christians directed their missionary work at the young, the uneducated, and the impressionable.”<sup>127</sup> He was thus implying that these social categories would be more vulnerable to manipulation and conversion. This falls in line

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<sup>123</sup> Ste. Croix, 16.

<sup>124</sup> Stark, 187.

<sup>125</sup> Chadwick, 111.

<sup>126</sup> Origen. *Contra Celsum*. Book 3, Chapter 55.

<sup>127</sup> Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts*. (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2001), 78.

with a theory of NRM that the public is concerned that NRMs may cause psychological damage, especially to the vulnerable. During Celsus' time, this included women and young people. Celsus also criticizes the Christians' rejection of war or more specifically their lack of participation. Origen replies that Christians are pacifists and help the Empire in their own way "by offering prayers to God."<sup>128</sup> Perhaps if the Christians offered prayers to the gods, Celsus would be less inclined to condemn them on this point.

Celsus' attack on Christianity gives the reader an idea of how a pagan might have viewed Christian belief and conduct. In addition, Origen's response to Celsus a century later also indicates the long-lasting effect that the words of Celsus had for pagans and Christians alike. Perhaps the arguments brought forth by Celsus continued throughout pagan circles and became more than a mere irritant to Christians – so much so that a theological powerhouse such as Origen had to respond.

### **Porphyry (mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century)**

Born in Tyre in the year 232 CE, Porphyry went on to become a well-educated Neoplatonist in Rome. He made it his mission to oust Christianity from the Empire and wrote volume after volume against it. None of his works have survived except in the texts of his adversaries because they were burned during the reign of Valentinian III and Theodosius II in 448 CE. W. Den Boer suggests that in all likelihood, Porphyry was brought up in a Christian environment due to his detailed knowledge of Christian texts and traditions. "The intensity with which he scouted the faith may therefore in part betray

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<sup>128</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Book 8, Chapter 75.

the attitude of a renegade.”<sup>129</sup> Ralph Martin Novak quotes fragments of Augustine’s *City of God* and Jerome’s *Commentary on Daniel*, both of whom respond to Porphyry’s attacks against the canonical Gospels, the apostles and Jesus himself.<sup>130</sup> Eusebius, however, attempts to use Porphyry to the advantage of the Church by exploiting “how close his moral and spiritual ideals stood to Christianity.”<sup>131</sup> That his many books continued to be sought out and burned years after his death testifies to Porphyry’s influence throughout the Empire, even after Christianity’s legalization.

### **The Reign of Decius (249-251 CE)**

The span between the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Decius is almost 70 years and throughout that period, persecution against the Christians was sporadic and varied according to region. Ste. Croix explains:

In reality, persecution went on automatically, if sporadically, whoever the emperor might be; and until the third century at any rate it is better not to think of persecutions primarily in terms of emperors. It was the provincial governor in each case who played the more significant role—and even his attitude might be less important than what I must call “public opinion.”<sup>132</sup>

That is to say that a local governor had more weight in local matters than would the emperor, who was far away in Rome, and that the local mob would have more weight than the local governor. It is not until Decius, however, that a state-sponsored persecution begins. J.W.C. Wand notes,

It was an official campaign, having nothing to do with that mob-law which had frequently been the cause of trouble for the Church in the past; it was universal throughout the empire, not confined to one particular province as such outburst often were before; and thirdly, it was systematic, beginning on a fixed day and leaving nothing to the initiative of local magistrates.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> W. Den Boer, “A Pagan Historian and His Enemies: Porphyry against the Christians,” *Classical Philology* 69 (1974) 3: 199.

<sup>130</sup> Novak, 135-138.

<sup>131</sup> Chadwick, 178.

<sup>132</sup> Ste. Croix, 15.

<sup>133</sup> J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church to A.D. 500*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 1965), 100.



One of the ways in which Decius made this persecution “official” was by *libellus*, a formal petition ordering everyone in the empire to sacrifice. In order to ensure that the populace participated, certificates were produced which recorded the date of the sacrifice, the name and signature of the person who sacrificed the town or city where the sacrifice took place and finally the signature of a witness. John R. Knipfing describes the *libellus* as

A petition of an inhabitant of the empire addressed to local authorities requesting that these countersign his declaration of pagan religious loyalty, and give written testimony of the pagan sacrifice performed by him in their presence, by adding their official attestation of loyalty and sacrifice.<sup>134</sup>

Why did Decius decide to enforce sacrifice? Again, the political circumstances of the Empire help decipher the reason: invasions from the Goths and other foreign assailants challenged the might of the Empire. “Decius seems to have felt that divine protection for the empire needed to be assured.”<sup>135</sup> From this point onward the “Church lived on only in hiding.”<sup>136</sup> Agnes Cunningham argues that it was also at this time in history when “Rome understood that Christianity was an autonomous religion with a following of noteworthy strength, [therefore] imperial administration took action against it.”<sup>137</sup> Along with Christianity’s independence from Judaism, the number of Christians also made authorities anxious. More Christians meant fewer sacrifices to the gods. Few sacrifices to the gods meant more natural disasters, wars, plagues and other catastrophes, according to the Roman understanding of the interdependence of things earthly and heavenly.

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<sup>134</sup> John R. Knipfing, “The Libelli of the Decian Persecution,” *Harvard Theological Review* 16 (1923) 4: 345.

<sup>135</sup> Simon Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, Noel Lenski, ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>136</sup> Paul Keresztes, *Imperial Rome and the Christians: from the Severi to Constantine the Great Vol. II*, (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 50.

<sup>137</sup> Agnes Cunningham, *The Early Church and the State*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 3.

The protocol issued by the Emperor Trajan in 112 CE, according to which Christians were not to be sought out and anonymous accusations were to be ignored did not hold by this point in time. “No [legal] foundation was necessary, other than prosecutor, a charge of Christianity, and a governor willing to punish on that charge.”<sup>138</sup>

### **The Theatre (mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century)**

In the meantime, Christians continued to suffer abuse at the hands of pagans, in many forms. There is a line in William Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It* that goes “all the world’s a stage,”<sup>139</sup> but Shakespeare probably did not realize how much his writing rang true centuries before he penned those words. Since time immemorial the theatre has been one way of ridiculing opponents, particularly governments and religions. The pagans often mimed Christian rituals, especially baptism. Dorothee Elm in her article entitled “Mimes into Martyrs: Conversion on Stage,” explains that mime and pantomime were known for “obscenities, [their] turbulent comedy of action and [their] stinging satire.”<sup>140</sup> So, no doubt the miming of baptism and other Christian rituals were done with the utmost disrespect and flamboyancy in order to evoke a reaction from the audience. Gregory of Nazianzus, bishop of Constantinople in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, wrote in his *Oratio in laudem Basilii* about spectacles such as these: “we have already – I can hardly speak of it

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<sup>138</sup> Ste. Croix, 17.

<sup>139</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, act 2, sc. 7, ed. Richard Knowles, (New York: Modern Languages Association, 1977).

<sup>140</sup> Dorothee Elm, “Mimes into Martyrs: Conversion on Stage,” in *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed. Ian H. Henderson and Gerbern S. Oegemo (Munich: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 89.

without tears – been represented on stage amid the laughter of the most licentious... and the most popular dialogues and scenes is the caricature of the Christian.”<sup>141</sup>

There were, however, stories of some men who got more than they bargained for when they decided to mime a baptism. Elm recounts the record of a man named Gelasinos who was performing in the Heliopolis theatre in modern-day Syria in the mid-third century. As was popular at the time, he was mocking the Christians on stage by miming a baptism. Legend has it, however, that Gelasinos actually received the sacrament of baptism and was converted in that moment. When he confessed his faith to the audience they thought that it was merely a performance but soon realized that he was serious and stoned him to death on stage.

