



The First Christians (33-200 AD)

PLINY

In 112 AD, in the Roman province of Bithynia Pontus (spanning much of what is today the northern coast of Turkey), the governor of the province sat down to write a letter to the Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117 AD).¹

The governor Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, better known as Pliny the Younger (61-c. 113 AD), had been brought up by his uncle the natural historian Pliny the Elder, a celebrity throughout the Roman world who some decades earlier had been killed while investigating the eruption of Vesuvius.² Before coming to Bithynia, Pliny the Younger had led a distinguished legal and political career in Rome, holding the highest political offices, including that of consul, and successfully defending two previous governors of Bithynia on charges of misconduct.

As such, he understood the province and the responsibilities and perils of his office. A governor's primary duty was the stability and order of the province, and to this end, he held sweeping powers to dispense justice as he saw fit (in keeping with Roman customs, of course). Yet, sometimes the case was so concerning that he needed to seek guidance from the Emperor. This was just such an instance.

"It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt."³

¹ Pliny the Younger, Letter on the Christians X. 96.

² Pliny the Younger, *Letters on Vesuvius* VI. 16, VI. 20.

³ Pliny, *Letter* X. 96.



ABOMINATIONS

Pliny had recently received numerous denunciations of individuals in his province who, it was claimed, were 'Christians'. This disturbing Jewish sect had first attracted the serious attention of the Imperial authorities in Rome during the reign of Nero (r. 54-68 AD) around 64 AD. Pliny's close friends, the historians Tacitus and Suetonius, while generally portraying Nero as a depraved tyrant, nevertheless applauded his crackdown on the Christians of Rome.⁴ Tacitus suggested that this was initially inspired by Nero's need to find a scapegoat for the great fire that had just engulfed the city, but Suetonius made no mention of this. Both were clear that these Christians had been justly punished for their 'abominable crimes' and their 'hatred of humanity'.⁵

Christians' primary and most public offence was that of 'atheism', their refusal to join in the worship of any of the gods who so abundantly filled every avenue of daily life and the exclusive devotion of their one Christian God.⁶ Of course, atheism was nothing new in Rome. Jews had lived in the city of Rome for at least the past two centuries, but as Tacitus remarked, the 'perverse and disgusting' customs of their foreign superstition could at least be justified on the grounds of antiquity, that they were continuing ancestral customs, however bizarre.⁷ This toleration did have its limits. The Jews had been expelled from Rome at least three times before Nero's day for converting and corrupting the morals of non-Jews.⁸ Indeed, in 95 AD, the Emperor Domitian's (r. 81-96 AD) own cousin Titus Flavius Clemens, who had only just finished his time as consul, was executed for atheism, having 'drifted into Jewish ways'.⁹ This new Christian sect of Judaism posed an even greater threat in its active desire to corrupt others and convert them to their folly.

⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 16; Tacitus, *Histories* 15.44. Tacitus was a friend of Pliny's who governed the next-door province of Asia, while Suetonius was Pliny's protégé and seems to have accompanied him to Bithynia, perhaps as his secretary: Pliny, *Letter to Trajan* X. 94.

⁵ Tacitus, *Histories* 15.44.

⁶ Crescens (in Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*); Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen *Contra Celsum*).

⁷ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

⁸ Valerius Maximus, 1.3.3; Cassius Dio, 57.18.5; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36.

⁹ Cassius Dio, 67.14. This could possibly mean that he had become a Christian, still seen as a Jewish sect.

Worse still were their meetings, away from the temples and the public forum, in secret and darkness. Here, all sorts of disreputable people gathered together to swear oaths, worship a criminal, and undermine the emperor with talk of a kingdom.¹⁰ Terrible things were widely rumoured to occur in the shadows. Marcus Cornelius Fronto, tutor to the future Emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180), described their monstrous rites, how they feasted on human meats, tricking initiates into killing and eating a child disguised as bread, licking up its blood and dividing its limbs.¹¹ He also described their debauched feasts in which men and women mingled freely and promiscuously, their lusts unrestrained.¹²

To tolerate such people and to tolerate their increase risked the anger of the gods. Pliny, in his letter, imagined a future in which the temples were deserted and sacrifices were no longer brought. What retribution might the gods wreak? When earthquakes devastated the provinces, might this not be the gods' anger at a society that harboured such defiant and perverse blasphemers?¹³ Like his friends Tacitus and Suetonius, Pliny too agreed it was right that they should die.

