



Prophecy, History and Archaeology

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The Roman attitude to Christianity

Dennis M. Elliott

THE TRIUMPH of Christianity in the harsh military and political climate of the Roman Empire was a victory gained after centuries of oppression and active persecution. One only had to admit to being a Christian to be vulnerable to a whole range of charges that could even produce the death penalty. The catacombs of Rome, with their countless thousands of graves, bear tragic testimony to the numerous Christians who accepted the martyrdom of death rather than renounce their faith in Jesus Christ.

The adversary

The charge of atheism was commonly levelled against Christians for not making sacrifices to Roman gods or supporting Roman festivals, whilst the accusation of treason was made for not rendering service in the army and for believing in the return of Jesus to be King over the nations, with the consequent eclipse of Roman power in the earth. The measures were ruthlessly applied, as will be seen in the information that follows.

The Apostle Peter warned believers of their unrelenting adversaries who were determined to undermine the faith that they held so dear, and so he wrote: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world" (1 Pet. 5:8,9). His reference to their "adversary" the "roaring lion" may well have related to the repressive Roman authorities, whose conduct and diabolical measures form some of the blackest pages of history. It became imperial policy, by means of successive edicts, to remove Christianity from the Roman Empire.

Persecution by Nero and Domitian

The Emperor Nero, who reigned from A.D. 54 to A.D. 68, became obsessed against Christians. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote of him as fol-

lows: "Stained with the foulest enormities himself, he had a rooted conviction that virtue was a pretence, and that all men were equally depraved".¹

Another Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote of the corrupt imperial Rome, "where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular". He then pointed out that Nero accused the Christians not only of having been implicated in the firing of Rome but also of incontrovertible recalcitrance, saying: "an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burned, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired".²

Samuel Dill furnishes some enlightening details concerning the later Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96): "But there can be little doubt that Domitian, although he was astute and able, was also a bad man, with the peculiar traits which always make a man unpopular. Domitian himself allowed his court poets to vilify Caligula and Nero . . . He struck out blindly and savagely and compelled the Senate to bear a part in the massacre . . . Domitian had a great love of cruelty and was never more dangerous than when he chose to be agreeable; he loved to play with his victims".³

Mob violence

Roman administration was, to a degree, tolerant of the diverse racial and religious elements within the empire as long as there was no perceived threat to Roman rule, or civic disturbance such

1. *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 29.

2. *The Annals*, 15:44.

3. *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, pp. 54-7.

as occurred at Ephesus when Demetrius the silversmith incited the idol-worshipping inhabitants into a protracted, turbulent, public demonstration against the Apostle Paul's presence in the city and his preaching of the Christian faith. It will be recalled that the town clerk warned the people that "we are in danger to be called in question for this day's uproar" (Acts 19:40), knowing full well that his own position would be under review because of the Roman view that such uncontrolled protests were not to be allowed to take place in regions under their jurisdiction.

Some of the emperors manipulated mob violence, such as Tiberius, Nero, Domitian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, Diocletian and Galerius. Williston Walker says, regarding the evil manner in which they allowed mob unruliness and vehemence to oppress and persecute those who held to the Christian faith: "Much of the governmental persecution of Christianity in this period had its incitement in mob attacks upon Christians. That was the case at Smyrna when Polycarp suffered martyrdom in 156 A.D."⁴ The martyrdom of Polycarp took place during the reign of Antoninus Pius, who was emperor from A.D. 138 to A.D. 161.

Christianity illegal

Williston Walker highlights the fact that a mere profession of the Christian faith was regarded as an offence classified as criminal, which brought forth a firm response from the Roman authorities: "Trajan's reply to Pliny, the Governor of Bithynia (111-113 A.D.), presupposes that Christianity was already viewed as criminal. That already recognized, the Emperor orders what must be deemed mild procedure from his point of view. Christians are not to be hunted out, and, if willing to adjure by sacrifice, are to be acquitted. Only in case of persistence are they to be punished. From the standpoint of a faithful Christian profession this was a test which could only be met by martyrdom."⁵

Walker emphasises the fact that Christianity was always illegal in the eyes of the imperial authorities, with extreme penalties attaching to it:

"Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.) gave renewed force to the law against strange religions and initiated a sharper period of persecution which extended into the reign of Commodus. The spurious charges of athe-

ism, anarchy and treason made against Christians and the altogether hostile attitude of the Roman government to the believers elicited a number of literary defenders who became known as the Apologists. The stand that they took against the inflexible measures instituted against the Christians was having some influence amongst the more intellectual elements in society and one of the foremost of these was Justin who proved to be typical of the group as a whole.