Another example is Genesisius, who performed in front of the Emperor Diocletian. A “presbyter” and an “exorcist” appeared on stage and even before the mock baptism could take place, Genesisius was converted. He still appeared to be acting until he described to the audience his vision: a hand reaching down from heaven, angels reciting his sins and then washing them away and finally showing his new self to him in a mirror. Suffice to say his revelation was not well received – he was tortured and beheaded.<sup>142</sup>

Evidence of Christianity in the theatre is helpful on two counts. First, it demonstrates how much the Christians were scorned – so much so that people would pay to watch actors act out Christian rituals and speak Christian prayers (albeit in a lurid fashion). Second, it also reveals yet another way in which Christians managed to twist a bad situation in their favour. Whether anyone actually converted on stage is not the point

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<sup>141</sup> Elm, 90.

<sup>142</sup> Elm, 93.

but rather that the Christians used the opportunity to spread tales of the power of the Christian god.

### **Diocletian and the Great Persecution (303 – 312 CE)**

By the time of Diocletian (284-305 CE), the Christians are noticeable – they have rebuilt since the previous persecutions and on a much grander scale.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, Christians have infiltrated almost every social stratum. Rodney Stark estimates that by the year 300 CE, Christians numbered 6 million in a Roman population of 60 million.<sup>144</sup> Ralph Martin Novak, quoting Ramsay MacMullen, estimates the number to be somewhere around 5 million.<sup>145</sup> This means that the Christians represented 8-10% of the population, which is not an insignificant number. Therefore, when the Empire decided to strike out against the Christians, this time it too would be on a much grander scale.

Yet why did 50 years or so pass before another official persecution began? What was happening in the Empire? First, in 286 CE, Diocletian divided the Empire into East and West and designated Maximian his co-emperor. Then, in 293 CE, Diocletian divided the Empire into four quarters; the West represented and ruled by Diocletian himself and Constantius I, a junior emperor and the East by his other junior emperor, Galerius and co-emperor Maximian. With these new arrangements, the Empire boasted its largest administration to date. The need for stability became even greater with such a monumental government. Furthermore, the size of the Empire itself demanded more and more men to maintain its borders. The general population became overtaxed in order to sustain the necessary strength of the army. More and more foreigners were hired to make

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<sup>143</sup> Keresztes, 94.

<sup>144</sup> Stark, 7.

<sup>145</sup> Novak, 142.

up for the lack of Roman citizens in the army. “What Rome had achieved was political unity at the expense of cultural chaos.”<sup>146</sup> Wand suggests that general discontent, along with the rising population, influence and wealth of the Christians “brought upon the Church the jealousy of the pagans, and led to the formation of a strong anti-Christian party, headed by the Emperor’s son-in-law, the Caesar Galerius.”<sup>147</sup>

Christian apologist Tertullian (160-225 CE) wrote in defence of Christianity that their “crime lies in knowing the true God and in fidelity to him!”<sup>148</sup> This is a direct attack on the deification of the emperor and an argument for the Christian belief that no human creature could ever be elevated above their god. Annemarie Luijendijk, however, argues that “emperor-worship is a factor of almost no independent importance. Far more often it is a matter of sacrificing *to the gods* – as a rule, not even specifically to ‘the gods of the Romans’.”<sup>149</sup> In any case, whether due to lack of respect for the gods or the divinity of the emperor, the Christians were threatening.

While there is no evidence to suggest that Christians as a body were disloyal either to Rome or the emperors, the emperors were aware that this increasingly numerous and wealthy religion taught both that the Christian God was a higher authority than the emperor and that many fundamental aspects of the traditional pagan society and religion were immoral institutions that should be abolished.

I would argue, however, that in the eyes of Roman administration, Christians who refused to make sacrifices to the gods and perform emperor worship were indeed disloyal and troublesome.

In the year 302, Diocletian decreed: “the ancient religion ought not to be censured by a new one. For it is the height of criminality to reverse that which the ancestors had

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<sup>146</sup> Stark, 144.

<sup>147</sup> Wand, 124.

<sup>148</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, Book 30, 7.

<sup>149</sup> Annemarie Luijendijk, “Papyri from the Great Persecution: Roman and Christian Perspectives,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008) 3: 355, note 47.

defined, once and for all, things which hold and preserve their recognized place and course.”<sup>150</sup>

On February 23, 303, a state-sponsored persecution began. The Feast of *Terminalia* was held to celebrate the ensuing termination of the Christians.<sup>151</sup> The first of four edicts was enforced throughout the Empire beginning on that day: 1) destruction of churches and property to be confiscated; 2) all Christian scripture was to be burnt (normally anything of monetary value would be confiscated and sold but since Christian texts were deemed worthless, they were destroyed); 3) any Christian meetings were prohibited<sup>152</sup> and 4) Christians were to lose juridical privileges. The second edict, promulgated shortly thereafter, ordered the arrest of Christian authorities (priests, bishops, etc.). In the fall of 303, the third edict offered “amnesty to the incarcerated Christian clergy, granting them pardon on condition that they sacrificed.”<sup>153</sup> Finally, the last edict commanded all those within the Empire to sacrifice or face penalty of death.

Part of the first edict, destruction of the churches and confiscation of church property specifically, has left behind a paper trail for scholars to find. Luijendijk wrote an article about all the papyri from the Great Persecution, including papyri that documented what was taken from Christians. “They checked for lands, buildings, cattle money and precious metals, clothing and also slaves—these all could be sold.”<sup>154</sup> Wherever money could be made, the Roman authorities leaped on the opportunity. Otherwise, unimportant documents and texts were burned.

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<sup>150</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000*, Second Edition, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 60.

<sup>151</sup> Keresztes, 98.

<sup>152</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, “Aspects of the “Great” Persecution,” *HTR* 47 (1954) 2: 75.

<sup>153</sup> Ste. Croix, 76.

<sup>154</sup> Luijendijk, 350.

The second edict, which ordered the arrest of Christian leaders, was based on the belief that if those in positions of authority were imprisoned or executed, the movement would flounder and eventually disappear. This tactic had succeeded many times before in the history of the Empire. Take for example the figures of Theudas and ‘the Egyptian’. Josephus reports that not many years after Jesus’ death, Theudas proclaimed that he was a “second Moses” and that ‘the Egyptian’ foretold the fall of the Jerusalem wall. In both instances, before any prophecies could be verified, the Roman army rushed in and slaughtered many followers and Theudas himself. It is said that ‘the Egyptian’ escaped.<sup>155</sup> The Christians, however, were not elitist, in the sense that everyone was of equal importance. In the meantime, Rome left the large group of obvious Christians untouched, much to the detriment of their campaign.

The fourth aspect of the first edict, the loss of juridical privileges, is also attested in discovered papyri. A private letter entitled *P. Oxy. XXXI 2601*<sup>156</sup> is from a man named Copres to his sister Sarapias (scholars believe her to be his wife). In it, he informs his wife that he has made it to Alexandria safely from Oxyrhynchus (suggesting wealth) and that before he can bring his land issue to the courts, he must sacrifice. This must have been surprising to him, otherwise he would not have mentioned it. Rather than refuse, he gives his friend power of attorney so that he can sacrifice and proceed with the case for him. He signs the letter and ends with the number 99. Isopsephy, giving Greek letters numerical values so as to write in code, is one way in which Christians secretly communicated their faith. The number 99 translates to ‘amen’. This number, along with the mention of sacrifice in the letter, confirms scholars’ belief that Copres was a

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<sup>155</sup> Josephus, *War.* 2.261-3; *Antiquities.* 20.97, 167-72.

