

# *The man who taught them how to fight back*

**The Christians suffered false charges in silence  
until the deft convert Justin gave them skill  
with words, then paid for it with his life**

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arcus Cornelius Fronto was not a man whose views could be taken lightly. Lawyer, senator, friend of Caesar, tutor of the future emperor Marcus Aurelius—when he described the Christian sect, what he said was regarded as authoritative by those who mattered. And to Fronto, the Christians were repulsive.

He sketched their customary ritual. On an appointed day, he said, they gather at a banquet with people of either sex and every age, most of them relatives. “There, after full feasting, when the blood is heated and drink has inflamed the passions of incestuous lust, a dog, which had been tied to a lamp, is tempted by a morsel thrown beyond the range of its tether. It bounds forward with a rush, the light is upset and extinguished, and in the shameless dark, lustful embraces are exchanged. All alike, if not in act, yet by complicity, are involved in incest, as anything that occurs by the act of individuals results from the common intention.”

What lent credence to Fronto’s description were the things other Romans could see and hear of these Christians. Though they lived in the midst of other people, they were indeed a community unto themselves. Their central rite, which they called a “thanksgiving”—the Greek word for it was *Eucharist*—was veiled



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*A group of early Christians disperses at dawn after a night spent in worship and study. Although they lived in the midst of others, they were a community apart, misunderstood and often viewed by their neighbors as secretive and subversive.*

in secrecy. It was a meal of some kind which only full members could attend. The most appalling stories were told about it. They actually consumed, it was said, the body and blood of their founder.

This would be the man Jesus, whom they call “Christ.” He was crucified at Jerusalem back in the days of Tiberius on some sort of sedition charge. There was talk of their “reenacting” his crucifixion at each session. So, like the disgusting Druids, for all anyone knew, these Christians might well be practicing human sacrifice. They apparently also practiced cannibalism, and to this must be added incest, for they spoke of “loving” their brothers and sisters, with everything that implied.

Yet they could not be called crafty or deceptive. In fact, they were gullible fools. The worshipers of “that crucified sophist” Jesus, wrote the pagan writer Lucian, could easily be bilked by a few confidence men. They set so little store

by their possessions that “if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by it, came among them, he quickly acquired sudden wealth by imposing upon these simple folk.”

Finally and beyond all that, their community even within itself appeared to lack all proper respect for things like title, social status, education, gender. They did not seem to realize that any society must be structured. They treated one another as equals, sometimes even their slaves. It was shocking. Small wonder Christianity held such appeal to the lower classes and, of course, to silly women. Small wonder, too, that responsible people of rank, senators and statesmen, saw their ideas as a threat. They were. How long could Rome last if fantasies like this took hold?

Apart from this implicit threat to the social order, however, it’s improbable that the Roman aristocracy, the great patrician families, much cared about the



*This substantial marble altar, in Pompeii, Italy, stands in a temple dedicated to the cult of the Emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69–79). Since public policy decreed Rome was ascendant by the will of its gods, acceptance of the divinity of the emperor was used as a test of loyalty to the state. Refusal to acknowledge that divinity brought automatic conviction and sentence.*

perceived excesses of Christian worship. Even Fronto's celebrated depiction of them, says his biographer Edward Champlin, was probably no more than a passing reference used to illustrate the "superstitions" imported by the bizarre mix of races flooding into Rome as the empire grew. Along with the grotesque sorceries of these Christians, there were the depraved sacrifices of the Druids brought from Gaul<sup>1</sup> as well as the wine-crazed contortions of the worshipers of Bacchus from Greece (likewise prohibited and likewise practiced), the legalistic gymnastics of the Jews, and the stargazing lunacies of the Chaldean astrologers.

However, the really grave offense of the Christians, the one for which they would be expelled, enslaved, and executed, was their atheism—that is, their effrontery in denying Rome's twelve gods, within the very walls of the city. Did the Roman leadership, drawn from the patrician class and later the army, actually believe in these gods, these stern personifications of sterner virtues, their auguries, and demanding rituals? Probably not, but they very much believed

in what they represented. Patrician philosophers of the first century B.C. like Varro and the more famous Cicero would have thought such a question naive. After years of study, Varro deemed civic gods and goddesses worthy of compulsory devotion not because they existed, but rather because they reinforced civic values. As Cicero averred: "Without piety, good faith and justice cannot exist, and all society is subverted."

This was not cynicism. The Romans believed that their city was ascendant by divine will, and that its rule was for the good of all. They were not conquering the world; they were liberating it. So perhaps it was not such a leap for the Senate, the upper legislative house of Roman patrician families, to make Julius Caesar a god in 42 B.C., the year after his death. He was already worshiped in the East, after all, and had not the very heavens saluted him with a blazing comet (later known as Halley's) during his funeral rites? Temples were built and a priesthood enlisted. Even legal oaths, it was decreed, could be taken by the "genius," or immortal guiding spirit, of Caesar.

Julius's successor, Caesar Augustus, was declared a god, but only in the provinces. The Romans were grateful to him for his having ended a half century of civil war and inaugurating the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, a new era of prosperity. Ironically, the first Caesar to assert unqualified divinity for himself was the degenerate Gaius, nicknamed Caligula.

Degenerate or not, this emperor-god, too, was supported by Rome's upper classes. Though unconvinced by imperial "deification," they saw the oath to divine emperors as a loyalty test to Rome itself, and it was therefore enforced on

1. The Romans had a deep-seated aversion to human sacrifice, something practiced by two of the toughest opponents they faced in their rise to world power: the Gauls and the Carthaginians. When Julius Caesar ordered a temple to the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis torn down, a secret temple to the Cappadocian goddess Ma-Bellona was found beneath it with pots full of human flesh. Despite legal prohibitions, however, the practice continued, even in Rome.

pain of death.<sup>2</sup> Since Roman religion buttressed the state, foreign religions were regarded as undermining it, particularly those with secret rites whose deity was a jealous god that forbade oaths to Rome's own deities.

Christians, therefore, could be charged with atheism at any time. However, a crackdown was most likely during plagues, famines, or a military defeat on the empire's frontiers. At such times, most Romans would make offerings to propitiate their gods. Christians not only refused to participate, but some seemed to welcome any catastrophe as a sign of their Messiah's imminent return. The response to their recalcitrance was often mob fury. "Let these nonbelievers themselves become a sacrifice to the gods in the public arena," people raged. So informers would denounce their neighbors and bring them before the magistrates. The accused would be asked to burn a pinch of incense to the divine emperor, or sometimes to take an oath on his "genius." Refusal brought instant conviction and sentence. Some were asked "*Christianus es?*" ("Are you a Christian?"). An affirmative answer amounted to a guilty plea.<sup>3</sup>

## *A crackdown was most likely during plagues, famines, or a military defeat, when Romans would make offerings to their gods but Christians would not participate.*

Not until 250, under Decius, did the empire as a whole attack the Christians systematically. The earlier sporadic persecutions were nonetheless terrifying. Christians could live in undisturbed peace for years, then suddenly be confronted with sheer horror. The threat of arrest was always there. After all, though they might meet in secret, they lived for the most part in full view of their neighbors in the empire's most populous cities. It was there, of course, that the first evangelists could find the biggest audiences. By A.D. 80 or 90 there were already Gentile Christians living in Rome, and by the middle of the second century their numbers approached thirty thousand, enough to support an impressive professional staff of 150 presbyters or priests, plus deacons and full-time "visitors." They could hardly be called an underground church.

As city folk, they were mostly artisans, tent-makers, cloth-dealers, laborers, slaves and servants, potters, plasterers, masons, and tavern keepers. They also included people of wealth and station; their early writings reveal a sophistication found only among the educated classes. Their preaching in the marketplaces,

2. The Jews were usually exempted from the requirements to sacrifice to Rome's gods, partly because they were allies before they became subjects, and partly because their worship was ancient, and the Romans were wedded to tradition, even other people's. Since the earliest Christians were nearly all Jews, they at first enjoyed the same privilege. Once they were differentiated, however, the Christians came under attack—frequently from the Jews, who saw them as pirating their Scriptures and traditions.