PROCEDURE

Having begun his investigations, he now wrote to the emperor asking for advice about how to proceed. Throughout the first and second centuries, there was no imperial policy of persecution, and Trajan reiterated this in his reply. Christians were not to be sought out but only charged if they were reported by a delator, a denouncer willing to face them in court and act as prosecutor. The punishments for false denunciations could be severe, but a conviction would also yield the denouncer some of the Christian's property.¹⁴

A denouncement might be made, or a professional denouncer hired, less because someone was discovered to be a Christian – but rather more often as a result of a conflict with a neighbour, colleague or even family member already known to be a Christian.¹⁵ Yet, rumours of Christians' abominable practices or offence and concern at their disregard for the gods also sometimes stirred up popular outcries and rioting, which governors would be keen to quell with displays of justice.¹⁶ An enterprising delator might take advantage of such a disturbance.

Pliny's correspondence with Trajan was later published as guidance for future governors handling the prosecutions of Christians. One of his primary questions was whether Christians should be killed 'just for the name'. That was, whether it was enough that the accused accepted the accusation that they were a Christian, or whether he had to find proof of their heinous crimes. Yet, so far in his interrogations, he had

¹⁰ Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*); Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); Justin, *First Apology*.

¹¹ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*). Also, Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*.

¹² Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.14. Christians in modern Kyrgyzstan still sometimes face very similar accusations.

¹³ Marcus Aurelius' *letter* (in Eusebius, *History* IV.13).

¹⁴ Hadrian's *letter to Minucius Fundanus* (in Eusebius, *History* IV.8-9).

¹⁵ It is sometimes suggested that Justin Martyr (d. c. 165 AD) was executed under Marcus Aurelius as the result of a denouncement by a rival philosopher.

¹⁶ The persecution prompted by rioting in Vienne and Lyon, in the Roman province of Gaul (present-day France) in 177 AD is perhaps most prominent (Eusebius, *History* V.1). But we might also think of the rioting in Ephesus in Acts 19:23-41, or of similar events in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) in 122/3, the context of Hadrian's letter to the province's governor Minucius Fundanus (Eusebius *Histories* IV.8-9), or those in Smyrna which lead to Polycarp the Bishop's execution in the mid-second century.

found no evidence of anything more than “excessive superstition”.¹⁷ In his reply, the emperor confirmed, yes, the name alone was indeed enough.¹⁸

Under the reign of the later Emperor Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161), the Christian philosopher Justin, then teaching in Rome, penned an open letter to the emperor and his adoptive son Marcus Aurelius.¹⁹ His primary grievance was the execution of Christians for ‘the name alone’, which he held to be unworthy of the high standards of Roman justice, and he appealed to the emperor to investigate Christians, test their deeds and see if they were worthy of punishment.²⁰

We see something similar in 1 Peter, an epistle written to an earlier generation of Christians in Pliny’s province of Bithynia and Pontus, which encourages them that when they suffer because of the name Christian, rather than for any crime, they are sharing in Jesus’ sufferings, and in his glory.²¹

WHO WERE THEY?

Joining Pliny in his interrogations, we might now enter the community and find out for ourselves who these people were who accepted the name ‘Christian’, why they chose to associate themselves with this Jewish sect that worshipped a crucified criminal, and what they really got up to in their meetings.

All sorts of people were brought before the governor. They came from the countryside and the cities, men and women of all ages, and all ranks, including slaves and Roman citizens. Pliny was obliged to send the citizens to Rome for trial, but Roman law permitted him to torture slaves in the course of his investigation. Two female slaves whom he tortured he described as being ‘ministers’ (*ministrae*) within their communities. Elsewhere, we see very prominent freed slaves, such as Hermas, author of *The Shepherd*, an incredibly popular work among early Christians, and his brother Pius, the overseer (*episcopus*) of the Christians in Rome.²² To Roman onlookers, Christians numbered the “lowest dregs of society, the unskilled and women!”²³ Yet, those whom the Greek and Roman philosophers regarded as weak and foolish, unfree slaves and women, were counted by Bithynia’s Christians among their leaders.

Still, we might also find more socially prominent individuals among them, whose presence goes unnoticed by most Roman authors. Civil authorities and even members of the imperial household, as well as those with more education.²⁴ Justin had been a well-educated philosopher and continued to teach as a Christian philosopher in Rome. Marcus Minucius Felix and his friend Octavius, the central character of his remarkable Latin novel of the same name, were highly educated lawyers working in the Roman courts towards the end of the second century.²⁵

¹⁷ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

¹⁸ The name ‘Christian’ was quite likely understood by Romans as the repudiation of the name ‘Roman’ or of any other identification of ‘people/tribe’ rather than a confessional label as we understand it (none really existing before) or philosophical (like Epicurean). It was more like Jew – the name of a foreign people and belief.