<sup>156</sup> Luijendijk, 357.

Christian. This also demonstrates one of the ways in which Christians found methods to keep their Christian identity a secret from the authorities. A bishop of Alexandria in the year 306 had this to say about these “loopholes”: “There are those who have not nakedly written down a denial but rather, when in great distress have mocked the schemes of their enemies: they have either passed by the altars, or have made a written declaration, or have sent pagans in their place. Six months of penance will be given to them.”<sup>157</sup> Evidently these types of practices were frowned upon but not to the point of excommunication as in the Donatist schism after some Christians renounced Christ to save their lives. It is difficult to be harsh with these Christians. After all, in their mind they are still Christian and avoiding pagan ritual as they have been taught.

Another clue about Christians at the time that one can glean from this letter is that Copres was in contact with pagans, since he entrusted his friend to make the sacrifice for him. Persecutions did not necessarily mean that Christians would dwell solely among Christians and that pagans would do the same. In this case, a pagan was willing to help out his Christian friend. Studies have shown that Christians would likewise lend a helping and healing hand to pagans during times of plagues and natural disasters. NRM theories suggest that in order for fledgling movements to survive, networks must be kept open and bonds between members have to be rather strong. Maintaining friendships and perhaps even familial ties was one such network, others include travel by land or sea.

According to Ste. Croix, throughout Diocletian’s persecution, Christians could be divided into three groups:

At one extreme the *lapsi*, who had either sacrificed or procured false certificates to that effect; at the other extreme the confessors, a few of whom were martyred; and in between the two, a substantial third group: Christians who were not arrested or called upon to make any public

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<sup>157</sup> Luijendijk, 362.



profession of their faith, but had at least run the risk of punishment for failing to sacrifice by the appointed day and might be charitably assumed to be ready to confess their faith should they be apprehended.<sup>158</sup>

Scholars have uncovered evidence that points to many Christians who would pay someone to impersonate them when public sacrifice was ordered (such as Copres), or those who would force their slave to sacrifice and sign a certificate on their behalf (even if the slave was Christian too). It has also been suggested that some literate Christians pretended otherwise “in order to avoid signing an oath swearing to the *tyche* of the emperors.”<sup>159</sup>

There were also voluntary martyrs, those who either purposefully sought attention in order to be arrested and executed or those who upon hearing the possibility of persecution remained to be found rather than flee. Tertullian in his *To Scapula* (ca. 210 CE), reports that when a large group of Christians came before the proconsul Arrius Antoninus, ready to be put to death, Antoninus waved a few away to be executed but to the rest he said, “O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have precipices or halters.”<sup>160</sup> Although written before the Great Persecution, this passage also demonstrates that not all Roman authorities were necessarily relentless in their capture and prosecution of Christians and some such as Antoninus found the entire situation more annoying than anything else.

Keith Hopkins argues that despite the organization and edicts by which the Empire tried to eliminate Christianity, full force could not and was not used.

But even these persecutions were not universally executed, because the Roman state lacked the steadfast will, the total control of its local administrators, and the dispersed resources to wipe Christianity out completely; besides, it always had other more pressing needs.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Ste. Croix, 96-97.

<sup>159</sup> Luijendijk, 355.

<sup>160</sup> Tertullian, *To Scapula*. Book 5, 1.

<sup>161</sup> Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire*. (London: Weinfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 112.

Likewise, Simon Corcoran argues that “enforcement was uneven, depending largely on the enthusiasm of governors or local magistrates, or even on the propensity of eager would-be martyrs seeking confrontation.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore, despite Diocletian’s efforts, the Christians could not be wiped out.

## **Conclusion**

Diocletian attempted a reform of the empire. It was meant to be a return to the gods and their divine protection, a cleansing of that which the government saw as subversive and dangerous. Due to reasons beyond the empire’s control or comprehension, this reform would ultimately fail and Christianity would ultimately spread and strengthen. The decisions made by the succeeding emperor would change the course of history for what was once an unknown Jewish sect.

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<sup>162</sup> Corcoran, 52.

## Chapter 3

### The Constantinian Revolution

#### Introduction

Social-scientific theories of NRMs have given the means to be able to understand what kind of relationships the Christians shared with Jews and pagans. In turn, these relationships have shed light on the persecution of the early Christian communities and what this meant for the Church's future. This chapter will discuss the pivotal role of the Emperor Constantine and how his approval catapulted Christianity into the impressive and monumental religion it would eventually become.<sup>163</sup>

#### Constantinian Revolution?

Some scholars, such as Rodney Stark, argue that it is misleading to call this period in history the Constantinian revolution or reformation. According to Stark, the population of Christians would have eventually grown so much that the emperor (whoever he may be) would have little choice but to embrace Christianity. Therefore, the fact that Constantine was emperor at the time and the one to legalize Christianity was merely happenstance. Stark is not the first (nor the last) to make this argument. Kevin Scott Latourette maintains that eventually the emperor would

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<sup>163</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Ian Henderson of McGill University for sharing his wealth of knowledge on the subject of the early Christian community and particularly for this chapter.

have settled matters amicably with the Christians to achieve some sort of peace<sup>164</sup> and Edward A. Johnson agrees that it was inevitable.<sup>165</sup>

In response to these arguments, I will enumerate three points. First, scholars can agree that there was indeed a revolution and that this revolution occurred during the reign of Constantine. Second, while another emperor may have had the foresight to legalize Christianity and perhaps even make it the official religion of the empire, it is impossible to say, however, whether said emperor would have invested the time, energy and money into Christianity as Constantine did. Third, and more to the point, Constantine tried to reform the empire and the way that he chose to do so was with Christianity. Note that he was not the first emperor to introduce reform. Diocletian responded to the same forces and issues as Constantine years before, but rather than work with Christianity, Diocletian attempted to eliminate it. Theodosius I, in years after Constantine, also attempted to reform the empire by instituting Christianity as the official religion of the empire. Each of these emperors faced the same problems and obstacles. Each of these emperors responded differently. Therefore, I maintain that the title Constantinian Revolution is accurate.

### **Emperor Constantine I (306-337 CE)**

The Emperor Constantine I, who reigned from 306 to 337 CE, was heir to Diocletian's massive administrative change and thus the complications that went with it. He shared his rule with Maxentius, who usurped power in Rome and

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<sup>164</sup> Kevin Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: the First Five Centuries*, (New York: Harper Press, 1937), 160.

<sup>165</sup> Edward A. Johnson, "Constantine the Great: Imperial Benefactor of the Early Christian Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979) 2: 162.

Licinius who ruled in the Roman province of Pannonia, which is present day Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. From early on in his political career “Constantine nursed aspirations to become the supreme and sole ruler of the empire.”<sup>166</sup>

Constantine worshipped the sun god, also known as Apollo. It was his monotheistic beliefs that probably allowed for him to be more sympathetic to the Christians and more understanding of their belief system. However, he was “first and foremost, a politician”<sup>167</sup> and scholars have debated as to the truth that Constantine was in fact a genuine Christian. Raymond Van Dam, for example, argues that “Christianity was not Constantine’s primary concern. Because the practical obstacles to establish imperial rule were overwhelming, becoming emperor, surviving as emperor, and imposing his authority were more pressing worries [than religious institutions].”<sup>168</sup> While the question of the historical authenticity of Constantine’s religious affiliation to Christianity is fascinating, the truth remains that Constantine chose Christianity as a means to unite the Empire.