3. Informing on people was a profession in imperial Rome, though a despised one. The government paid these *delatores* a share of the estate confiscated from the miscreant convicted by their sworn testimony; the rest of the property went to the emperors, who could always use the money. Informers were paid in various ways. If the punishment were merely a fine, the informer might collect half. Under some emperors, there was a fee schedule, the amount varying with the seriousness of the offense. Informers grew so rapidly in numbers that various emperors attempted to restrict them, or banish the worst among them. False accusers were punished, often with the very penalties that their victims would have merited if convicted.

their mixed-gender services, their care for the sick, all in the tightly packed living conditions of Rome, inevitably drew attention, much of it scornful. Their children were taunted by other children. Christians were ridiculed in graffiti like the one still there on the Palatine Hill, showing a man standing before a crucified donkey, over the words, “Alexamenos worships his god.”

The rumors of their sexual excesses lay in sharp contrast to the facts. Many took Paul’s advice and became celibates, vowing they would never marry. Divorce was disapproved among the Christians. So was the remarriage of widows. Some observers, like the second-century pagan physician Galen, wrote admiringly of them: “They include not only men, but also women who refrain from cohabiting all their lives; and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.” Fidelity and chastity in marriage were still ideals in imperial Rome, respected if not observed, but Christians practiced them so conspicuously and universally they became hallmarks of their faith.

They similarly distinguished themselves by their support for the needy, the sick, for widows and orphans. They consistently networked. The wealthier employed the needy, preferred their brethren in business, and opened their houses as meeting places, adorning the walls with frescoes and the floors with

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mosaics showing communion loaves, chalices, praying figures, and such symbols of Christ as lambs and fish.<sup>4</sup> The Christians were their own mutual-aid society that transcended class.

They distanced themselves from their neighbors in other ways. Most refused to attend the gladiatorial games, or use imperial coins that proclaimed the emperor a god, or teach school, lest the syllabus require retelling the bawdy shenanigans of pagan deities. They shunned the theater for the same reason, along with sculpture or painting, and they denounced rampant homosexuality within the public baths. A Christian had to be careful in businesses where contracts were sealed with oaths to deified emperors.

Where they refused to do things everybody else was doing, they also took part in activities that excluded others. They attended worship services or study groups in the evenings that sometimes lasted till dawn. So they were a strange people, and since most of them were converts, they stood in marked contrast not only to their neighbors but also to their former selves. As one of them wrote:

4. Portraits of Christ were few in Roman houses, and those that survive mostly show him as an idealized, beardless youth like the god Apollo. “We do not know of his external appearance,” wrote Augustine in the fifth century. In early representations, Christ is portrayed as a beardless youth. Not until later did the depiction of a bearded, long-nosed, individualized Savior become the unmistakable convention.



*One of the oldest known representations of Christ is actually a derisive graffiti on the wall of a former guardroom on the Palatine Hill in Rome. Dating from about A.D. 200, it depicts a figure nailed upon a cross with another looking on, one hand upheld in a gesture of worship. To add offense, the crucified figure was drawn with what appears to be the head of an ass. A crude inscription reads: ‘Alexamenos worships his god.’*

We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts, dedicated ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into common stock and share with everyone who is in need; we who hated and destroyed one another and, on account of their different customs would not live with men of a different race, now, since the coming of Christ, live on excellent terms with them and pray for our enemies.

The author of those words was Justin, a newcomer to Rome, a Christian convert from the East, who arrived in the city about the year 150 and was destined to make a profound difference to the attitude of the Christian community there. For until Justin, the Christians generally suffered in silence the abuse that was so widely heaped upon them. Or they would merely complain like the bishop of Antioch: “Godless mouths falsely accuse us, the godly who are called Christians, saying that our wives are the common property of all and indulge in promiscuous intercourse; that further we have intercourse with our own sisters; and that—most godless and cruel of all—we taste human flesh.”

But Justin did not merely complain; Justin fought. He was a lethal debater,

and with devastating artistry on public platforms everywhere, he preached the Christian message and declared the Christian case. In the end, he would pay for his eloquence with his life, but some listened, and the seed took root.

Born about the year 100 of pagan parents in the Roman colonial city of Flavia Neapolis in Palestine (ancient Shechem in Samaria), Justin was to live under three emperors—Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius—and to die under a fourth, Marcus Aurelius. The son of well-to-do farmers originally from Italy or Greece, he demonstrated from his youth a love of philosophy, and a zest for



*Philosophy lay at the heart of learning in the ancient world and had an important place in Roman life as a framework for argument and debate. Justin saw in this an opportunity to persuade Romans that the search for Truth at the heart of the Stoic and Platonist philosophies was something they shared with the Hebrew prophets—and by extension Christianity. A Roman sarcophagus (left), now held by the Vatican museums, was decorated with this relief of three philosophers in conversation. This depiction of a typical philosopher (center) dates from the first century B.C. or the first century A.D. The second- or third-century A.D. mosaic of a philosopher (right) is held by the the Rhenisches Landsmuseum in Trier, Germany.*

debate: not in the tendentious style of the Roman schools, but rather debate as the means to know Truth, which to Justin meant to know God.

So by arguing he searched, and his search is recounted in one of his three surviving works, *The Dialogue with Trypho*. “I put myself first into the hands of a Stoic,” he writes, seeking through the austere, impersonal, morally principled philosophy of Stoicism an avenue to Truth. But after studying with him for some time, “I got no further with respect to God, for he did not know himself, and he was continually saying that this learning was not necessary.”

Next he sought out a Peripatetic, a disciple of Aristotelian philosophy (so named because of Aristotle’s habit of walking about as he taught), but his new teacher’s preoccupation with tuition fees persuaded him he was not a philosopher at all. Still, Justin was not discouraged. Philosophy continued to sound for him “a special note” of “supreme excellence.” He then approached a Pythagorean “of great reputation” who told him he must first learn music, astronomy, and mathematics. But just at this point a Platonist philosopher arrived in Flavia Neapolis and took him as a student. Plato enchanted him. “I was quite enraptured with the perception of immaterial things, and the contemplation of ideas added wings to my intelligence,” and at last he found himself on

the brink of knowing “the Good.” Then it happened. He met an elderly man who was Christian.

Well-schooled in philosophy, the old Christian deftly laid bare a major weakness in the approach of Plato’s followers. The soul, they held, could achieve union with God only in dreams which the dreamer could not remember later. “What’s the use of that?” asked the old man. There could be none, and he cited the axiom that neither God nor Nature ever did anything without purpose. So the Platonic union with God must be false.

*Justin watched Christians die in the arena, and when he saw ‘they were afraid neither of death nor of anything else ordinarily looked upon as terrible,’ his faith was born.*

If man were to come to know God, the Christian argued, it must be through something God himself does, not man. But did God so intervene in the Nature he had created? The old man directed his student to the Jewish Scriptures. Justin plunged into them, devouring them so diligently he could recite them chapter and verse for the rest of his life. But these alone did not bring him to conversion. Could the righteous God he found there be somehow represented on Earth by these dreadful Christians about whom he had heard such repellent stories? Not very likely.

Then, about the year 130, he saw a horrible but amazing sight that changed his mind. In the arena, he watched Christians die. “I saw that they were afraid neither of death nor of anything else ordinarily looked upon as terrible,” he wrote. The sight gave birth to his faith. “I concluded that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure.” For if such were the goals of the Christians, why would they not perpetuate their pleasures and escape death by offering the required sacrifice to the gods? He believed, and became Christian.

But Flavia Neapolis held little challenge for this eager young convert. He moved to Ephesus, the capital and Christian center of the province of Asia, where John the Apostle was said to have written the Fourth Gospel. Far from abandoning philosophy, Justin saw in it an opportunity for Christian evangelism, and took full advantage of the spirit of free inquiry that prevailed wherever Greek influence had been felt. He opened a Christian philosophical school and strove to reconcile with Christianity the two philosophies he saw as closest to it. God, he concluded, had not confined to the Jews his intervention into the lives of his human creatures. He had influenced the Greeks as well. Thus, while the Hebrew prophets had begun to discern the Truth, so too did Stoicism and Platonism.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, instead of fleeing from conflict with the pagan world, he

<sup>5</sup> The idea of Plato being a “pagan prophet” probably started with Justin. Plato wrote the following account of creation, so reminiscent of the opening verses of both Genesis and John’s Gospel: “He was good: and in the good no jealousy in any matter can ever arise. So being without jealousy, he desired that all things should come as near as possible like himself. . . . the god took over all that is visible—not at rest, but in discordant and unordered motion—and brought it from disorder into order, since he judged that order was in every way better.”

sought out opportunities to confront it, contradicting the theories of his pagan peers so effectively that they became worried and jealous.

