

# Christian Persecutions in the Roman Empire

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No one can deny that Christians who lived in the Roman Empire were, on occasion, persecuted. However, the persecutions were not empire-wide, nor were they constant. Persecutions were intermittent and localized. Nevertheless, persecutions under emperors such as Nero and Domitian are the backdrop for several biblical books. Some knowledge of this background will be of great help to us in understanding books such as the Gospel According to Mark, the Book of Revelation, and 1 Timothy.

## Emperor Worship

Christians were vulnerable to persecution because they would not participate in emperor worship. Emperor worship began in the Roman Empire with the first emperor, Augustus (27 BC–AD 14). Although Augustus did not declare himself a god, he was worshipped as a god and deified after his death. Nero (54–68) did think of himself as divine, and Domitian (81–96) had the title “lord and god.” Worship of the emperor was a political act, a way of establishing unity in the far-flung empire. It did not preclude worship of other gods; the gods of the ancestors were also worshipped.

Christians and Jews refused to participate in emperor worship or to worship the gods of the Greek and Roman ancestors. Of course, the first Christians were also Jews. Jews were granted some special privileges in the Roman Empire, such as exemption from military service and from emperor worship. However, some of the Jews who believed in the divinity of Jesus were expelled from the synagogue (see John 9:22). This meant they were no longer exempt and, if they refused to participate in emperor worship, were subject to persecution. Christians who were Gentiles had no such exemption in the first place.

From a Roman point of view, it was unpatriotic to refuse to participate in emperor worship, given that people could worship their own gods along with worshipping the emperor. Romans thought Christians were subversives. They even accused Christians of being cannibals. This charge, of course, was based on a misunderstanding of just what was taking place at the Eucharist.

## Persecution under Nero

According to historians, the Emperor Nero was a vicious person. He murdered his own mother and his own wife. In addition, he persecuted Christians. During his reign there was a great fire in Rome. After the fire, Nero took a great deal of the devastated land to build a sumptuous palace. On seeing this, some Romans began to suspect that Nero was responsible for the fire having occurred. To counter this suspicion, Nero blamed the fire on the Christians. Thus started the first terrible persecution of Christians. Both Peter and Paul are thought to have been crucified during this persecution. It was to this audience that the Gospel According to Mark was directed.

Imagine that you were a Christian in Rome when Nero was emperor. Think how tempting it would have been to participate in emperor worship in order to avoid martyrdom. You might tell yourself that God would know you were participating under duress and didn't really believe that the emperor was a god. As Mark tells the story of Jesus, he pictures Jesus in a similar situation. The only way Jesus could avoid death would be to deny his Father's will, to “go along” with the authorities in order to placate them. However, Jesus did not do that. Although it was just as hard for Jesus to accept death as it would be for those in



Mark's audience (Mark emphasizes Jesus' humanness and Jesus' suffering), Jesus remained faithful. In choosing death, Jesus chose life. Mark wants his audience to embrace Jesus as a model: to die with Christ and to rise with Christ.

## Persecution under Domitian

Scripture scholars believe that the Book of Revelation was written in response to persecutions during the reign of Domitian. Just how severe those persecutions were, and whether they were aimed particularly at Christians, is debated. However, there is no argument that Domitian enforced the imperial cult, wanting to be honored as a god not only after death but during his lifetime. Such honors might be required as part of trade agreements or as part of a ceremony at a banquet. Christians, of course, could not participate in such ceremonies.

The Book of Revelation is written in the literary form apocalyptic literature, a form that developed in the midst of persecution. Apocalyptic writing was written in code to a persecuted audience to offer hope that the end time was near, that is, the end of the present persecution.

Some of the code in the Book of Revelation is obviously referring to Roman emperors and to the imperial cult. For instance, in chapter 13, the beast that gets its authority from the dragon is the Roman Empire. People worship the beast, saying, "Who can compare with the beast or who can fight against it" (Revelation 13:4)? The beast is "allowed to wage war against the holy ones and conquer them" (Revelation 13:7).

However, the beast does not prevail. Rather, the Lamb, whose blood gives life, along with the faithful martyrs, is victorious: "Then I looked and there was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1). The martyrs have risen with Christ and now reign victorious with him in the heavenly court. The author of Revelation is encouraging his audience to be marked with the sign of the Lamb (Baptism), not with the sign of the beast (emperor worship) so that they can join their martyred loved ones in Heaven.

## Trying to Avoid Persecution

Several of the letters show that Christians tried to avoid persecution by placating the Romans even as they refused to participate in emperor worship. For instance, in 1 Timothy the author tells Timothy to pray "for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity" (1 Timothy 2:2). Those who are to become bishops "must also have a good reputation among outsiders" (1 Timothy 3:7a). Also, women's leadership roles in the early Church were apparently pulled back, perhaps to accommodate Roman society. As 1 Timothy says: "A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:14). This is quite a change from an earlier letter, 1 Corinthians, which describes how women should dress when they pray or prophesy in a worship setting (see 1 Corinthians 11:5).

Persecutions of Christians continued intermittently in the Roman Empire until the reign of Constantine, when Christianity became a tolerated religion. Constantine signed the Edict of Milan in 313, thus putting an end to the persecution of Christians by Roman emperors.



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