### **Battle at Milvian Bridge (312 CE)**

In the fall of 312 CE, Constantine went to war with Maxentius and it was this momentous event that changed the course of history. Constantine’s vision of the cross on the eve of the Battle at Milvian Bridge is one of the most well known

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<sup>166</sup> Henry Chadwick, ed., *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 181.

<sup>167</sup> Bill Leadbetter, “Constantine and the Bishop: The Roman Church in the Early Fourth Century,” *The Journal of Religious History* 26 (2002) 1: 10.

<sup>168</sup> Raymond Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11.

Christian conversion stories. Simply put, Constantine saw (or dreamed depending on the version) a chi rho, the Greek letters 'X' and 'P', being the first two letters of the word 'Christ'. He was instructed to mark all shields and banners with this sign. Having obeyed this order he went to war against Maxentius and won.

The Christian apologist Lactantius wrote in his *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, written sometime around 317 – 318 CE, that

Constantine was directed in a dream to mark the celestial sign of God on his shields and thus to engage in battle. He did as he was ordered. He inscribed the name of Christ on the shields, using the initial letter X, crossed by the letter I with its top portion bent. Armed with this sign, the army took the sword.<sup>169</sup>

The battle was brutal; Maxentius' army, however, was soon overwhelmed and he reportedly drowned in the Tiber River.

The only other account comes from Eusebius of Caesarea, who recounted the event in his *Life of Constantine* circa 338 CE. Eusebius goes into much greater detail and with much more fanfare than did Lactantius. In this account, Constantine was desperate for some kind of divine intervention and received a vision of a cross "above the sun, and bearing the inscription, conquer by this."<sup>170</sup> According to Eusebius, despite his claim that the entire army shared in this apparition, Constantine could not decipher its meaning and did not ask anyone what it meant. That night, therefore, Christ appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to use the sign shown to him in his vision "as a safeguard."<sup>171</sup> Constantine prepared the

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<sup>169</sup> Lactantius, *On the Deaths of Persecutors* 44, quoted by Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Text*, (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2001), 156.

<sup>170</sup> Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts*, (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2001), 157.

<sup>171</sup> Novak, 157.

army by marking all banners and shields with the symbol and they were victorious in battle.<sup>172</sup>

Both authors maintain to have received this information from Constantine himself. Lactantius was tutor to Constantine and later to his son, Crispus, while Eusebius was in contact with Constantine after the persecutions. Since both men had close dealings with Constantine each claim is plausible. Lactantius' account, however, was written relatively shortly after the battle while Eusebius' was much later. Ralph Martin Novak notes that Lactantius describes the chi rho in an odd and confused manner, apparently not realizing or understanding the symbol to be the letters 'X' and 'P'. Eusebius on the other hand immediately deciphers the chi rho and its relevance. This and the relative proximity in time to the battle itself have caused scholars to give more weight to Lactantius' account rather than to Eusebius'.

Yet Novak notes that "it is one of the most difficult historical events to understand or explain because of the silences, inconsistencies, and ambiguities found in the extant accounts of these events."<sup>173</sup> One such account comes from the speech *Panegyrici Latini*<sup>174</sup> from the year 310 CE, which invokes the gods, specifically Apollo and Victory, to provide divine protection for Constantine. Moreover, the address claims that Apollo appeared to the Emperor in a vision, which ensured his victory against Maximian, father of Maxentius. If there was even

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<sup>172</sup> Many scholars have noted that the phenomenon that Eusebius describes is known as a solar halo, which occurs when ice crystals fall across the rays of the sun and appear as rings of light around the sun or a cross of light in the middle of the sun. See Ralph M. Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts*, (Pennsylvania, Trinity Press International, 2000), 159; Oliver Nicholson, "Constantine's Vision of the Cross," *Vigiliae Christianae* 53 (2000): 311; and TD Barnes, "The Conversion of Constantine," *Classical Views* 4 (1985): 371-391.

<sup>173</sup> Novak, 154.

<sup>174</sup> Novak, 154-155.

the slightest hint that Christianity was more than just a passing interest to Constantine, argues Novak, there is no way a subject would dare make such a speech. This suggests that favouring Christianity above all other religious traditions was not foreseen, a mere three years before the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.

Whatever the case may have been, Constantine clearly experienced some sort of change of heart (or mind) because Christianity eventually received his approval. Furthermore, two pagan sources suggest something indeed had changed. The *Panegyrici Latini* from the year 313 CE celebrated Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge; while it did not mention his vision of the cross and "attributed various divine qualities to Constantine in a traditional manner, [it] never referred to any pagan god by name."<sup>175</sup> The other pagan source, the *Inscription on the Arch of Constantine*, did not depict the vision or any Christian symbols but the inscription, like the panegyric, does not mention the name of even one pagan god. Instead it honours Constantine's "Divinity"<sup>176</sup> for his success. Novak understands these silences as "the political response of the pagan political elite toward the still rather disreputable Christian faith of the new emperor."<sup>177</sup> As Emperor, Constantine probably went unchallenged (at least publicly) when he announced his newfound faith to the senate. Just the same, perhaps he knew better than to reflect these changes immediately in speeches and arches by overt and blatant Christian jargon and representations. Or perhaps "Constantine believed the god of the Christians was on his side, but this did not mean a rejection of other gods."<sup>178</sup> For example,

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<sup>175</sup> Novak, 161.

<sup>176</sup> Novak, 161.

<sup>177</sup> Novak, 161.

<sup>178</sup> Charles Freeman, "The Emperor's State of Grace," *History Today* 51 (2001): 11.



when Apollo was his personal divinity this did not mean that Constantine enforced Apollo-worship for the entire empire.

In any case, whether the alleged occurrence at Milvian Bridge is Christian propaganda from Constantine or Christian apologists, or whether historically accurate is irrelevant. The fact remains that something or someone had a profound effect on Constantine's understanding or value of Christianity. To complicate matters further there is "the difficulty of separating Constantine's personal religious beliefs from his political acts as a Christian emperor in a pagan political environment."<sup>179</sup> Charles Freeman argues that one of the problematic events after the Battle at Milvian Bridge was the Edict of Milan, also known as the Edict of Toleration, granted by Constantine and Licinius in the year 313 CE. Freeman argues that "a true Christian brought up in the tradition that the polytheistic world was evil could hardly have supported it"<sup>180</sup> due to the fact that one could adhere "to that religion which he feels to be most suited to himself"<sup>181</sup> This means that, as long as one prayed to their god or gods for the well-being of the emperor and empire, all religions could be tolerated. This is a far cry from the future emperors who endorsed pagan persecutions. Either Constantine was still caught between his pagan past and his possible Christian future or his political ambitions proved subtle yet ingenious. He slowly bid his time until the most opportune moment to release the Christian Church from oppression and later elevating Christianity to new and

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<sup>179</sup> Novak, 162.

<sup>180</sup> Charles Freeman, 9.

<sup>181</sup> Novak, 162.

unprecedented heights, making himself its “heavenly messenger from God”<sup>182</sup> and eventually immortalized as Constantine “the Great.” H.A. Drake argues, however, that Constantine “thought of Christianity as an “umbrella” organization, able to hold a number of different wings or factions together under a “big tent” of overarching mutual interest.”<sup>183</sup> This would explain Constantine’s conflicting actions after his conversion. For Constantine, it was not necessary to choose; it was not an either/or situation at the time.