A record of one debate appears in *The Dialogue with Trypho*. Trypho was a Hellenized Jew with whom Justin conducted a polite public debate at Ephesus in 135. For Justin, it was the combative opening bell.

When Trypho introduces himself and requests a discussion of philosophy, Justin strikes immediately to the flaw the old man had shown him in philosophy. Why philosophy? he asks. Had not Plato himself observed that every philosophical proof must be stronger than the thing which is proved through it, because the latter is inevitably dependent on the former? How, therefore, could human reason

*To Justin's dismay Marcion, the bishop's son, taught that the God of the Jews was 'fickle, capricious, ignorant, despotic, and cruel,' inferior to the 'Supreme God, Jesus' Father.*

lead to a true perception of God, if God, the Creator of the human mind, must be superior to it? "How could you get as much out of philosophy as you could from your own [Jewish] lawgivers and prophets?" he demands. For while through reason we could not find God, through the prophets and through Christ God had found us and redeemed us.

The fight was over in the first round, but Trypho no doubt knew that Justin's real target in this discourse was not philosophy at all, but the currently dangerous teachings of one Marcion, a bishop's son, expelled from his own congregation, it was said, for immorality, who taught that the God of the Jews was "fickle, capricious, ignorant, despotic, and cruel" and inferior to the "Supreme God" who was Jesus' Father. Justin knew that the validity of Jesus much depended on the validity of the Jewish prophets who came before him. So he spoke as a friend and strong supporter of the Jewish tradition.

Confronted with pagan religions, however, Justin was not at all conciliatory. Plato must have been influenced by Christ in some fashion, he declared, even though Christ came later, and the Jewish prophets were Christ's forerunners too, but the pagan gods were demons—particularly those enshrined in myths that resembled the story of Jesus. Put into the heads of ancient poets, they allowed opponents of Christianity to argue that Christ was the mere embellishment of a myth.

Justin's reputation as a skilled defender of the faith soon spread to the Christians at Rome, who badly needed his help. Senior people in the imperial bureaucracy were once again becoming belligerent and menacing.

The emperor Hadrian's twenty-one year-reign ended just three years after Justin's debate with Trypho. Like his predecessor Trajan, Hadrian was wise, superstitious, statesmanlike, and no more ruthless than he needed to be. Unlike Trajan, he pronounced no oppressive measures against the Christians.

In fact, he sent a directive to the governor of Asia, known as the "Rescript of Hadrian," ordering instead a crackdown on false informers. All charges against Christians must be thoroughly investigated, he ruled, and false accusations must entail punishment.

However, it was during Hadrian's reign that Telesphorus, listed by Catholic Christians as the seventh bishop of Rome after Peter, was arrested and executed. No record remains of either the charges or the manner of his execution, though one ancient account says his evangelical preaching was so successful that the numbers

## Ancient Israel's last president

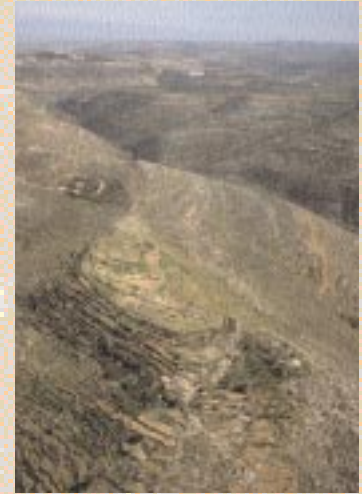
The giant Kochba's nine-fingered army defies Rome until his temper foils him

He was so powerfully built, it was said, that he could snatch from the air huge stones hurled against him by Roman catapults and then fling the boulders back at his attackers. According to another tale, he found the strongest and fiercest men for his rebel army by proclaiming that only those who severed one of their own fingers were eligible—and thousands, eager to serve at his command, willingly passed the painful test. He and his nine-fingered men led a highly successful revolt against the Romans for nearly four years, setting up efficient Jewish administrative centers deep within the Roman Empire, and even minting coins proclaiming independence for the Jewish state. He fell from grace, taking the Jews with him, because he killed a holy man in a fit of temper, and he died in the coils of a giant snake.

That's some of the mix of fact and legend surrounding Simon Bar Kochba—also known as Simon Bar Koziva, Shimeon Bar Koshba, or Shimeon Ben Kosiba. He is credited with leading the spectacular second revolt of the Jews against Rome, beginning in A.D. 132, and continuing to 135. Much of his history is uncertain, if not clearly mythical, and until the middle of the twentieth century, there was considerable doubt about whether he had ever lived at all.

Yet live he did, as was revealed by astonishing discoveries in caves near the Dead Sea in the 1950s, when archaeologists came upon some thirty-five documents dating from Bar Kochba's time, including a number of letters, written by Bar Kochba himself, describing himself as "President over Israel."

The contents of the letters are unremarkable, dealing with such things as the ownership of a cow and the shipment of wheat; none mentions any specific battle, and they are all undated. But when Yigael Yadin, the archaeologist whose expedition turned up



An aerial view of Betar, in the Judean hills, the remains of the headquarters for the rebellion against Rome by Simon Bar Kochba, self-proclaimed "President over Israel."

the letters, presented photos of them to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in 1960, members of the Knesset and the cabinet who were present were at first struck dumb. Then, Yadin recalled, "the silence was shattered by spontaneous cries of astonishment and joy. That evening the national radio interrupted its scheduled program to broadcast news of the discovery. Next day, the newspapers came out with banner headlines over the announcement. This was not just another archaeological discovery. It was the retrieval of a part of the nation's best heritage."

Most contemporary sources now see the Bar Kochba rebellion as having been provoked by unendurable pressure applied to the Jews by the Roman

of his converts alarmed the authorities.<sup>6</sup>

In 135, Hadrian put down the Bar Kochba rebellion (see sidebar) and outlawed circumcision, an essential part of God's covenant with the Jews given to Abraham (Gen. 17:12). Hadrian refrained from deifying himself, but instead declared his beloved and beautiful pageboy Antinous a god, an action appalled to both Christian and Jew. Hadrian died miserably in 138 of an unidentified but chronically debilitating disease, after three attempted suicides. His successor

emperor Hadrian. When he took power in A.D. 117, Hadrian seemed to sympathize with Judaism, and was even said to have promised the Jews that they could rebuild the Jerusalem temple leveled by Roman forces in A.D. 70—probably for political reasons and possibly under the influence of the Jew-baiting Roman historian Tacitus. However, Hadrian changed his mind, enacted a law against castration that forbade circumcision as well, began deporting Jews, and started construction of a new city, Aelia Capitolina, on the old Jerusalem site, with a temple to the pagan god Jupiter where the Jewish temple had once stood.

The rebellion simmered for years, erupting full force in 132, when Bar Kochba organized a guerrilla army that may have numbered as many as 100,000 men, and began seizing towns and territory. Eventually, the rebels held some fifty strongholds in Palestine, along with 985 towns and villages—including, according to some but not all accounts, Jerusalem itself.

In this, Bar Kochba was aided by the much-admired Rabbi Akiva, who became his armor bearer and proclaimed him the Messiah. Bar Kochba fought the Romans for three-and-a-half years and, according to the Jewish Talmud, became so convinced of his own powers that he arrogantly ordered God to stay out of his affairs, demanding, "Lord of the Universe, neither help nor hinder us."

Bar Kochba had strong religious support from the sage Eleazar, his uncle, who sat in sackcloth and prayed continually. When the Romans learned of Eleazar's role in boosting the rebels' morale, they dispatched an agent to the city of Betar. There, the agent publicly approached Eleazar and pretended to whisper something in his ear. Bar Kochba's men, of course, seized the agent, who falsely told them that Eleazar was about to hand the city over to Rome. Enraged, Bar Kochba confronted Eleazar, dismissed the holy man's denial of the accusation, and kicked him so hard that Eleazar died.

Betar fell to the Romans shortly afterwards, and the rebellion ended with the slaughter of an estimated 580,000 Jews. The blood that flowed was said to be so heavy that it rose to

the level of the horses' nostrils, and coursed from Betar into the Mediterranean Sea with so much force that it carried boulders along with it. For their part, the Romans lost so many of their own that when the emperor reported his victory to the Senate, he omitted the traditional, "I and the army are well."