¹⁹ Justin, *First Apology*.

²⁰ Justin, Tatian, and Tertullian among others all address the grievance of Christians being killed for the name rather than any specific crime.

²¹ 1 Peter 4:13-16. This was also addressed to Christian communities in neighbouring Galatia, Cappadocia, and Asia.

²² A later overseer, or bishop, of Rome, Callixtus (d. c. 222), had also been a slave. Some have also seen in Onesimus, the overseer of the community in Ephesus at around the same time as Pliny’s investigation, the previous slave of Philemon: Ignatius, *letter to the Ephesians*; Paul, *letter to Philemon* (*Philemon*).

²³ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix’ *Octavius*).

²⁴ *Philippians* 4:22

²⁵ Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius*. While the novel itself is a work of fiction, some scholars believe that the characters were real, and really known to Minucius Felix.

Outside their meetings, Christians lived in a highly stratified society, but when they met together, there was neither slave nor free, they called each other brother and sister, and sat alongside and ate with each other without distinction. To the world, they might remain masters and slaves, but to each other, they were now brothers and sisters. Of course, some struggled to live these ideals out, still many clearly did, given that this was a source of great consternation to the Romans. They were baffled, even disgusted that Christians might so subvert the household order and replace real kinship with this fake brotherhood, and, so it seemed, add incest to their abominations.²⁶ The social and gender mixing was perhaps one of the most striking features of Christian meetings, and the root of much of the suspicion around them – who knew what they got up to once they were so free with each other?

Many of the first members of these communities were, of course, Jews. The Christians' particular teaching had originated in Jerusalem but quickly spread across the far flung Jewish diaspora. We see in Acts Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem from across this diaspora, encompassing the whole Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean as far as Rome. But in Acts we also see Jews from beyond the Roman Empire, from Mesopotamia and Persia, the lands of the Parthian Empire, the great rival of Rome, where Jewish communities had remained since the exile. Alexandria in Egypt contained the largest Jewish community outside Jerusalem, but Jews were also present further afield, in France, Crimea, Ethiopia and even India.

The early apostles and first Jewish Christians continued participating in the Jewish community and attending the synagogue, and it was here that they first looked to share their message. We see in Acts that Paul and others would first go to the synagogue when they reached a new city. The reasons for Jews to convert were perhaps more straightforward than for Gentiles. They had been convinced that Jesus was the long awaited messiah, although perhaps quite a different messiah to their expectations, and one whose message brought them new and complicated challenges. They had to rethink their relationship to the law of Moses and towards living under gentile Roman rule.

Since the beginning, there were also many non-Jewish believers whose numbers grew over the first two centuries to become the majority of believers. Their inclusion marked again a radical re-conception for some Jewish believers, but one which seemed to make sense of various prophecies – promises that one day those outside the Jews would come to worship the God of Israel.²⁷

Already, there had been increasing turns among Greeks and Romans towards recognising a single creator. Plato, following the teaching of Socrates in works like *Timaeus*, had dismissed the idea of whimsical, arbitrary and capricious deities, instead proposing a mighty God, the demiurge, a singular, good and perfect creator, willing goodness, and creating in his image, although impersonal and almost unknowable.²⁸ Similar ideas were becoming more generally popular in the years preceding Jesus' birth too. Zeus, for the Greeks, Jupiter for the Romans, was increasingly associated with this universal heavenly father and creator, Zeus Theos. Throughout the Hellenistic east, offerings and statues were dedicated to Theos Hysistos, 'the most high God'.²⁹

Similar sympathy is perhaps detected in the many theosebeis, god-fearing gentiles such as Cornelius the centurion and Lydia, encountered in the Gospels and Acts living in Judaea and Macedonia, and associating with local synagogues.³⁰ Numerous surviving synagogue inscriptions likewise reveal the presence of many such individuals drawn to the teachings of their Jewish neighbours. Even before the appearance of Christians, Roman authors bemoaned the corrupting influence of Jewish communities, who

²⁶ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); *Epistle to Diognetus*; Justin, *Trypho*; Justin, *First Apology*; Tertullian, *Apology*.

²⁷ For instance: *Psalms* 72:11, 86:9; *Isaiah* 2:2, 49:6, 60:3; *Zechariah* 14:8; *Micah* 4:1-2, 5:2-4.

²⁸ Influential on Justin – Justin, *First Apology*.

²⁹ For instance the Oenoanda inscription.

³⁰ *Matthew* 8; *Luke* 7; *Acts* 8, 10, 13:16, 13:26, 13:50, 16:14.

led Romans and Greeks to abandon their ancestral beliefs. This new Jewish sect was even more troubling in its determination to lead non-Jews astray.