### **Licinius**

Once the Edict of Milan had been issued, Constantine now had to convince the Christian community that he was trustworthy. “Confidence had to be established so that Christians themselves could be convinced of the emperor’s sincerity, and the emperor be confident of their support.”<sup>184</sup> As with most revolutionary changes, however, the reality of the situation was different than the promise of a new social order. Christian persecution did not cease all together after 313 CE. Licinius, now Constantine’s sole adversary, was also a monotheist and was not known for persecuting Christians; nevertheless Constantine found a way to goad Licinius into battle and gain further trust with the Christians. When Constantine negotiated “behind [Licinius’] back with the Christian king of Armenia, Licinius played into Constantine’s hands by forbidding Episcopal synods, ordering churches rigorously

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<sup>182</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.10-14, quoted from Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts*, (Pennsylvania, Trinity Press International, 2000), 173.

<sup>183</sup> H.A. Drake, “Constantine and Consensus,” *Church History* 64 (1995) 1, 1-15:4.

<sup>184</sup> Leadbetter, 2.

to segregate the sexes and harassing Christians near the Armenian frontier.”<sup>185</sup> In short, Constantine conspired so that Licinius would distrust his Christian subjects and eventually persecute them. The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (present day Sivas, Turkey) are a few of the more popular Christian martyrs at the hands of Licinius. Forty Christian prisoners were left naked on a frozen lake just outside the city for an entire night unless they renounced their faith. To further tempt them, warm baths and blankets were made readily available on the shore for them should they recant. Only one prisoner gave in and his place was taken by one of the soldiers, whom it is said was immediately converted. The rest eventually perished in the night.<sup>186</sup> Whether the exact details of this account are true, it is safe to say that such an occurrence was not improbable. With Licinius now cast as the villain, Constantine waged war against him (and his unbelieving, non-Christian ways) at Chrysopolis. Successful in his campaign, Constantine reinforced his pro-Christian policies, reassured his Christian populace and managed to become sole emperor in 324 CE. Licinius was subsequently beheaded in Thessalonica.

## **Eusebius of Caesarea**

One of the most well-known figures in early Christianity is Eusebius of Caesarea. Due to his many contributions and activities during the Constantinian era, specifically his relationship to Constantine, as demonstrated by his work *The*

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<sup>185</sup> Chadwick, 188.

<sup>186</sup> Chadwick, 188. See also "Sebaste, the Forty Martyrs of" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Ed. E. A. Livingstone. Oxford University Press, 2006. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Concordia University Library,

*Life of Constantine* mentioned above, Eusebius is almost always considered alongside Constantine and thus important for this chapter.

Between his birth around the year 260 and his death in 340, Eusebius' accomplishments are many: bishop of Caesarea, all the while a biblical scholar and church historian. Probably his greatest achievement, however, or perhaps the achievement for which he is most well known, is his *Church History*, which has provided scholars with a detailed narration of events beginning with the origins of the Christian church up to the reign of Constantine. *Church History*, along with other historical descriptions of Eusebius' words and deeds, have garnered him numerous characterizations.

[He is] a political propagandist, a good courtier, the shrewd and worldly adviser of the Emperor Constantine, the great publicist of the first Christian emperor, the first in a long succession of ecclesiastical politicians, the herald of Byzantinism, a political theologian, a political metaphysician, and a caesaropapist.<sup>187</sup>

These judgments have been articulated for numerous reasons but most notably are Eusebius' theological beliefs, his account of historical events and his relationship with Constantine.

With regards to his theology, Eusebius argued, like the Arians, that Jesus was God's highest creature but a creature nonetheless. He believed that "a transcendent God requires a mediator between Himself and Creation, [which] made it virtually impossible for him to arrive at a truly Trinitarian understanding."<sup>188</sup> This discernment led to his excommunication along with Theodotus of Laodicea and Narcissus of Neronia at the Council of Antioch in 324. Despite this pronouncement,

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<sup>187</sup> Michael J. Hollerich, "Religion and Politics in the Writings of Eusebius: Reassessing the First 'Court Theologian'," *Church History* 59 (1990) 3, 309-325: 309.

<sup>188</sup> K.R. Constantine Gutzman, "Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and his 'Life of Constantine': A Heretic's Legacy," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 (1997) 3-4, 351-358: 352.

Eusebius was given a second chance at the Council of Nicaea a year later at which he presented a creed that did not exclude Arians. To the dismay of many, Constantine approved the creed so long as Eusebius accepted that the Son was equal to the Father. Eusebius grudgingly agreed. “[Eusebius’ enemies] were compelled to receive Eusebius, whom they still considered heretical, back into communion or to brand Constantine as a heretic for sharing the unorthodox beliefs of the bishop of Caesarea.”<sup>189</sup> This episode explains some of modern scholars’ particular interpretations of Eusebius as listed above. It also explains the notion that Eusebius was close with Constantine and might have had political ambitions beyond his role as bishop.

Eusebius’ scholarship has prompted reactions that he “promoted a particular sort of Christian emperor that conveniently corresponded to his own doctrines.”<sup>190</sup> In particular, his *Church History* has been at best observed and at worst criticized for its mistakes in chronology and editing to suit Eusebius’ present needs. Eusebius’ goal, however, was not objectivity nor was this ever a claim made by Eusebius himself. Perhaps to the modern mind, labelling Eusebius a historian seems inaccurate by today’s standards. Nevertheless, Eusebius chronicled his understanding of events, which says something in itself about the Christian movement and Eusebius as the author. These can be explained by Eusebius’ relationship with Constantine.

Timothy Barnes argues that Eusebius most likely met Constantine a total of four times and only for specific purposes such as the Council of Nicaea. He did not

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<sup>189</sup> Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 216.

<sup>190</sup> Van Dam, 227.

actually live near the emperor so it is highly improbable that Eusebius was a close and trusted adviser to Constantine. Were Eusebius' grandiose accounts of Constantine and his works mere political schemes? Barnes and Michael J. Hollerich argue to the contrary. Eusebius was "a biblical scholar both by instinct and by training,"<sup>191</sup> and he wrote commentaries on books of the Bible, such as Isaiah. It was his belief that God manifested his will through space and time, that is, history. Eusebius compares Moses, Jesus and Constantine, offering their lives as proof of God's hand in history. Each in their own way were liberators; Moses from the Egyptians, Jesus from sin and death and Constantine from pagan oppression.<sup>192</sup> Eusebius offers the defeat of the Pharaoh in the Red Sea alongside the drowning of Maxentius in the Tiber River as an example for comparison. This did not mean, however, that Moses, Jesus and Constantine were equal to one another in their role fulfilling God's will. While Eusebius may have disputed the equality of Father and Son, this did not mean that he reduced Jesus' status nor elevated Constantine's. Eusebius' devotion to Constantine therefore, was "because he was already disposed to see the empire as having an essential role to play in God's plan,"<sup>193</sup> not necessarily because Eusebius had grand ideas about becoming socially and politically elite. Due to his belief that God worked through history, Eusebius worked with the idea that the emperor was God's instrument on earth.

The truth behind Eusebius' actions and words can never fully be known. Suffice it to say that he played an important role in the elevation of Constantine to the first holy Roman emperor, Constantine "the Great."

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<sup>191</sup> Barnes, 94.

<sup>192</sup> Hollerich, 323.