Bar Kochba was killed—beheaded by the Romans in some accounts, strangled by a giant snake in others. With the now leaderless revolt put down, Hadrian plowed Jerusalem under and clamped down even more tightly on Judaism, barring Jews from the entire region of the Holy City, forbidding not only circumcision, but the study of the Torah, the keeping of the Sabbath, and even the making of any Jewish calendar.

Bar Kochba's defeat "marked the end of Jewish hopes for an independent state for almost 2,000 years," writes Rabbi David E. Lipman in his essay *The Bar Kochba Revolt*. "We didn't have our own country again until May 14, 1948"—when the modern state of Israel was proclaimed in the Middle East.

The rebel leader's followers had changed his actual name, Bar Kosiba, to Bar Kochba, meaning "son of a star," underlining their conviction that he was the Messiah. But in the Jewish tradition he is denied such a title, for the Messiah is still to come. ■



In 1982 the remains of a group of Bar Kochba's rebels were reburied with full military honors at Masada, Israel. Bar Kochba's defeat meant the end of Jewish hopes for an independent homeland for almost two thousand years—until May 14, 1948, when the modern state of Israel was proclaimed.

and adopted son, Antoninus Pius,<sup>7</sup> proved actively tolerant of Christians. Upon his accession he revoked all Hadrian's outstanding death sentences, repealed on behalf of the Jews the edict against circumcision, and directed local authorities in Asia to treat Christians with tolerance.

However, many of the new emperor's senior administrators did not share his benign attitude towards Christianity, thanks especially to Fronto's monstrous depictions of Christian rituals. By 150, the attitude to Christianity had hardened among Fronto and his colleagues because of rumors that the sect's orgiastic activities were growing even worse.

This was easily explained. After the execution of Bishop Telesphorus by Hadrian, the Roman church was rapidly infiltrated by Gnostic teachers whose belief in the meaninglessness of the material world led them in either of two, opposite, directions: asceticism or debauchery. That is, either they rejected the lures of sex as unreal and therefore worthless, or surrendered to them because they were unreal and therefore harmless. It was the latter group that caused the scandal, perhaps occasioning Fronto's much published fulmination against the Christians, known as *Fronto's Oration*, probably during his consulship in 143. It runs deeply into the lurid:

They recognize one another by secret marks and signs, and they enjoy mutual love almost before they meet. Here and there among them is spread a certain cult of lust, and they promiscuously call one another brother and sister, so that their frequent fornication becomes, by the use of a sacred name, incest.

Thus, their vain and insane superstition glories in its crime. Unless there were a foundation of truth, wise rumor would not speak of these wicked matters, rightly suppressed. I hear that they worship the head of a most disgusting animal, consecrated by some stupid conviction or other: Their religion was born worthy of such customs! Others say they worship the genitals of their leader and priest, and, so to speak, adore their own source. This may be erroneous, but certainly the suspicion would arise in their secret nocturnal rites. And anyone who tells of a man paying the supreme penalty for his crime, and the deadly wood of the cross in their ceremonies, attributes suitable altars to those depraved criminals. They worship what they deserve.

The story of their initiating novices is as detestable as it is notorious. An infant, concealed in meal so as to deceive the unwary, is placed before the one who is in charge of the rites. This infant, hidden under the meal, is struck by the novice, who thinks he is striking harmless blows, but kills him with blind and hidden wounds. Horrible to relate, they drink his blood, eagerly distribute the members of his body, and are united by this sacrifice and pledged to common silence by this awareness of guilt.



The use of coded signs, like this first-century inscription showing early Christian symbols of fish and an anchor, led anti-Christians such as Fronto to claim that they were a subversive and secretive cult with much to hide.

6. Telesphorus, the bishop of Rome martyred about 138, is acclaimed in early Christian legend for inaugurating the tradition of the Christmas Eve midnight service, though Christians did not settle on December 25 as the date to observe Christ's birth for another two hundred years.

7. Reportedly, Antoninus received the additional tag Pius after the emperor Hadrian saw him helping his extremely aged father-in-law and Marcus Aurelius's father, Marcus Annus Verus, up the Senate stairs. This would have reverberated with associations to "pious Aeneas," Rome's mythic Trojan founder.

## Snapshots in stone of city life in Rome

Sales gimmicks like live monkeys and display counters show that some things haven't changed

Snapshots in stone: Sturdy bas-relief sculpture, with its carved figures rising slightly from a stone surface, provides vivid glimpses of life in the streets of Ancient Rome. The play of light and shadow on the flat background adds depth and realism to human forms, and the technique was widely used by the Romans to illustrate social or historical events, especially in commemoration of an individual's death. Quite lifelike figures adorned funerary *stele* (commemorative stone tablets) and the marble caskets known as sarcophagi. Many well preserved examples still survive. A butcher prepares the day's cuts for sale (1). Meanwhile, an enterprising vendor uses two monkeys (left) to attract customers to her stall (2). Boots are fashioned as they would be for centuries afterwards in a cobbler's shop (3). Except for the togas, the exchanges depicted in these memorial carvings might occur in contemporary stores—as in the cases of the cutlery merchant (4), and the silversmith assisting a shopper with a selection from racks of his wares (5). ■



This diatribe, coming as it did from a source so close to the empire's highest authority, left the Christians horrified. Thus the urgent call from Rome for the help of the man they heard so much about at Ephesus.

Justin's arrival in the capital can be reconstructed. He would have landed at the port of Ostia and, full of expectation and foreboding, walked the fourteen miles to the city. He would at last behold the great sights of a place whose magnificence he had heard described all his life. He knew, too, that Rome was the home of a moral turpitude into which one could gradually and unconsciously slide and never return. Either way, Rome was the nexus of the greatest empire mankind had ever known, a metropolis more dominant in its day than would be Louis XIV's Paris, Queen Victoria's London, or the Moscow of the czars and the commissars. It was home to the best and the brightest of all the world's talents, and its citizenry gloried in their dominance.

There before him were the city's celebrated seven hills, dotted with the brightly colored palaces of the imperial family and the mansions of the two or three thousand members of the patrician class. He would perhaps pause and confer a few coins on the beggars who frequented the twin-door Ostian Gate, which took him through the six-hundred-year-old Servian Wall. Now appeared before him the Tomb of Cestus, a massive, marble-faced pyramid more than a century old, and beyond it the crowded, narrow, but mathematically aligned streets of the city, redesigned by Nero after the Great Fire of A.D. 64, which he had blamed on the Christians.

Passing beneath row after row of six- or seven-story tenements, homes for most of the city's million inhabitants, one quickly learned to avoid the garbage heaved out the upper-story windows. So many slaves and freedmen, drawn from all over Italy, Greece, and Gaul, had poured into Rome that a new wall would soon be built to let the city expand. In the meantime, even unlit cellars, garrets, and the tiny spaces under stairways were rented out. In defiance of building codes, apartments were expanded to dangerous heights, propped against each other with buttresses extending across streets that did not prevent the frequent thunderous collapse of brick, wood, and mortar into piles of rubble and screaming victims. Despite the lessons of the Great Fire, such buildings were still subject to frequent conflagrations. With charcoal braziers heating most apartments, sparks could alight on furniture or fabric, and fire easily spread along narrow streets crowded with tradesmen's wares, pedestrians, and litters bearing the wealthy.

The firefighting corps by now consisted of seven thousand freedmen quartered in twenty-one stations throughout the city and trained in the use of pumps and vinegar-soaked blankets to douse flames. These crews doubled as the city's night watch, aiming to catch thieves in the act as well as to douse fires before they spread. To patrol the daytime streets, a police department of three thousand men was organized on military lines.

Rome's great buildings and monuments would have deeply stirred Justin. In the city center—a hollow between its seven hills—Augustus had begun erecting



what became the most palatial metropolis the world would ever know. “I found Rome a city of brick and left it one of marble,” Augustus declared. He and his successors built or rebuilt the Forum, the Senate, the Hall of Records, temples to Venus and Peace, Pompey’s Theater, the Coliseum, the Circus Maximus, the bronze-roofed Forum of Trajan, and the huge public baths. These were all relatively new works, and more were going up every day.

This, then, was the mighty city whose senior authorities frowned fiercely upon its tiny Christian minority. Why, these officials continually asked themselves, do people join this sect? With all that Rome had to offer, what was the



appeal of this crucified Jew? Why were so many abandoning the gods of a city that had accomplished more than any other in human history?

