

Persecution in the Early Church

Sources

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*

Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* (“On the Deaths of Persecutors”)

W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (1965)

I. Introduction

A. Nature

1. Earliest persecution: Jewish
2. Major persecutions: Roman
3. A constant threat

B. Overview

1. Not 10 major persecutions
2. Many smaller outbreaks
3. A few major Roman outbreaks

II. Roman Persecution

A. Background

1. Christianity originally seen as Jewish
 - a. A protection (cf. account of Gallio in Acts 18)
 - b. Changed after destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70)
2. General Reasons
 - a. Too exclusive → “atheistic”
 - b. Unpatriotic: Refusing to say “Caesar is lord”
 - c. Vile Rumors
 - 1) Distorted understanding of secret worship
 - 2) Reason for apologies

B. Chief Examples

1. Nero (1st century)
 - a. Christians → scapegoat for great fire of Rome
 - b. Mainly in Rome/central Italy
 - c. Probably martyrdom of Peter and Paul
2. Domitian (1st century): Disputed persecution
3. Marcus Aurelius (2nd century)
 - a. Philosopher’s persecution
 - b. Christians → disobedient atheists
 - c. Leading victim: Justin Martyr, “philosopher martyr”
4. Decius (3rd century)
 - a. 1000th anniversary of Rome
 - b. A patriotic emphasis that ensnared Christians
 - c. First empire-wide persecution
 - d. Notable martyr: Origen
 - e. Ended w/ Decius’s death in battle
5. Diocletian: Fiercest (4th century)
 - a. Part of desire to unify empire
 - b. Method: Attacked ...
 - 1) Literature → Destroy the Scripture

- 2) Leadership
- 3) Laity

III. Effects

A. Martyrdom

1. Classification
 - a. Martyrs: died for the faith
 - b. Confessors: suffered for the faith
 - c. Both reckoned holy
 - d. Alternative of flight debated
2. Examples
 - a. Polycarp
 - b. Perpetua
 - c. Sebastian
3. Danger of “martyr spirit” → seeking martyrdom

B. Legend of the Catacombs

1. Place of burial, source of art
2. Not living quarters

C. Impact

1. Purified the church
2. Spread the witness (Tertullian: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”)
3. Questioned legitimate alternative of flight (Matt. 10:23)
4. Challenge of the lapsed
5. Persecution a sign of the true church? (cf. Foxe)