<sup>193</sup> Hollerich, 315.

## Constantinople, 324 CE

Constantine continued his political manoeuvring by establishing Constantinople on the Greek city of Byzantium in 324 CE. While Rome remained the sacred capital of the Roman Empire, Constantinople, the “new Rome,” was founded to protect the empire’s borders more efficiently but quickly became “space for a new and Christian foundation.”<sup>194</sup> Expanding Christianity into Asia Minor “meant the grafting of a highly Christianized region onto an empire that, otherwise, remained generally and covertly “pagan” in many ways.”<sup>195</sup> To make Constantinople a respected and Christian city, Constantine “imported ancient statues and monuments from Rome”<sup>196</sup> in order to make it look old and rooted deep in history. In short, “the foundation of Constantinople conspicuously reaffirmed the increasing importance of the northern and eastern frontiers. It furthermore highlighted the importance of the army, Greek culture, and Christian Constantinople would become a military, Greek, and Christian capital.”<sup>197</sup> By its mere existence, Constantinople would cause Rome to lose its once dominant position in the empire.

Unknowingly, by establishing a strong Christian foothold in the East, Constantine revealed a fragmented Christian community rife with theological disputes. This led to one of the most important events of Christian history: the Council of Nicaea.

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<sup>194</sup> Chadwick, 188.

<sup>195</sup> Gérard Vallée, *The Shaping of Christianity: the History and Literature of its Formative Centuries (100-800)*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 109.

<sup>196</sup> Van Dam, 306.

<sup>197</sup> Van Dam, 39.

## Nicaea, 325 CE

If Constantine's goal was to unite the empire under a cohesive Christianity, splintering factions would obviously hinder that. It is a well known fact that there were a variety of Christianities after the death of Jesus, including Novatianists, Valentinians, Marcionites, Paulianists, Montanists as well as Arians and up until this point these groups remained relatively minor issues for the proto-orthodox church because no one had forced these differences to be resolved. The particular controversy that sparked Constantine's intervention was a dispute between Alexander, a bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria about the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father. Alexander summed up his opponents' beliefs in this way:

God was not always Father, but there was [a time] when God was not Father. The Word of God did not always exist, but came into existence out of nothing. For God, who existed, made him who did not exist out of what did not exist. Hence, too, there was a time when he was not. For the Son is a creature and an object. He is neither like the Father in substance, nor the true and natural Word of the Father, nor his true Wisdom, but one of the created objects, and he is improperly called Word and Wisdom, since he himself came into being by the proper Word of God and the Wisdom in God, in which God made both everything and him. Hence he is both mutable and changeable by nature, as are all rational creatures. The Word is alien to, different from, and separated from the substance of God, and the Father is invisible to the Son. For the Word neither knows the Father perfectly and exactly nor can see him perfectly. And the Son does not know the nature of his own substance. For he was made for our sake, so that God might make us by means of him, as by a tool. And he would not have existed had not God decided to make us.<sup>198</sup>

Therefore, Constantine summoned a council of bishops to discuss the matter and come up with an agreed upon resolution.

Before Constantine took action, however, he attempted to resolve the matter himself by writing a letter to both parties, urging them to back down. Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* contains this letter, written a year before the council was to take place. In it, Constantine may have revealed his lack of understanding as to the

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<sup>198</sup> Barnes, 203.



importance of this dispute, referring to it as “truly insignificant” and “intrinsically trifling and of little moment.”<sup>199</sup> This either demonstrates Constantine’s faith and understanding in its infancy or the mind of a ruler who does not particularly care about the “truth” but rather that the problem be settled quickly and without much fuss. Or, perhaps Constantine’s “reason for finding so little value in a matter of such great theological significance was his recognition of the need to accommodate diversity.”<sup>200</sup> This brings us back to the point about Constantine not banning paganism right after his conversion or advertising Christianity in his speeches. Perhaps Constantine, coming with an understanding of a polytheistic empire, knew that the *pax Romana* was best kept by tolerance. In this letter written to both Arius and Alexander, he writes, “As far, then, as regards the Divine Providence, let there be one faith, and one understanding among you, one united judgment in reference to God. But as to your subtle disputations of questions of little or no significance, such differences should be consigned to the secret custody of your own minds and thoughts.”<sup>201</sup> To come from an environment in which many gods and rituals were accepted so long as the gods were honoured and the rites conducted to achieve prosperity for the empire, must have been a strange change of pace for Constantine. Whether these are the words of an uneducated emperor in the matters of theology, anxious for unity and stability or the words of a clever and liberal leader is debatable. Despite this letter, Arius stood firm and Constantine summoned the bishops to council.

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<sup>199</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.68, 172.

<sup>200</sup> Drake, 4.

<sup>201</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 2.71, quoted from H.A. Drake, “Constantine and Consensus,” *Church History* 64 (1995) 1, 1-15: 4.

Set originally for Ankyra, the meeting place was then moved to Nicaea (both in present day Turkey) by Constantine so that the bishops from the West might have easier access.<sup>202</sup> In the end, Arius' theology was condemned and he was exiled. The Nicene Creed was composed and Constantine had all those bishops who would not sign it sent into exile as well. "By force of his personality and power as the first Christian emperor, Constantine pressured the bishops into an agreement over the resolution of the Arian controversy."<sup>203</sup> While Constantine helped crystallize Christian doctrine, he did so by flexing his imperial muscle in order to enforce this cohesion.

### **Nicaea: Defining God, Defining Emperor**

Perhaps just as important as defining Jesus for the Christian community and for Constantine himself, was the task of redefining the emperor. "The theological search for the identity of Jesus Christ and the political search for the identity of a Christian emperor were complementary aspects of the same discourse about power and representation."<sup>204</sup> While the council of Nicaea is best known for its debates about the divinity and humanity of Jesus, it also brought to the fore a new understanding of emperor. Whereas previously the emperor was synonymous with the Antichrist, a new thought-process had to be developed. "Because Jesus was their prototype of a Christian ruler on earth, the appearance of a Christian emperor in their midst compelled them to reconsider both notions of imperial rulership and

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<sup>202</sup> Chadwick, 198.

<sup>203</sup> Novak, 175.

<sup>204</sup> Van Dam, 13.

doctrines about divine Rulership.”<sup>205</sup> Therefore, the council of Nicaea brought up the redefinition of the person of Jesus Christ and also of the person of Roman emperor.

Several inscriptions throughout the empire also attest to this redefinition. On Vatican Hill, for example, an inscription dedicated to St. Peter also reflects Constantine’s vision of himself and perhaps the Christians’ opinion of him as well: “Under your leadership the world has raised itself triumphant to the stars. As a result, Constantine the victor has built this hall for you.”<sup>206</sup> Another inscription reads: “This [church] that you see is a seat of justice, a house of faith, and a hall of modesty. All piety possesses it. This celebrated [church] rejoices in the virtues of father and son, and makes its own *auctor* [creator] equal in the praises of the *genitor* [progenitor].”<sup>207</sup> Van Dam suggests that this could be read theologically and politically. Theologically, in that the father is indeed God the Father and the son, Jesus. This could be Constantine’s support of the Nicene Creed. However, the father could be Constantine and the son Constantius because while Constantine had begun construction, it was his son who had finished it. Yet another possibility is God as father and Constantine as son, elevating the emperor to Christ-like status; this falls in line with Eusebius’ understanding of God and history and his comparison of Moses, Jesus and Constantine. In any case, this inscription proclaimed a redefinition of emperor to the masses. How it was interpreted is unclear.