Did not Venus, the goddess of lust, for instance, offer them all the possible rewards of sexual satisfaction? But these rewards, many found, were momentary, enjoyable and then gone, and constantly requiring the ever more perverse to sustain such joys as she provided. What of Apollo, what of Mercury, what of Diana, goddess of the hunt? But the enchanting stories of these assorted beings, fascinating though they still were to children, had long ago paled, and anyway who could actually believe them? The gods, like humanity itself, seemed chained to a great wheel from which there was no escape.

The twentieth-century philosopher Mircea Eliade would call this futility “the Myth of the Eternal Return.” Ancient polytheism, he said, suffered two disastrous

blows. The first came with Abraham and his monotheism, the second with Christ, who promised a personal relationship with God, forgiveness for sins, and a concept of history in which individual choices could change the world. It was a message that for more and more people would prove irresistible.

Not, though, in the early second century, says the historian W. H. C. Frend, when the Christian numbers grew chiefly from within. The reason was not mysterious. It was the campaign of vilification waged relentlessly against them. Though the charges were grossly untrue, the Christians themselves, by their reluctance to respond, seemed to confirm them. Had not



Christ himself commanded them to “turn the other cheek” (Luke 6:29)? And anyway, what did these ravings matter, many Christians reasoned, because Jesus would soon return.

But Jesus did not return, and as that hope grew fainter, members of a younger Christian generation—sometimes raised in the faith from infancy, sometimes converted from the pagan world—sought to fight back, to engage their enemies in dialogue, in public debate, even in name-calling and counter-accusation. These became known as “apologists.” The term’s English meaning has come to be reversed over the years. It now refers to those who ask for pardon. But the Christians of the second-century Age of the Apologist were not seeking pardon; they were explaining, driving home a point. And first and most forceful among them was Justin.

*In Justin’s time all roads led to Rome. At its heart, cupped between seven hills, was the great Forum, the center of political, religious, and economic life (as in the artist’s reconstruction, left). At the height of its power, Rome was the most impressive metropolis ever constructed, then or since. Even in ruins (above), the Forum retains much of its grandeur—and remains a magnet for tourists, just as it was eighteen centuries ago.*

When Justin arrived in Rome, his first assignment was to rebut the attack made by Fronto. He did this with a document that came to be known as *The First Apology*. It petitions Antoninus and his adopted sons, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, to make a proper investigation rather than condemn the Christians on the basis of gossip. “We demand that the accusations against them [the Christians] be probed, and if these be shown to be true, they be punished,” wrote Justin, “as any guilty persons should be. If, however, no one has any way of proving these accusations, sane reason does not allow that you, because of a mischievous rumor, do an injustice to innocent men.”

*Those who followed Christ, Justin wrote in his appeal to the emperor, found their lives inexplicably transformed, their former burning love of evil turned to good.*

Why, he asked, was officialdom’s crackdown focused only on Christians? Why not Gnostics like the followers of Simon Magus? Why not those who preach outright blasphemy like the Marcionites? “You neither molest nor execute them, at least not for their beliefs. . . . Those who follow those teachings are not checked by you; on the contrary, you bestow rewards and honors on them.”

As to the charge that Christians were not loyal subjects of the emperor, this was far from the truth. “When you hear that we look forward to a kingdom, you rashly assume that we speak of a human kingdom, whereas we mean a kingdom which is with God. We, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace. As we have been instructed by him, we, before all others, try everywhere to pay your appointed officials the ordinary and special taxes.” It was true, he said, “that we do not worship with many sacrifices and floral offerings the things men have made, lifeless things set in temples, and called gods.” But that was because Christians worshiped only the true God. “In other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men, and praying that you may be found to have, besides royal power, sound judgment.”

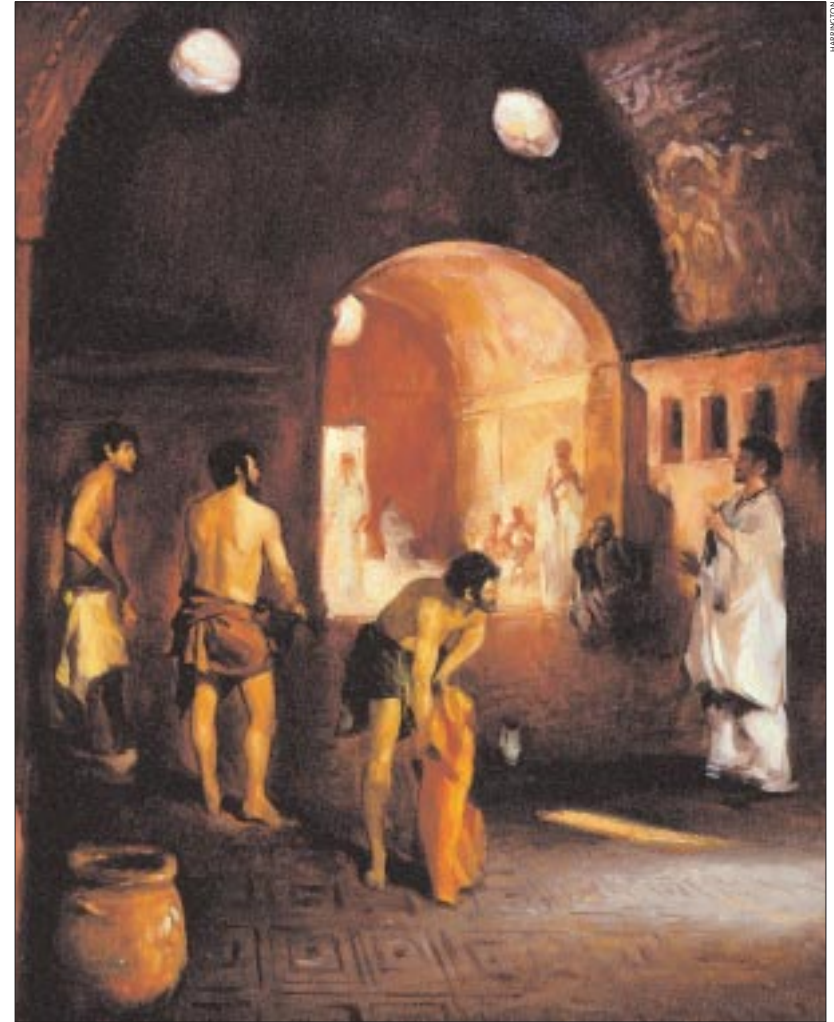
No matter what had been falsely said about them, those who followed Christ’s teaching turned away from evil actions, he said. For example, they cherished marital fidelity. “Not only he who actually does commit adultery, but also he who wishes to do so, is repudiated by God, since not only our actions, but even our inner thoughts, are manifest to Him.” Even divorce was frowned upon. “All who contract a second marriage according to the human law are sinners in the eyes of our Master.”

For the fact is, he said, that Christ came to call to repentance not the just or the pure, but the impious, the incontinent, and the unjust. Those who followed Christ found their lives inexplicably transformed, their former burning love of evil turned to good. “We who delighted in war, in the slaughter of one another, and in every other kind of iniquity have in every part of the world converted our weapons of war into implements of peace—our swords into plowshares, our spears into



JUSTIN ON HIS CONVERSION

*Indeed, when I myself revelled in the teachings of Plato, and heard the Christians misrepresented and watched them stand fearless in the face of death and of everything that was considered dreadful, I realized the impossibility of their living in sinful pleasure.*



*Justin set up a school at Rome, in an apartment above the Timotian baths, where he taught philosophy for his living and preached Christianity gratis. He doubtless also took his message into the public baths, which were often a venue for debate and discussion.*

# In the Christians' first big schism, they and the Jews part company

With the Temple and Jerusalem gone, rabbinical Judaism rises into being, and a struggle with Christianity begins that will rage on for centuries

Nearly a thousand years before Western and Eastern Christians parted in bitterness, fifteen centuries before Roman Catholics and Protestants divided, and even longer before the Protestants themselves splintered into countless denominations, the first and most painful division of them all rocked Christianity to its core. It would fiercely separate the Christians and their earliest brothers, the Jews.