When Paul gave his address to the gentile Greeks in Athens, he chose to describe his own God by quoting verses originally written by Greek poets to refer to Zeus. They wrote how Zeus lives and abides forever, 'For in him we live and move and have our being,' every street, market, and even the depths of the seas were filled with Zeus Theos, everyone was sustained by Him, for 'We are his offspring'.³¹ Early Gentiles who joined the Christian community perhaps brought these understandings with them, the creator that they had known as Zeus Theos being revealed to them through Jesus. Justin, for instance, seems to have found a belief in Jupiter as a good creator as a natural stepping stone to Christianity.³²

Still, throughout the Roman Empire, the vast majority of people lived in a world filled with deities. Their cities and streets were lined with temples to multifarious gods, the country was filled with shrines, and the house was inhabited by lares, domestic gods. The Greco-Roman gods held a place of particular prominence and prevalence, but the gods of various conquered lands were also often incorporated into the common worship. They were petitioned and propitiated, appealed to for blessings and help, bountiful harvests, military victories, good marriages and healthy children, and they were appeased that they might not grow angry and wreak havoc on weak mortals by disasters and diseases. Their powers were great, but also local and concerned almost solely with this life.

WHY DID THEY BELIEVE?

Many of the Christians' claims about Jesus were less scandalous to them than to the Jews. Once the sons of god had walked the earth. In their stories, Perseus had been born of a virgin, Aesculapius had been a healer, and Herakles had suffered and died, only to ascend to heaven as a god, as had the hero Bellerophon on the back of winged Pegasus.³³ In Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), the sons of gods had returned, and to the Romans they were a present fact, with many of their own great emperors ascending at their deaths to godhood. Their images, which had marked the coins of daily exchange, being transferred to temples to receive worship. They could easily understand a son of god, and to some early Christians it seemed that these stories pointed, however partially, to a truth that they saw fulfilled in Jesus.³⁴

Yet, what was scandalous to all about Jesus was the manner of his suffering and death. Crucified as a criminal. A hideous and shameful death. How laughable, even pitiable, such insanity as the worship of a crucified criminal seemed to Roman authors.³⁵ "A man punished by extreme suffering for his wickedness – how appropriate for wicked men to worship what they deserve".³⁶ Nevertheless, many thousands of Romans, Greeks and others still chose to count themselves among the members of a weird sect of the strange and foreign Jewish religion.

Socially, it offered little but ostracism, while the only thing that stood between them and the executioner was the lack of a denouncer. Perhaps the most disenfranchised in society, including women and slaves, the poor, and widows and orphans, could find some acceptance and dignity, maybe even status, but Christian communities were not composed exclusively of such converts.

³¹ Acts 17:28; Aratus, *Phenomena* 1–5; Epimenides, *Cretica* (preserved in Ishodad of Merv's *Commentary on Acts*).

³² Justin, *First Apology*.

³³ Justin, *First Apology*. Bellerophon was, however, denied entry.

³⁴ Justin, *First Apology*.

³⁵ Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrinus*; Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*); Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); Justin, *First Apology*.

³⁶ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*).



Some saw the writings of the Jewish prophets fulfilled in Jesus and found this particularly convincing. As a young philosopher, Justin was particularly compelled by these proofs as they were laid out to him by an older Christian. Yet, in contrast, the Roman philosopher Celsus dismissed them as too vague to be necessarily applied to Jesus.³⁷

Some may have been persuaded to join the head of their household or another family member or friend, those whose judgement and opinion they already valued and respected when deciding what was right. When they encountered Christians, many were impressed by the attractive values they saw in their lives – their sincerity, consistency, and honesty, especially when this represented a marked change from their former lives.³⁸

Minucius Felix's novel *Octavius* ostensibly depicts a philosophical debate which convinces his and Octavius' mutual friend Caecilius to become a Christian. Yet, at its heart, the work is an ode to friendship. Their honest discussion is the product of this friendship, which brings Caecilius to a better understanding of his friends, helping to evidence to him not only the truth but the attractiveness of their beliefs.³⁹

Christians went around talking about a loving God who loved the world, wanted a relationship with people, and demanded love between people, even between enemies. He was nothing like the petulant deities of popular belief, unimaginable even to the followers of Plato, who saw God as good but distant. Such a God was hard to understand but eminently attractive.

