

2. The First Three Centuries [cont.]

I. Attitudes in the Roman Empire

A. Jewish Attitudes to Christians

Jews initially considered Jewish Christians to be a sect: the sect of the Nazarenes (cf. sects of Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes). With authority from the High Priest, Paul persecuted followers of the Way.

1. First Jewish Revolt (66-73)

Most of the (Jewish) Christians in Jerusalem fled to Pella, one of the Decapolis cities across the Jordan. The destruction of Qumran (68), the Temple (70), and Masada (73) by Vespasian and Titus ended most sects of Judaism: Essenes, Sadducees, Zealots. Only the Pharisees survived. They left Jerusalem, moving perhaps to Jamnia (Yavneh) near Joppa. Rabbinic Judaism emerged, built upon the oral law (*halakah*) of the Pharisees. This law was codified as the Mishnah by Judah ha-Nasi (the Prince) in Sepphoris in the mid-2nd century.

An additional item (*birkat ha-minim*, curse on the heretics) was added to the Eighteen Benedictions (the Amidah, recited 3× daily):

For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let (the *nozerim* 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.

2. Second Jewish Revolt (132-135)

aka the Bar-Kochba Revolt, after its leader whom Rabbi Akiva heralded as the Messiah. Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem as a pagan city, Aelia Capitolina. Jews were forbidden, but were allowed to continue in the Land. The rabbinic court moved to Sepphoris then Tiberias.

Though the Romans brutally suppressed both revolts, they continued to recognize Judaism as a legal religion (*religio lecta*), with certain special “privileges”: exemption from emperor worship, military service.

3. The Ebionites

A Jewish-Christian sect that survived many centuries in the East. Accepted Jesus as Messiah but rejected his divinity; insisted on necessity of following Torah; rejected Paul as apostate from Torah; revered James the Just.

B. Roman Attitudes to Christians

The Romans initially considered Christianity a Jewish cult, and hence legal. But persecution showed that Christianity had become an illegal cult (*religio illicita*, until 312).

Romans viewed Jews as strange, Christians as even stranger:

1. atheists: rejected pagan gods, refusal to participate in imperial cult. A dangerous element, threatening *pax deorum*, the peace of the gods.
2. antisocial: refused to participate in pagan festivals, join trade guilds, serve in military, observe spectacles.
3. cannibalism: ate flesh and drank blood in eucharist
4. incest: called one another brother, sister; kiss of peace; *agape* love feasts.

Christians were therefore often targeted as scapegoats in times of trouble.

1. Persecution

- Nero: local to Rome.
- Domitian (r. 81-96): enforced worship of himself as Lord and God.
- Trajan: correspondence between Pliny, governor of Bithynia, and Trajan on how to deal with Christians.
- Third century: systematic, empire-wide persecution under Decius, Diocletian (the Great Persecution).

Local officials were usually unwilling to kill Christians, but ended up having to do so because of their refusal to participate in the imperial cult.

2. Martyrs

- Stephen: the first martyr
- Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (c. 110): wrote a series of letters as he headed to Rome for martyrdom.
- Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (c. 155-56).

By c. 200 the practice arose of observing the anniversary of a martyr's death (his/her birthday) with ceremonies at his tomb; these sites often developed into shrines, church buildings. Martyrs came to be seen as especially holy/saintly, leading to the "cult" of saints.

The Seed of the Church

Christians' willingness to die rather than compromise (swear/offer incense by the *genius* of Caesar) baffled Roman authorities. It impressed many people.

Tertullian to the "Rulers of the Roman Empire" (c. 200):

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.

II. Persia

Travel through Persian lands was facilitated by two important routes:

1. Persian Royal Road: Susa to Sardis 2700 km. Rebuilt by Darius I (the Great, r. 522-486). Royal couriers could traverse entire route in 9 days; normal travel time 3 months by foot. Herodotus: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."
2. Silk Road: to India, China.

1. Persian Empires

1. Achaemenid (550-330 BC)
2. Parthian Empire (Arsacid) (247BC - AD 224). capital Ctesiphon.
3. Sasanian, Sassanid (224-651)

2. Religions of the Persian Empires

1. Zoroastrianism
2. Manichaeism
3. Yazidism