The Jews and Christians had, after all, sprung from the same root, as third-generation Hebrew Christian writer Jakob Jocz observes in his book-length study of the controversy, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ*. Jocz, a prominent twentieth-century Messianic Jewish theologian, writes: "The parting of the roads between the Messianic movement and Judaism began upon Jewish soil as a result of a religious controversy between Jews and Jews." Put simply, the first Christians were Jews, as was Jesus himself.

Jesus was born into a Jewish family, growing up with Jewish faith and life and customs, studying the Hebrew Bible, observing Jewish Law, and accepting it as divinely appointed. His disciples were Jewish, his ministry was carried out almost exclusively among the Jews, and the first church in Jerusalem was a Jewish church. Jesus was welcomed in the Jewish synagogues, where he worshiped and preached. The eager crowds that surrounded him were overwhelmingly Jewish. The devoted multitude following him, as he made his way to the cross, was largely faithful Jews, weeping in sorrow. Many Jewish people showed themselves deeply devoted to him.

What happened? The Jews were his blood relatives, his family in the strictest sense of the word, and it was to them, he said, that he had been sent. But he would come to be seen by his own people as an enemy, his name a curse, his teachings reviled or, worse, utterly ignored.

One common view explains Jesus' persecution in political terms—he was a rabble-rouser, a threat to Rome as much as to Judaism. But Jocz notes that Jesus remained aloof from political issues, except for his startling advice that a man should render unto Caesar—that is, the government—what the government was owed; debt to God was a separate issue.

Another popular explanation blames the division between Christians and Jews on the apostle Paul. Jesus' message was welcomed by Jews of his time, this claim goes, but Paul turned it into something else,

something that Jesus never intended and the Jews could no longer accept.

That theory, however, ignores significant facts: chief among them the Crucifixion itself, which took place long before Paul's arrival on the scene, as well as the heavy persecution of the Christians immediately following Jesus' death. Jewish leaders were already working hard to root them out, rounding them up and killing them, with the as-yet-unconverted Saul leading the charge.

Such persecution was inevitable, Jocz declares, because Jesus' claim to be the Messiah demanded a response. Either he was right, and the only response was to submit to him, or he was wrong and a blasphemer. The Jews declared him wrong.

According to Jocz, Christianity begins with humanity in crisis, helpless to act on its own behalf, while central to Judaism is the assertion of human strength. It's a basic difference in the understanding of mankind's deepest problem, Jocz says, and the terrible division was therefore inevitable.

But the Christians were only part of the Jews' dilemma. "Without their religion, the Jews had no history, and without their history no religion," writes the scholar Alfred Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. How could a religion rooted in a specific geographical location and structure, Jerusalem and the Temple—both now destroyed—survive with its heart, so to speak, ripped out? This they answered by addressing two vexing problems.

First, they quickly dealt with the troublesome presence of those Christians who continued to attend Jewish religious observances, and to argue forcefully there for the new faith. In about A.D. 85, the *Birkat ha-minim* was added to the twelfth of eighteen benedictions recited daily in the synagogues. In its earliest form, the *Birkat ha-minim* was a single sentence calling down a specific curse upon Christians: "[M]ay the Nazarenes and the *minim* (heretics) perish as in a moment, and be blotted out from the book of life, and with the righteous may they not be inscribed."

Though by medieval times the text would be softened and directed against undefined "slanders," its initial impact was profound, John writes: "The Jews... agreed that if any one should confess him [Jesus] to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22 RSV). The separation, of course, had been a two-way street from the beginning, with many of the earliest Christians distancing themselves from the Jews.

Their second task was to refashion out of a

Temple-based, sacrificially centered faith one that could survive its grievous loss. A pattern, of course, had already been set in the synagogues of the Diaspora, functioning far from Jerusalem. But these had always been subsidiary to the Temple and the Holy City.

The *Mishna*, a collection of oral traditions and teachings of the rabbis, emerged in about A.D. 200 in Palestine under Rabbi Judah (called "The Prince"), and helped resolve the dilemma. In the *Mishna*, the core of what would become the *Talmud* in the fifth and sixth centuries, Judaism shifts its focus from the Temple to the synagogue and, therefore to the dispersed nation of Israel itself.

Similarly, Johanan Ben Zakkai, a first-century scholar of the *Torah* or written Law, taught that study of the *Torah*, wherever undertaken, was as valuable and important as sacrifices in the Temple had been. Another scholar, Gamaliel of Jamniah, head of the Sanhedrin after Jerusalem was destroyed, established uniform rites of worship and a standardized calendar for religious observances, which were to take place thenceforth in synagogues, no matter where they were.

By the end of the first century, Christians were actively competing with Jews for Gentile converts, each side hurling increasingly vehement abuse against

the other. The pagan philosopher Celsus, who was opposed to them both, recorded the Jewish explanation of Jesus. He was born, they said, the illegitimate child of a Jewish peasant woman and a Roman soldier named Panthera, the woman having been divorced by her husband, a carpenter, for adultery.

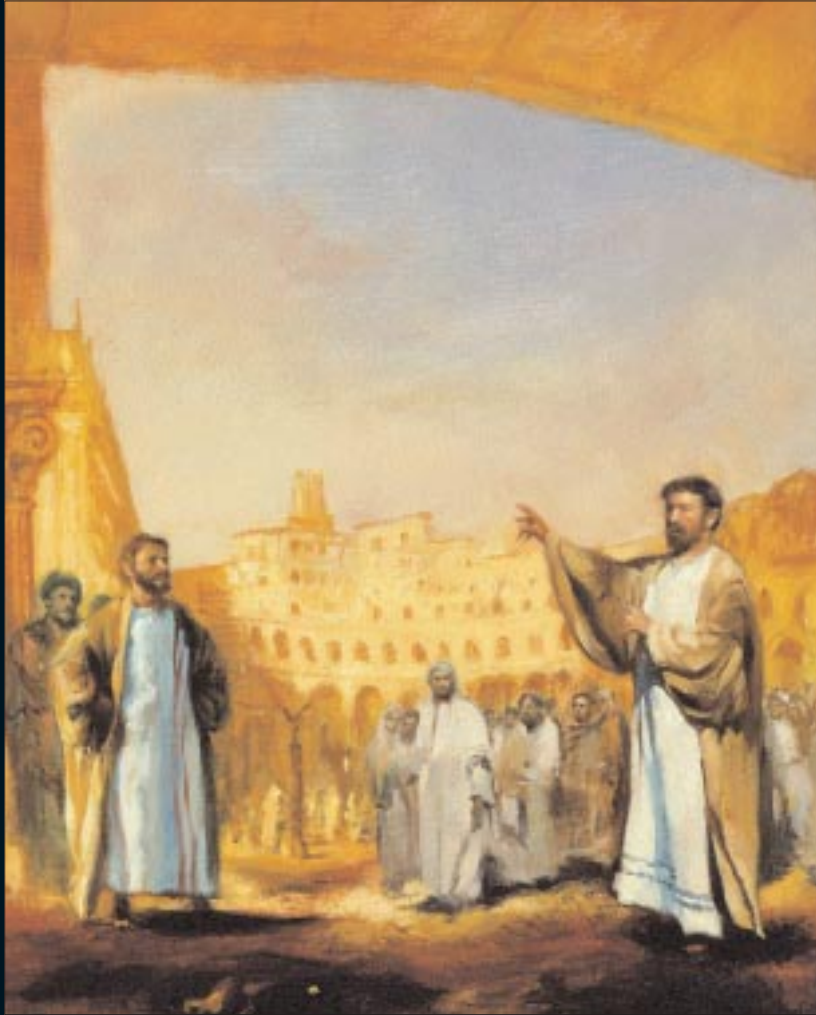
When grown, Jesus emigrated to Egypt, worked as a laborer, learned magic, and returned to his own country, cocky, conceited, and proclaiming himself to be God. His supposed miracles were never authenticated, his prophecies were proved false, and in the end God abandoned him and let him die on the cross. His disciples stole his body and pretended he had risen from the dead. Such was the Jewish story.

Moreover, observes the historian W. H. C. Frend in his *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, the Jews had "all the advantages of wealth, lawful status, a coherent religious sense, and revolutionary appeal to dissatisfied provincials." However, "these were nullified by one fact. Judaism remained a national cult, protected indeed by its claim to antiquity, but repellent to most non-Jews."