"Justin, called the Martyr, from his heroic witness unto death in Rome under the prefect Rusticus, about 165 A.D., was born in Shechem, in the ancient Samaria, of heathen ancestry. He lived, for a time at least, in Ephesus, and it was in its vicinity probably that the conversion of which he gives a vivid account took place (Justin, Dialogue, 2-8). Justin's Apology (often called two Apologies, though the 'second' is only an appendix) is a manly, dignified, and effective defence. Christians, if condemned at all, should be punished for definite proved crimes, not for the mere name without investigation of their real character. They are atheists only in that they count the popular gods demons unworthy of worship, not in respect to the true God. They are anarchists only to those who do not understand the nature of the kingdom that they seek. Justin then argues the truth of Christianity, especially from the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, and briefly explains Christian sacraments and worship."⁶

It will be remembered that, when Peter was arraigned before the Sanhedrin for preaching the gospel in the temple with the other apostles, he answered: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). It was the same dictate of conscience that impelled the Christians at Rome to remain loyal to their beliefs and therefore refuse to take part in heathen practices, which conflicted with the faith that they held so dear.

Walker quotes the words of Tertullian, who, in his portrayal of the inflexible Roman attitude towards the Christians, said: "legally, Christianity was condemned. It had no right to exist."⁷ Walker continues: "A change of policy came under Maximinus (235-238 A.D.) by whom an

4. *A History of the Christian Church*, p. 49.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 50,51.

7. *Apology*, 4.

edict against the Christians was issued, which, though not extensively enforced, thrust both the 'Catholic' bishop, Pontianus, and his schismatic rival Hippolytus from Rome into the cruel slavery of the mines, where they soon lost their lives. In eastern Asia Minor and Palestine this persecution made itself felt".⁸

The charge of treason

There seemed to be no real respite for the Christians in their persecutions, and the dreadful situation in which they found themselves, under the Roman heel, with the charge of treason hanging over their heads, is brought to our notice by Duncan Armytage:

"This suspicion of treason was strengthened by the difficulty some Christians found in performing military service. The form of oath to the Emperor which was administered to each recruit, seemed to some Christians to be idolatrous and disloyal to Christ, and they felt bound to refuse a duty incumbent upon all citizens. Naturally, therefore, Christian meetings for prayer and worship in private houses, or in the Catacombs of Rome, laid them open at once to the charge of being law-breakers. And, because of the secrecy of their meetings, and because they were held at night, they were accused of committing the most abominable crimes . . .

"The methods adopted by the Government to repress this dangerous religion were strangely unlike the normal judicial procedure. A trial for treason could have been instituted under any one of four counts, for each of the charges given might be construed as treasonable action. But, strange though it may seem, the name of 'Christian' alone was sufficient for prosecution. *Nullum criminis nomen extat, nisi nominis crimen est*, says Tertullian—'No charge is even mentioned, the only charge is the name'.⁹

Avoiding pagan sacrifices

The Christian believers were courageous in adhering firmly to the teachings of Jesus Christ, their Lord and Master, and were strengthened in their resolve to maintain the beliefs, which they would not compromise in any way whatsoever. So T. R. Glover writes: "But the Christians would not compromise; neither would the State yield. It came to war between them in the short reign of Decius. When he became Emperor in 249 A.D. the storm broke. It was the first general persecu-

tion. The Emperor's edict against the Christians required all persons to 'sacrifice' (i.e. to the pagan gods) by a certain day. Certificates, issued to those who did, are still extant".¹⁰

This is how the certificate reproduced by Glover reads:

"To those chosen to superintend the sacrifices at the village of Alexander-Island, from Aurelius Diogenes, son of Satabus, of the village of Alexander-Island, being about seventy years old, a scar on the right eyebrow. It has always been my custom to sacrifice to the gods, and now in your presence, in accordance with the decrees, I have sacrificed and poured libations and tasted the offerings, and I request you to countersign my statement. May good fortune attend you. I, Aurelius Diogenes, have made this request. (In another handwriting) I, Aurelius Syrus, as a participant have certified Diogenes as sacrificing along with us. (Dated by Diogenes) The first year of the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajanus Decius Pius Felix Augustus. Epeiph 2".