So loving was He indeed that He even loved sinners and offered them a fresh start. For Roman philosophers like Celsus, this again seemed madness – why this insane preference for sinners? They criticised how so many wicked people were attracted to Christianity and accepted by Christians, “all other mysteries invite the purified,” decried Celsus, “but Christians resort to those who have committed sins!”⁴⁰

³⁷ Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*).

³⁸ Justin, *First Apology*; Galen, *Summary of Plato's Republic* (in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Lives of the Physicians*; 'al-Qifṭī, *Taṭrikh al-Ḥukama*)

³⁹ They and their speeches are probably fictitious, but the setting and conversion is perhaps not. Caecilius, it has been suggested, was a real figure, perhaps the same Caecilius Natalis as that mentioned in numerous inscriptions serving as a magistrate in Circa (in present-day Algeria) around 210 AD.

⁴⁰ Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*); Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*).

Yet, most striking to Roman critics, most weird, foolish, and pitiable of all their beliefs was their sureness that they would be resurrected after their deaths.⁴¹ Beyond the deification of the sons of gods, this was not something conceived of or hoped for by ordinary Greeks and Romans. Many Roman gravestone inscriptions carry epitaphs such as “he went on to another world that is no world, where there is nothing else except darkness”, or more pithily “I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care.”⁴²

Whatever they made of such strange hopes and promises, what shines through many of the surviving writings of early Christians and the reports of their answers before courts is that they were convinced that they had had an individual encounter with the divine Jesus.

WHAT WERE THEY GETTING UP TO?

It is early Sunday morning and still dark. We arrive where we have been told they are gathering. One week it is someone’s house in the city, other weeks outdoors in the country.⁴³ People are slowly gathering from the farms and the city, we have already seen some of them, the slaves and citizens, wives and widows, lawyers and councillors.⁴⁴

Here is the overseer, the episkopos, who leads all the communities in and around the city, handpicked by an apostle, or one of their disciples, or one of theirs. There are also the elders, the *presbyteroi*, who lead this particular gathering every week and look after its members.

All are here now, and together they recite a prayer: “Our Father, who is in heaven...” they recite this particular prayer three times every day, even when they don’t meet.⁴⁵ Here now is the dawn breaking, and they turn to face it and start to sing.⁴⁶ This is a Jewish practice, but their song also resembles a song of praise to a god, known as a *hymnos* in Greek, but it is about Jesus. “They sing to Christ as a god”, wrote a baffled Pliny.⁴⁷ Perhaps they are singing Philippians 2:6-11, maybe the earliest surviving Christian hymn, “Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God... every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

They then listen to readings, either from the books of Jewish scripture that are believed to contain prophecies about Jesus, or from the testimonies of apostles who met the resurrected Jesus, written down in letters from them or as narratives by their followers. Some of the community are old enough to remember when those who had met the apostles would come in person and relate what they remembered hearing from them.⁴⁸ Such itinerant teachers provided a close connection to the apostles and to Jesus’ earthly life. But there is also a concern about ‘false’ teachers, motivated by money or status, or who have added their own interpretations or elements to the stories. Consequently, to evaluate these teachings, they are keen to get hold of written records about Jesus, which can be traced back to the apostles.

Various texts are now floating around, and there are debates about which best reflect the apostles’ own witness. They are not naïve, and they weigh and assess the texts carefully. However, a wide ranging consensus is naturally forming around some of these texts, including a number of letters by Paul, a letter

⁴¹ Lucian, *Death of Peregrinus*; Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*).

⁴² Gravestone of Ares, Alexandria, second century (British Museum).

⁴³ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

⁴⁴ Justin, *First Apology*.

⁴⁵ *Didache*.

⁴⁶ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

⁴⁷ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

⁴⁸ Papias (in Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 18; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1-7).

by John, and four narratives of Jesus' life, which, by at least the end of the second century, will be known by their supposed authors' names: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.⁴⁹ Other books are floating around, but not everyone has them or has made up their minds about them yet. These include: the Revelation of John and Revelation of Peter, the Letters of Peter, Hebrews, Acts of the Apostles, the Letter of Barnabas, and Shepherd of Hermas. There are other books too, but these are even less widely used. They are all tested and weighed against the testimonies, which most reliably reflect and can be traced back to the teachings of the apostles.

Still, they have been and are sometimes still struggling with how the Old Testament and the Jewish laws fit with Jesus' message. Some were so keen to please God and be counted among his people that they were willing to submit themselves to Jewish law, circumcision and all. Among others, Marcion, at present a young man living in Bithynia, the son of one of the community's overseers, is so in love with the picture of God's love and grace which he sees in Paul's letters, that he will eventually go on, after being expelled from the community in Rome, to throw out the God of the Jews and all the other accounts about Jesus.