Nevertheless, Judaism endured, and in the two millennia that followed, Christianity and Judaism would grow independently, acknowledging and bewailing but often nevertheless exacerbating the deep wounds separating the two great faiths. ■



This reconstruction of the interior of a third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos, Syria, displayed at the National Museum in Damascus, was built on a prominent escarpment above the river Euphrates. Dura Europos, a remote Roman outpost, was destroyed in A.D. 256, the town literally disappeared for more than sixteen hundred years. It was rediscovered during the First World War and excavations began in 1928 (see also p. 264.) The walls of the synagogue are adorned with episodes from the *Torah*, even though Jewish law forbids the representation of living creatures. Thus did Roman culture influence the synagogue, just as it did the Christians.



IMAGINATION

*Justin debates Crescens, a distinguished Cynic philosopher, humiliated by Justin in public encounters. Crescens tried and failed to have Justin arrested as a Christian. According to Tatian, one of Justin's pupils, Justin foiled the attempt by showing Crescens to be "immoral, greedy, gluttonous, and insincere in debate."*

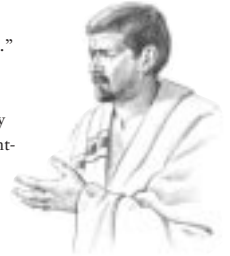
farmers' tools—and we cultivate piety, justice, brotherly charity, faith, and hope.”

How officialdom reacted to Justin's petition is not known. Antoninus Pius called off the persecution of Christians, however, and some historians suspect that Justin's appeal to Rome's deep respect for justice had produced the inquiry he sought, and the new Antoninus policy was the outcome. Far more significantly, however, Justin had demonstrated an aggressive new fearlessness in the Christian community, a willingness to beard the imperial lion in its den. Close behind him, other apologists would follow his example.

As he had at Ephesus, he set up a school at Rome. It was in his apartment, above the Timotheian baths where he taught philosophy for his living and preached Christianity gratis. As John the Apostle had back in Ephesus, he doubtless took his message into the baths themselves. Why should such a superb opportunity for debate, discussion, and the proclamation of the faith be a field abandoned to the enemy? From his apartment, too, he poured forth his letters and papers in defense and furtherance of the Christian gospel.

Here again, Justin rapidly gained note as a sharp debater, and eagerly threw himself into confrontations with those who opposed Christianity. As well as friends, this made him enemies, one in particular. The man's name was Crescens, a distinguished Cynic philosopher, humiliated by Justin in public encounters. Even under Antoninus Pius, mortifying such a highly placed representative of authority was dangerous. When Antoninus died in 161, it became lethal.

Crescens had tried before and failed to have Justin arrested as a Christian, bringing the same charge against him that had successfully produced the execution of Ptolemaeus (see sidebar, p. 89). According to one of Justin's pupils, a man



**JUSTIN ON THE SOUL**  
*The soul can with difficulty be recalled to those good things from which it has fallen, and is with difficulty dragged away from those evils to which it has become accustomed.*

*When a cataclysmic plague arrived, the emperor ordered Romans to begin sacrifices to appease the gods. But the Christians refused, and the response was public outrage.*

named Tatian, Justin had foiled the attempt by showing Crescens himself to be “immoral, greedy, gluttonous, and insincere in debate,” though Tatian's view of the case may not be unbiased.<sup>8</sup>

Justin greeted the new emperor, Marcus Aurelius, with his *Second Apology*, this more urgent than the first and more specific on the lapses in Rome's sense of justice. The Ptolemaeus case is cited and Crescens unflatteringly mentioned. Finally, the *Second Apology* is diplomatically imbued with the language of the Stoics, for the new emperor was known to be one of those. In it, Justin again asked that the Christians be tried for specific crimes, rather than for their beliefs. Whether Marcus ever saw this document is not known. What is known is that

<sup>8</sup> Tatian may have been grinding his own ax against Crescens who had, he claimed, also plotted against him. A native of Adiabene, Tatian was attracted to Christianity, like Justin, from Greek philosophy. Unlike Justin, he condemned Greek civilization as wholly demonic. He urged on all Christians so puritanical an ethic that he was opposed by most prominent Christian teachers of his time. Practicing what he preached, he moved to Syria and founded an ascetic order (see also p. 62).

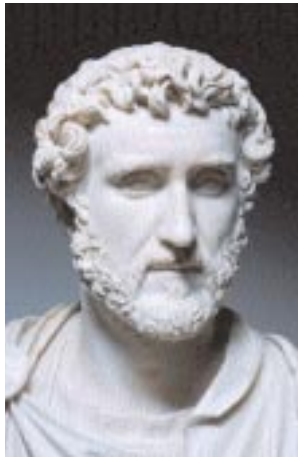
some time after it was published, Justin was arrested. The informer, said the Christians, was Crescens, and the occasion was a cataclysmic plague.

Having already devastated the eastern provinces, it reached Rome itself in 166, and the emperor delayed his departure for the Danube frontier because he considered the plague a greater danger than the barbarians. He ordered preparations begun for sacrifices to appease the gods, preparations in which all Romans were expected to participate. The Christians once again refused, some seeing the plague as a sure sign that the End Times had arrived. The response was public outrage. People whose families were dying around them viewed the Christians as the cause. How could these fanatics let little children die, they asked, through their insane loyalty to this crucified Jew? Starting in the eastern provinces, mob vengeance broke out, the martyrdoms began and then spread west.

The prime target in Rome this time was not the bishop. It was that glib-tongued smart-aleck Justin (as his enemies no doubt saw him), so fast with an answer, so quick to put people down. Let's have him to the arena. Justin was arrested along with six of his pupils, one of them a woman. Tatian, who wasn't among the arrested, named Crescens as the accuser, but many historians doubt this.

Justin scarcely needed an accuser; his Christian convictions had been everywhere published.<sup>9</sup> In any event, informers were no longer hard to find. Marcus Aurelius had already reinstated them as legitimate servants of the empire. The judge would be Junius Rusticus, chief magistrate of Rome and a confidant of Marcus.

A brief transcript of the trial was preserved by the Christians. Short as it is, it may represent all there was to report of the proceeding, since Christians were usually willing to convict themselves. Thus Rusticus asked: "What are the doctrines that you practice?"



The Emperor Antoninus Pius revoked all outstanding death sentences imposed by his predecessor, Hadrian, and directed local authorities in Asia to treat Christians with tolerance. This bust is in the British Museum.

"What are the doctrines that you practice?"

"I have tried to become acquainted with all doctrines," replied Justin, "but I have committed myself to the true doctrines of the Christians, even though they may not please those who hold false beliefs."

To the prefect, such a response bordered on outright defiance. "Are these the doctrines that you prefer?" he asked, providing Justin with an opportunity to equivocate.

Justin rejected it. "Yes," he replied, he believed with all Christians in the God "whom alone we hold to

9. Of the many volumes he wrote, only one survives apart from his *Apologies*—his *Dialogue with Trypho*, in which he tells of his spiritual journey to Christianity.

be craftsman of the whole world," and in Jesus Christ his Son, also God, who "came down to mankind as a herald of salvation," as foretold by the Hebrew prophets. The language of what would become known as the Apostles' Creed was already taking shape.

But Rusticus had heard enough—enough to convict, anyway—and he cut Justin short. Still, there was a chance he might implicate others. "Where do you meet?" he asked.

Justin saw the peril and answered evasively. "Wherever it is each one's preference or opportunity," he replied, adding derisively, "In any case, do you suppose we can all meet in the same place?"

Impatiently, Rusticus repeated the question. Justin explained that he held classes in his apartment above the baths, where he had lived his entire time in Rome.

Rusticus gave up. Justin would implicate himself, but not others. "You do admit, then, that you are a Christian," Rusticus said.

## When Christianity breaks a marriage

Christ had warned it sometimes would and in this case a teacher lost his life

People believed he had come to bring peace on Earth, said Jesus Christ, but in fact he would not bring peace, but division, splitting even families and households (Luke 12:51–53). That prophecy would be fulfilled all over the world for the next two thousand years, as in the case of one well-born Roman woman in the mid-second century.

In his work called the *Second Apology*, Justin tells her story without identifying her. She and her husband had lived dissolute lives, he says, until she "came to the knowledge of the teachings of Christ," gave up drunken orgies and promiscuity with the household servants, pleaded with her husband to do the same, and warned him of the "punishment and eternal fire that will come upon those who do not live temperately and conform to right reason."