The faithful band in Rome would have been well aware of Paul's teaching in the letter he sent to them: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). But the nature and wording of the certificate made it certain that there was no way in which Christian believers could bring themselves to sign such a document, which would have legally identified them as idol-worshippers.

Heavy persecution

Regarding these later persecutions, Williston Walker says:

"The Decian persecution (249-251 A.D.) was by far the worst trial that the church as a whole had undergone—the more severe because it had principle and determination behind it. The aim was not primarily to take life, though there were numerous and cruel martyrdoms, but rather to compel Christians, by torture, imprisonment, or fear to sacrifice to the old gods . . . Origen and hosts of others were tortured . . . Fierce as it was, the persecution under Decius and Valerian was soon

8. *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

9. *Christianity in the Roman World*, pp. 79-81.

10. *The Ancient World*, p. 364.

over; but only to be renewed in somewhat milder form by Decius's successor, Gallus (251-253 A.D.).

"In 253 A.D. Decius's old associate in persecution, Valerian, obtained possession of the empire (253-260 A.D.). Though he at first left the Christians undisturbed, in 257 and 258 A.D. he renewed the attack with greater ferocity. Christian assemblies were forbidden; Christian churches and cemeteries confiscated; bishops, priests, and deacons ordered to be executed, and lay Christians in high places disgraced, banished, and their goods held forfeited . . . It was a fearful period of trial, lasting, with intermission indeed, from 250-259 A.D.

"Diocletian (284-305 A.D.) moved slowly, however. A cautious effort to rid the army and the imperial palace of Christians was followed, beginning in February, 303 A.D., by three great edicts of persecution in rapid succession. Churches were ordered destroyed, sacred books confiscated, clergy imprisoned and forced to sacrifice by torture. It was a time of fearful persecution. As in the days of Decius there were many martyrs . . .

"The Eastern Caesar, Galerius (305-311 A.D.), was even more hostile to Christianity, and had much influence over Diocletian. To him the suggestions of persecution may have been due. The growth of Christianity, however, was uniting all the forces that threatened heathenism against it; while Diocletian and Galerius were disposed to emphasise emperor-worship and the service of the old gods".¹¹

The death of Galerius in May 311 opened up the way for Constantine ultimately to become emperor of the west, and, according to Williston Walker, "he was, thenceforth, in all practical respects a Christian, even though heathen emblems still appeared on coins, and he retained the title of Pontifex Maximus".¹² In A.D. 323 Licinius, the Eastern Emperor, was defeated by Constantine, who became at last the sole ruler of the Roman world.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul was able to comfort and assure the believers at Rome of the ultimate triumph of Christianity over all that they were suffering under the iron rule of the imperial power, saying: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution . . . or peril, or sword? . . . Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom. 8:35,37).

Those of us living in our comparatively free Western society, who feel safe from the heavy hand of autocratic authority and incarceration, cannot imagine what those early Christians had to endure in afflictions, persecutions, tortures, even the loss of their lives. Many of them lie entombed in the underground tunnels known as the Catacombs of Rome, awaiting the call to newness of life and glory in the Kingdom of God which is to come upon this troubled earth at the return of Christ the King. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus".

11. *Op. cit.*, pp. 86,87,108,109.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Ezekiel's visions of the Millennium

7. Summary and conclusion

Geoff Cave

THIS FINAL article in this series will attempt to summarise the details of the study and then to draw some conclusions.

The borders of Israel's inheritance

The prophet Ezekiel gives a fairly concise description of the borders of the land of Israel in the coming age. The details given reveal a relatively small area of land, a little smaller than that occupied by the nation in the days of David and

Solomon. It must be remembered, however, that this was the maximum extent of the earlier kingdom.

Rather than extend further from the days of Solomon onwards, the inheritance of the nation diminished because of the wayward behaviour of the people, from the king downwards. In the age to come, with an all-righteous King and a purified priesthood, the land will extend until it fills the whole earth.