These readings go on for as long as time permits, after which the overseer or one of the elders gives practical instructions. These believers take Jesus' exhortations to radical forms of love very seriously. The teacher will certainly command us to love our enemies and give to everyone who asks.⁵⁰ There is also a focus in this teaching on those points of behaviour, which God's love demands, which stand most in contrast to that of the surrounding society. In a world filled with astrology, divination and potions, they are to reject magic.⁵¹ In a society where promiscuity is common, male fidelity is rare, and children and especially slaves are frequently used as sexual objects, they are to reject all kinds of sexual relations besides the marriage of husband and wife.⁵² Pregnancies are not to be aborted, and babies are not to be killed or abandoned. Indeed, children abandoned on the hillside by others, who will either die or end up in sexual exploitation, as Justin details, are to be rescued.⁵³ The emperor, his governors, and magistrates are to be obeyed, as are the overseers of the Christian community.⁵⁴

To the bafflement of many Roman authors, these were ideals that the Christians really lived out! Lucian wrote his satirical novel, *The Death of Peregrinus*, about a charlatan philosopher who duped the local Christians and lived off their unquestioning generosity. The famed doctor and philosopher Galen

⁴⁹ Irenaeus (in Eusebius, *History 5*); Clement of Alexandria (in Eusebius, *History 6*); Origen (in Eusebius, *History 6*); Muratorian canon.

⁵⁰ *Didache*; Justin, *First Apology*.

⁵¹ *Didache*; Justin, *First Apology*.

⁵² *Didache*; Justin, *First Apology*.

⁵³ Justin, *First Apology*; *Didache*; *Epistle to Diognetus*.

⁵⁴ *Didache*; Justin, *First Apology*; Ignatius' letters.



marvelled at their restraint regarding sex. While he generally considered them fools, he praised them for their “keen pursuit of justice”.⁵⁵ They acted like philosophers, even if they didn’t appear to think like them.

They conclude their meeting with a collection for widows and orphans, the sick and poor, prisoners, and visitors staying with them – a common fund that was managed by the overseer.⁵⁶ Some communities may even still hold parts of their members’ properties in common.⁵⁷

This initial gathering for praise and teaching now disperses, but later in the day, the initiated congregate again. This is very reminiscent of the many Greek mystery cults, whose initiates met for secret rites. Here, however, there are no qualifications for initiation. Anyone who believes can be reborn to a new life through baptism, which they receive outside in running water, with the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit pronounced over them.⁵⁸

It was what they got up to in these meetings which was the sources of so much mystery and anxiety among the Romans, yet, to Pliny’s great surprise, all he could find out was that they met only to eat food of “an ordinary and harmless kind” (not human flesh and blood).⁵⁹ We might observe them sitting down, perhaps reclining, for their meal. They call it a meal of “thanksgiving.”⁶⁰ Besides the communal dishes, however, there is also some bread and some wine. Holding them, the overseer praises the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, before giving them to the ministers to distribute.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Galen, *Summary of Plato’s Republic* (in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, *Lives of the Physicians*; ‘al-Qifṭī, *Ta’rikh al-Ḥukama*)

⁵⁶ Justin, *First Apology*.

⁵⁷ Lucian, *Death of Peregrinus*.

⁵⁸ *Didache*; Justin, *First Apology*.