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<sup>205</sup> Van Dam, 250.

<sup>206</sup> Van Dam, 221-222.

<sup>207</sup> Van Dam, 222.

Likewise, Constantine's mother, Helena, was also elevated in status. If Constantine was akin to Jesus, the Son of God, then Helena was Mary, the mother of God. Whereas Helena was given funds to build churches and various pilgrimage sites, Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, was largely ignored. There were no public memorials in his honour, no statues and no mention of him. "Constantine now seemed to be the son of a virgin birth."<sup>208</sup> This is pure speculation, of course, but it is not impossible to think that Constantine saw himself in this light or that others like Eusebius saw parallels between his life and that of Jesus.

Eusebius' account of the council of Nicaea further sheds light on the issue of defining the emperor, especially in his description of Constantine as a "heavenly messenger of God," "distinguished by piety and godly fear" and that "he surpassed all present in height and stature and beauty of form, as well as in majestic dignity of men, and invincible strength and vigor."<sup>209</sup> Eusebius was clearly trying to make an impression on his readers, an impression with a particular message.

### **Nicaea's Significance**

Needless to say, the Council of Nicaea did not settle all questions and issues for the Church. During the fourth century alone, "more than twenty conferences or councils were summoned to sort out the true position of the church."<sup>210</sup> Solutions unearthed new questions. New questions created new schisms. New schisms formed new groups. New groups meant exile, excommunication and open hostility.

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<sup>208</sup> Van Dam, 306.

<sup>209</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.10, 173.

<sup>210</sup> Vallée, 87.

Nevertheless, these councils were necessary for the growth of the Church. By being forced to hammer out its beliefs and statutes, albeit slowly and painfully at times, Christianity was strengthened as a result of these gatherings. While uniformity was the goal, it did not stop some splinter factions from continuing on their own, away from the proto-orthodox church. By the time of the Great Schism in 1054 CE, it was very clear that one, united Jesus Movement would not be possible.

## **Transformation of Sacred Space and Time**

### *Sacred Space*

Constantine almost immediately began building churches and shrines throughout the Roman Empire. His first act of patronage was to build the Lateran Basilica dedicated to John the Baptist. Originally the palace of his wife Fausta's family, it was transformed into a magnificent place of worship.<sup>211</sup> One of the more famous of Constantine's endeavours is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (335 CE), which is said to be built on the site where Jesus was entombed after the crucifixion. His mother, Helena, as well as his daughter, Constantina, also transformed various cities into Christian centres with their architecture. "This was the beginning of Christian conquest of urban space in the first city of the empire."<sup>212</sup> Christianity had now become a pilgrimage religion, purposely made by Constantine. In addition,

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<sup>211</sup> Chadwick suggests that perhaps Constantine believed that by donating his wife's palace it would propitiate the Christian god for the murder of his wife and stepson. It has also been suggested that this was the reason for Helena's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. See Henry Chadwick, ed., *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 187.

<sup>212</sup> Chadwick, 187.

Constantine allocated major funds to already existing churches “while state funds for pagan worship were cut off, pagan temple assets seized, and pagan worship was restricted by law.”<sup>213</sup> Slowly but surely Constantine was eradicating paganism from the empire, although combining some of his personal sun cult traditions with those of Christianity.

[Constantine] did so to exalt the Christian bishops and their seats of office, to favour loyal Christian forces and promote orthodoxy, to honour the places associated with Christ and his witnesses, to promote Christian piety and mission, to provide suitable places for Christian worship, to acknowledge publicly the lordship of Christ, and in all this to range himself with the apostles as a witness and servant of Christ.<sup>214</sup>

All this to say that Constantine did what was expected of him as an emperor with personal ties to a particular religious institution. He worked toward ensuring a prosperous empire by providing for its citizens. In this case, this meant Christian buildings and sacred sites, as well as pro-Christian legislation.

### *Sacred Time*

In the year 321 CE Constantine decreed that “all judges, city-people and craftsmen shall rest on the venerable day of the Sun.”<sup>215</sup> This is an example of the blending Constantine did with Christianity and the sun cult. It is possible that Constantine was merely ensuring a relatively peaceful transition to a Christian empire, blending paganism with Christianity in order to appease both Christians and pagans. It could also be an example of Constantine’s ignorance on the difference between Christianity and sun worship or his attempt to bring about a

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<sup>213</sup> Novak, 167.

<sup>214</sup> Gregory T. Armstrong, “Imperial Church Building and Church-State Relations, AD 313-363,” *Church History* 36 (1967) 1: 12.

<sup>215</sup> *Justinian’s Code* 3.12.3, quoted from Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts*, (Pennsylvania, Trinity Press International, 2000), 169.

harmonious existence between the two. The relevance of this edict, however, is that Constantine took political control of the calendar, even adopting the Judeo-Christian seven-day week, versus the Roman eight-day week. Previously, the calendar was dominated by the birthdays of the Emperors, sacrifices to the gods, festivals for the army and games such as chariot races; but even these were not set in stone. Eventually, the feast days of the martyrs took precedence, although some pagan festivals continued to coexist alongside this new Christian calendar and even the names of the days of the week never managed to be changed and still today are derived from pagan names. When the date of Easter was decided at Nicaea and sanctioned by Constantine, this created “one orthodoxy, one Easter, one empire: the celebration of a single synchronized Easter would commemorate both the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the reunification of the empire.”<sup>216</sup> Rome and Constantinople were being redefined as cities of Christian martyrs, as wholly Christian cities in space and time.

## **Reactions**

### *Pagans*

The ramifications of a first ever Christian emperor were soon felt throughout the empire. Crucifixion was prohibited and the guilty were “condemned to gladiatorial school or the mines” and their crimes were “tattooed on their hands and ankles.” Eventually, however, even gladiator entertainment was forbidden and was

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<sup>216</sup> Van Dam, 272.

replaced by charioteers in the hippodrome.<sup>217</sup> Other changes included a ban on any Jew having a Christian slave, divination and magic were prohibited,<sup>218</sup> and more significantly “a general ban on sacrifice.”<sup>219</sup> Clearly these types of reforms would cause quite a stir within pagan circles. There were sporadic riots and some of Constantine’s statues suffered damage, according to Eusebius in *Life of Constantine*.<sup>220</sup>

### *Christians*

While many Christians quietly enjoyed the newfound freedom and power now held by the Church, some Christians insisted on vengeance. “Constantine thus had a variety of Christians with whom he could choose to work – some certainly determined to war to death against the old gods, but others prepared to live in harmony with their pagan neighbours.”<sup>221</sup> After all, it was not unheard of for pagans to have Christian friends and vice versa; documents from the Diocletian Persecution have revealed that some pagans even helped Christians evade the authorities.<sup>222</sup> The echoes of persecution, however, could still be felt by some Christians. Issues were not simply with pagans but with fellow Christians as well. The Donatist schism,<sup>223</sup> for example, is one of the types of problems that this new

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<sup>217</sup> Barnes, 51.

<sup>218</sup> Chadwick, 208.

<sup>219</sup> Drake, 7.

<sup>220</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.4.

<sup>221</sup> H.A. Drake, “The Impact of Constantine on Christianity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112.

<sup>222</sup> Luijendijk, 363.

<sup>223</sup> The Donatist schism dealt with the question of whether those Christians who cooperated with the authorities during the Diocletian Persecution rather than face martyrdom should be reconciled to the Church. Specifically, it arose after the consecration of a bishop at the hands of one who surrendered his Bible during the persecution.



Christian emperor had to deal with, along with every other Christian. The triumph of Christianity, while a relief for Christians in general, was a challenge for pagan and Christian alike.

### **The Death of Constantine (337 CE)**

At the age of 65 on the day of Pentecost, when God's Helper,<sup>224</sup> the Holy Spirit, was disseminated to the Apostles, God's other helper, Constantine, fell sick and died. Right before his death, Constantine was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia. In modern times, it is believed that one has not completely accepted the Christian faith if they have not been baptized. In fact, baptism is seen as the inauguration into Christianity, the first step toward a Christian life. It is for this reason (among others stated above) that Constantine's sincerity of faith has been questioned. Not well known, however, is that during the early Christian period it was common practice to wait until just before death before receiving the sacrament of baptism. This is because the rite of baptism washes away all sin and therefore, the best time to be baptized would be right before death so that one would be completely sin-free and ensure a heavenly afterlife.

Constantine's resting place is in Rome in a mausoleum; even in death the ambiguities surrounding his genuine faith of Christianity continue to haunt him. On the one hand, the grave site could be interpreted as evidence of a thoughtful reflection of Constantine's passion and knowledge of Christianity. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted as a common Roman design. His sarcophagus was

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<sup>224</sup> John 14:16; 16:7.

placed in the middle of twelve other empty sarcophagi. This has been construed in two ways: 1) representing the twelve Apostles and/or 2) representing the twelve gods of Olympus.<sup>225</sup> Obviously, the Christians maintained that Constantine was a true believer and that this is simply more evidence to support that.

Whether sincere or artificial, Constantine's conversion changed everything. "[It] meant a change of public practice in law, in architecture, in calendar, in marriage customs, in political institutions, in social mores, in burial practices, and much more. Christianity [was] a culture-forming religion."<sup>226</sup> One can only surmise what might have happened had Constantine not aligned himself with the Christian god.

## **After Constantine**

### *Julian the Apostate 361-363 CE*

In 362 Constantine's nephew succeeded to the purple and wished to completely reverse what his uncle had accomplished. "He attempted the impossible by restoring for a moment the pagan gods to their former primacy, a feat which horrified the Christians."<sup>227</sup> Julian forbade Christians to teach, required restitution from those Christians who paid to have pagan temples dismantled and forbade career promotions for Christians.<sup>228</sup> He recognized that in order to eliminate Christianity he would have to use brains rather than brawn. Having been brought up with a Christian education, Julian attempted to use his knowledge to discredit and

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<sup>225</sup> Chadwick, 210.

<sup>226</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, "In Defense of Constantine," *First Things* 112 (2001): 36-40, 39.

<sup>227</sup> Bowersock, G.W., *Julian the Apostate*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), xi.

<sup>228</sup> Chadwick, 306-307.

disprove Christian beliefs. His book entitled *Against the Galileans* ridiculed Christian tenets such as Jesus' divinity, Mary's title of *theotokos* and Christianity's lineage to Judaism. It was prohibited after his death but fragments have survived.<sup>229</sup> Ultimately, once Julian died after being wounded in battle, Julian failed much to the relief of the Christians and was subsequently labelled "the Apostate."

### *Before the fall of Rome*

The next monumental step for Christianity was its change in status to not simply a legal religion but the official religion of the empire. In 392 all pagan sacrifices were prohibited and in the year 407, a decree was issued effectively marking the end of paganism: "If any images stand even now in the temples and shrines..., they shall be torn from their foundations... The buildings themselves of the temples which are situated in cities or towns shall be vindicated to public use. Altars shall be destroyed in all places."<sup>230</sup> In 428, Theodosius II made heresy illegal and by 451 all pagan rites were banned. The Edict of Toleration in 313 was nothing but a faint memory. The reform begun under Constantine was a hopeful triumph for Christianity but unfortunately, in time, turned many Christians from the hunted to the hunters.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated the significant changes that Christianity underwent once it had been embraced by the authorities. Thanks to Constantine's intervention, Christianity grew and strengthened across the empire. At one time a

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<sup>229</sup> Novak, 189.

<sup>230</sup> Quoted from *Christianizing the Roman Empire (AD 100-400)*, Ramsay MacMullen, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 101.

new religious movement, it became the religion of the empire and ousted paganism from its long-kept place in society—a far cry from the days of severe persecution, scorn, distrust and half-truths circulating about.

## Conclusion

Chapter One of this thesis argues that the Christians were seen as a sect within Judaism and shortly thereafter became a deviant sect within Judaism and finally, a separate religion entirely. The reasons for these various stages are manifold but can be summarized as follows: Christianity was a threat to Judaism's appeal for converts, it claimed Judaism's ancient heritage as its own, it eventually demanded that a choice be made between itself and Judaism, it became dangerous to be mistaken as a Christian, and Christianity allowed for no wavering in allegiance (either Jesus was the Son of God and Savior to the world or he was not). Social-scientific theories of NRMs have helped explain these issues. Those in marginalized positions must eventually resolve this tension; the ultimate choice largely reflects the theory that people will side with friends and family rather than oppose them. Further more, already established religions will view NRMs as a threat, due to the potential for struggle over potential converts.

I have also tried to demonstrate, however, that despite the definite parting of ways for some Christians and Jews, there is evidence to suggest that the schism was not final for another century or so after Constantine for others. In this way, it is clear that a clean break between the two groups actually never occurred as some might surmise.

Regrettably, Christianity's legalization and prominence throughout the empire would change its relationship with Judaism for the worse, relegating their past ties to the shadows. It has only been within recent years that the bond between Judaism and Christianity has been studied in a positive light.

Chapter Two identifies the factors behind the persecution of the Christian community by the pagans, whether by governments, intellectuals or ordinary civilians. Christianity posed a threat to the peace and safety of the Roman Empire because its members refused to sacrifice to the gods. Some governors felt compelled to act against the Christians, despite any sympathies they may have held, in order to keep the peace. Social-scientific theories of NRMs indicate that opposition from governments is often due to the desire to balance religious freedom with public safety.

It was ridiculed because it was viewed as a superstitious cult with foolhardy beliefs. Philosophers of the ancient world, such as Celsus, scorned Christianity because it appeared to be a deviant sect within Judaism. It was also accused of preying on the young and uneducated. Again, some theories note that fear of NRMs stem from the belief that they may cause psychological damage to the vulnerable in society.

The mobs that demanded Christian executions were simply caught up in false rumours, the frenzy of a gladiatorial game or wishing to exact revenge on a particular Christian neighbour. In short, there were many reasons why the Christians were persecuted and no single motive can adequately explain over two hundred years of persecution but social-scientific theories of NRMs help considerably with this question.

Chapter Three explains the rise of Christianity and explores the man behind it all. Constantine I is essential when it comes to the early Christian period. His life explains the growth of Christianity. Thanks largely to Eusebius of Caesarea and his writings, we know about many of the issues that arose when Constantine chose to

delve into the Christian life. Constantine's reign is a key period in the history of Christianity because it was during that time when important theological and political decisions were made, which affected the future of Christianity and of the empire. It was Constantine's words and actions that catapulted Christianity into the spotlight and compelled it to crystallize its belief system and itself as an institution.

This thesis has been an exploration into the relationships between Jews, Christians and pagans during the time in history when Christianity was illegal. It is a study of the fascinating period when Christianity struggled to survive and when these two other particular groups struggled to come to terms with this new religious movement, which would simply not disappear.

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