⁵⁹ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

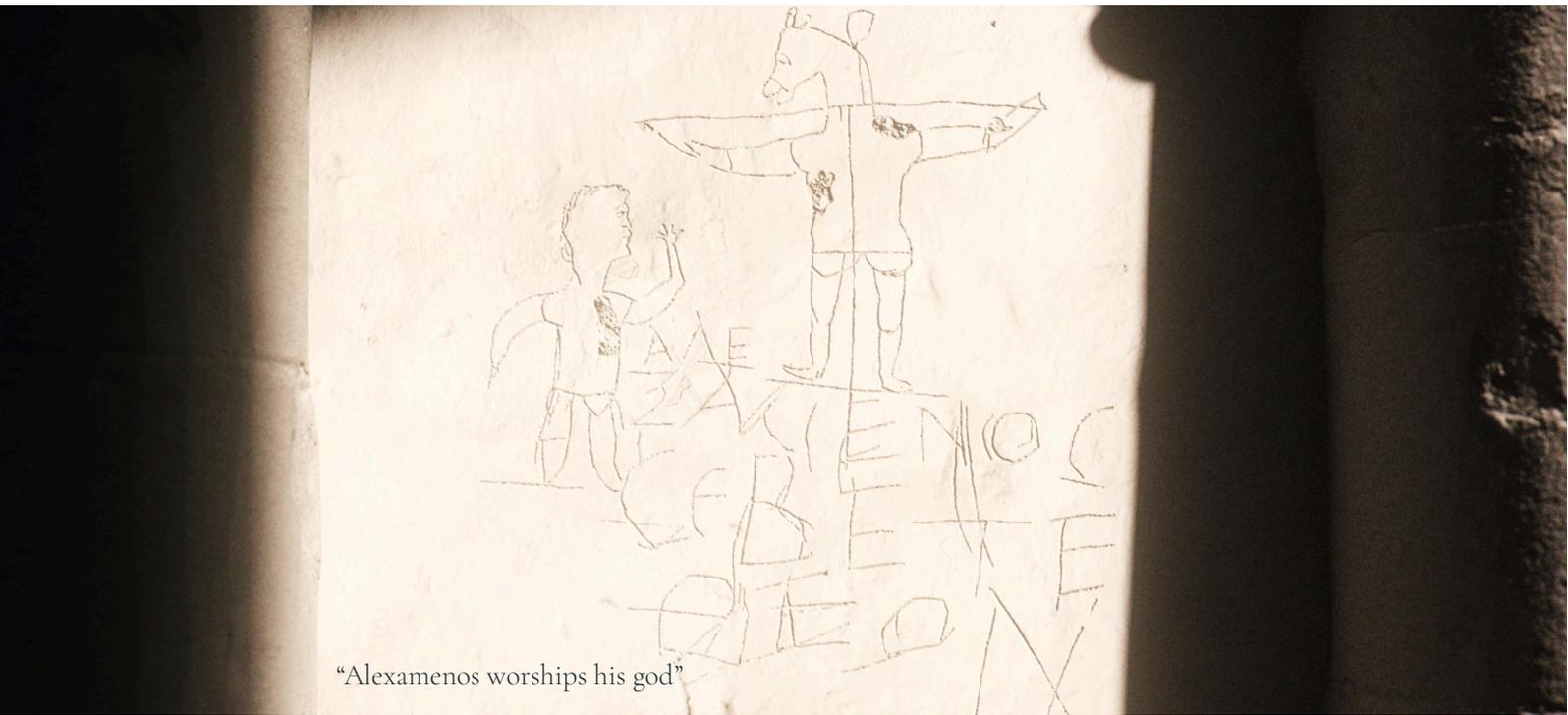
⁶⁰ *Didache*.

⁶¹ Justin, *First Apology*.

DISCRIMINATION

Among those Pliny interrogated were some who had been part of the Christian community but had, even as many as twenty years before, walked away.⁶² Many reasons may have prompted their departure, but it may simply have been that the daily pressures had gotten too much for them even before they came to the attention of the authorities.

Sometime around the year 200 AD, in an imperial building on the Palatine Hill in Rome, someone scratched a piece of graffiti into a wall. They drew a man stretched out and pinned to a cross, and gave him a donkey's head. Next to him, they drew another figure looking up at him, along with the words "Alexamenos worships his god". This is quite possibly the earliest depiction of Jesus that survives. The building was, for much of the period, used as a school for the emperor's page boys, and we might easily imagine this being drawn by one of the boys in mockery of his classmate. It was again widely rumoured that Christians, like the Jews, worshipped a donkey.⁶³ Such everyday mockery was perhaps not unusual.



"Alexamenos worships his god"

They lived in a world filled with gods. There were gods in the home, the streets and the markets. Public officials had to participate in religious duties, as did the members of associations of tradespeople, and every dinner party was filled with intervals for offerings and prayers to the gods. Being a Christian meant to refuse the dinner invitation, to turn down public office, to be an outsider among your fellow tradespeople, to be absent from public festivals, the theatre and the games, to cause tension within a household.⁶⁴ Even failing to kiss your hand to a way shrine as you walked down the street marked you very

⁶² Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

⁶³ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); Tertullian, *Apology*; Josephus, *Against Apion*; Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*).

⁶⁴ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*); Celsus, *True Doctrine* (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*); Lucius Apuleius, *Apology*.

visibly out as distinct.⁶⁵ The debate between the friends in Octavius follows a moment of tension when one of the friends kisses his hand, and the others don't.⁶⁶

The refusal to participate in these everyday observances caused confusion and offence, provoking mockery and anger. What sort of haters of their fellow men rejected so publicly the innate customs and traditions of their ancestors and society? Such people were deserving of mockery.⁶⁷

The pressures for Christian slaves in unbelieving households were surely even greater. Free men might behave absurdly, but slaves had no right to refuse their master's will, either when it came to the gods or to their owner's sexual demands. Yet, slaves in houses suffering these extreme tensions could remember the words written to their church in 1 Peter – that when slaves suffered injustice, they suffered with Christ and they gained glory in the eyes of God.⁶⁸ A world without slavery was inconceivable, and no mark could be made on so immense an institution, but God suffered with them, and they were like Him – their dignity was elevated higher than they could conceive.

Yet, for some, this was all too much and too high a price to pay for what this new teaching offered. Those who denied now being Christians, Pliny led in sacrificing to the gods for the welfare of the emperor, while cursing the name of Christ.⁶⁹

Others, however, accepted the charge that they were still Christians. Pliny endeavoured to persuade them out of this foolishness, explaining to them that the punishment was death. Still, they persisted that they were Christians. He explained to them again, but they remained “stubborn and inflexibly obstinate”, deserving of punishment for that alone!⁷⁰

EXECUTION

Ignatius, overseer of the community in the great city of Antioch, was sent to Rome for trial at around a similar time to Pliny's investigations. While travelling there, he wrote vividly of the fate he believed awaited him – to be thrown to the wild beasts in the arena, his mortal body to die by their claws and teeth.⁷¹ Under Nero, the Christians found-out in Rome had been killed by dogs, burned to death in the imperial gardens, and crucified like their god.⁷² Similar fates met the Christians of Lyon and Vienne in southern Gaul in 177 AD. Following a period of public outrage and rioting against this community, many Christians were taken to trial and executed – tortured, burned, and exposed to the animals in the amphitheatre. What deaths Pliny visited on the Christians of Bithynia are unknown, but they may have been similarly brutal, especially for slaves.

We do not know how the Christians of Bithynia responded to the deaths of many members of their community. Many may have left. Others might have held onto the words previously written to them in 1 Peter. Rejoice because you are sharing the sufferings of Christ. Under such pressures, elsewhere, there were continued exhortations to pray for those who denounced them and killed them, and even to fast for

⁶⁵ Lucius Apuleius, *Apology*.

⁶⁶ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*.

⁶⁷ Lucius Apuleius, *Apology*; 1 Peter 4:4

⁶⁸ 1 Peter 2:20-23, 4:13

⁶⁹ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

⁷⁰ Pliny, *Letter X*. 96.

⁷¹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaens*; Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*.

⁷² Tacitus, *Histories* 15.44.



them.⁷³ “And we must endeavour,” wrote Justin, “to persuade our unjust haters, that they might also partake in our same hope.”⁷⁴ No matter their injustice, brutality and cruelty, all those outside the community were still their potential brothers and sisters.

The population of Rome grew sympathetic to the Christians, bemoaned Tacitus, because of Nero’s excessive cruelty towards them. By the end of the second century, Christians were universally admired and pitied for their contempt for death.⁷⁵ Their willingness to die was indeed their most remarked-upon quality among Roman authors.

And yet, despite the great costs and pressures, they somehow grew. By 200 AD there were maybe around 200,000 Christians in the Roman Empire, and many more in the Parthian Empire, further up the Nile, and in India.⁷⁶ Their weird presence had become a fact of Roman life.

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⁷³ *Didache*; Justin, *First Apology*.

⁷⁴ Justin, *First Apology*.

⁷⁵ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (Minucius Felix’ *Octavius*); Marcus Aurelius’ letter (Eusebius *Histories* IV.13); Lucian *death of Peregrinus*; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3; Celsus *True doctrine* (Origen *contra celsum*); Galen, *summary of Plato’s Republic* (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *Lives of the Physicians*; ‘al-Qifṭī, *Ta’rikh al-Ḥukama*).

⁷⁶ Bardaisan (or Paul his follower), *The Book of the Laws of Countries*.

Recommended reading

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Pliny, *Letter X*. 96
- The Didache
- Justin Martyr, *First Apology*
- Minucius Felix, *Octavius*

SECONDARY READING

- Tom Holland, *Dominion*, Chapters 2, 3, and 4.
- Larry W. Hurtado, *Why on earth did anyone become a Christian in the first three centuries?* (Marquette University Press, 2016).
- Geoffrey E. M. de Ste Croix, "Why were the early Christians persecuted?" *Past & Present* 26.1 (1963): 6-38. [Republished in: *Studies in Ancient Society* (Routledge, 2013): 210-248.]
- Stephen Benko and Wolfgang Haase, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity during the first two centuries AD," *Religion* (Vorkonstantinisches Christentum: Verhältnis zu römischem Staat und heidnischer Religion [Forts.]) (1980): 1055-1118.