Ignoring her pleas, the husband persisted in his degenerate conduct until the woman concluded it was wrong to continue living with such a man. Her Christian friends objected, saying she should stay with him in the hope he would change. Soon after, however, he left for Alexandria, where his reputation grew even worse, and the woman gave him a bill of divorcement and left him. She feared, says Justin, that "by continuing in wedlock and by sharing his board and bed, she might become a partaker in his lawlessness and impiety." Furious, the husband returned and publicly, formally declared her a Christian, a capital offense. The wife petitioned the emperor for time to set her affairs in order before answering the charge. He agreed.

For the moment thwarted, the husband turned his anger upon her Christian teacher, one Ptolemaeus

(pronounced *Tol-e-MAY-us*), already in jail for reasons undisclosed. The husband knew a centurion at the prison who confronted the teacher with the fatal question: "*Christianus es?*" ("Are you a Christian?") As "a lover of truth and not of a deceitful or false disposition," according to Justin, who doubtless knew him, Ptolemaeus thereupon confessed. His sentence was prolonged until he could finally appear before the city prefect Urbicius, who again posed the question and gained the same answer. He was promptly handed over for execution.

However, this peremptory procedure exasperated Lucius, another Christian who had watched the hearing. "Why have you punished this man?" shouted Lucius. "He is not an adulterer, nor a fornicator, nor a murderer, nor a thief, nor a robber, nor has he been convicted of committing any crime at all. He has simply confessed to the name Christian." What a far cry from the policy of the tolerant Emperor Antoninus Pius, he said. What of Caesar's tradition of justice? What of "the sacred Senate?"

Thereupon Urbicius put the same fateful question to Lucius, who replied affirmatively and was ordered executed with Ptolemaeus. Lucius thanked the prefect. Now, he said, he would be "liberated from such wicked rulers and go to the good Father and King." A third Christian suffered the same fate.

Justin cited the case in a formal petition to the emperor, protesting a miscarriage of Roman justice and predicting he, too, would suffer the same fate. A few years later he did. No reply to his petition is known. Neither is the fate of the Christian woman. ■



*While Roman law made it technically illegal to be a Christian, this did not sit well with some of the empire's legal authorities. Although they did not hesitate to convict people of doing something, or refusing to do something, they believed it unjust to convict somebody for being something. Accordingly Christians were subjected, often under duress, to one of two tests. They were required to either burn incense to the god Caesar, as in this painting, or swear by the emperor's "genius," meaning his divine spirit. When Christians refused to do this they could be convicted of defying an imperial order and sentenced, frequently to death.*

"Yes I am," replied Justin, assuring his doom.

Rusticus now turned to a man named Chariton, who quickly incriminated himself. His sister, Charito, was given a chance to blame her friends for deceiving her. Had she been duped into taking part in the rumored promiscuity of the Christians? She had not been deceived, and there was no promiscuity, she said. "Rather, I have become God's servant and a Christian, and by his power I have kept myself pure and unstained by the taints of the flesh." She, too, was convicted. After her, Hierax, Paeon, Evelpistus, and Valerian all readily confessed themselves Christians since childhood.

Rusticus did not immediately pass sentence. He sent all seven back to prison, giving them time to reconsider their confessions. There they were probably visited by other Christians, for the persecutions at this stage were still highly selective.

How long the reprieve lasted is not recorded, but Rusticus was not known as a patient man. He again called the prisoners before him, this time threatening them with scourging or beheading. "Do you suppose," he asked Justin incredulously, "that you will really ascend into Heaven?"

"I do not merely suppose it," he replied. "I know it certainly."

He then gave all seven one last chance. "Since this then is your statement, impious ones, let us proceed to the issue that is before us: Agree together to sacrifice to the gods, lest you be miserably destroyed. For what person of intelligence would choose to relinquish this sweetest light and prefer death to it?"

Justin took up the challenge and brazenly defied him. "And what person of sound mind," he responded, "would choose to turn from piety to impiety, from light to darkness, and from the living God to soul-destroying demons?"

"Unless you sacrifice, I shall begin the tortures," Rusticus warned.

"This we long for," came the reply, "and this will grant us great freedom at the terrible tribunal of Christ, when each of us shall receive according to his deeds. And so do what you will. We are Christians and do not sacrifice to idols."

Rusticus ordered them lashed, no light penalty: One danger of a Roman flogging was that the prisoner might die under it, cheating the executioner, whose work often followed. (Whether Charito was flogged with the men is not recorded.) Would they now make the required sacrifice? One by one they answered that they would not. Thereupon Rusticus passed the sentence. "I decree," he intoned, "that those who have defied the imperial edicts and have refused to sacrifice to the gods are to be beheaded with the sword." In the account preserved by the Christians, Rusticus is described as "a terrible man, a plague, and filled with all impiety." The Roman mob no doubt took a very different view, denouncing him for irresolute vacillation. Why did he give them opportunity to recant? And why just the sword? Why not the arena?

No description of the executions survives. The date is set as approximately 165.

In the annals of the Christians, Justin is remembered as "Justin Martyr." Martyrs he and his students certainly were, and as martyrs they would want to be remembered. But Justin did something more. "How deeply he touched us," writes the historian Henri Daniel-Rops in *The Church of the Apostles and Martyrs*, "this man who groped in the dark so long for the Way, the Truth and the Life."

But in Christ, Justin found all three, and in so doing he made it possible to see the whole course of Christian thought as thoroughly within the tradition founded by Plato. He fused the heritage of Greece with that of the Jews, and thereby helped to lay the foundations for what would one day be known as Western culture.

Moreover, while Christians would argue for centuries over whether and when they should take up arms to defend the Truth, Justin unequivocally showed them they need have no qualms whatever about defending it with words. Words were weapons too, and Christians should learn to use them with all the skill God had conferred upon them.



JUSTIN ON TRUTH

*I am proud to say that I strove with all my might to be known as a Christian, not because the teachings of Plato are different from those of Christ, but because they are not in every way similar. Indeed, all writers had a dim glimpse of the truth.*

## *Their willingness to die hideously—this fact, beyond all others, drew converts to Christ*

The stalwart deaths of Carpus and Papyrus, whose calm defiance infuriated their judge, typify the figure of the martyr that inspires and shapes the faith's opening centuries

The amphitheater was packed that day in the city of Pergamum, north of Ephesus, near the Aegean's east coast. Once the seat of the Attalid kings, the Greek-speaking metropolis was now reduced to provincial status and overseen by a Roman proconsul named Optimus. Before him stood two men, charged with the crime of being Christian.

There is a Greek account, and a Latin, of the events that ensued—the Latin, probably an encapsulation of the Greek with a few details added. The chief controversy involves *when* it happened rather than *what* happened, whether in the mid-second century under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, or in the mid-third under Emperor Decius. Expert opinion favors the former.

From his official seat in the central balcony of the amphitheater, Optimus addressed the first prisoner, a rugged but elderly man. “What is your name?” he asked. “My first and most distinctive name is that of Christian,” replied the old man firmly. “But if you want my name in the world, it is Carpus.” (The Latin account names him as Bishop Carpus of Gordos, a city about two hundred miles to the east).

Optimus became grave. “You’re surely aware,” he said, “of the emperor’s decrees to venerate the gods who govern all things. So I suggest you right now offer sacrifice.” Offering sacrifice, meaning symbolically burning incense to the emperor as to a god, or swearing by the emperor’s “genius” or spirit, was the legal expedient developed to solve the Christian problem. Charging people with simply *being* something offended the Romans’ acute sense of justice. Charging them with *doing* something, or refusing to do it, that was a different matter.

But Christians everywhere, many of them anyway, were refusing to perform this simple sacrificial rite. That amounted to deliberate defiance of imperial authority, in effect treason, and the Romans well knew how to deal with treason. Yet the Christians’ reason for refusal was, for them, equally compelling. Had not Jesus, when challenged by the high priest, described himself with the unmentionable name of God, thereby assuring his Crucifixion? There comes a time, that is, when a man must speak the truth, even at the cost of his life.

Such a moment had now come for Carpus. “I am a Christian,” he declared, “and I venerate Christ, the Son of God, who has come in these latter times for our redemption.”<sup>1</sup> Christians must worship God, “in truth,” he said, because people take on

the image of what they worship. The images which the Roman world worshiped were the concoctions of the devil, and those who worshiped them would take on that diabolic image. “Wherefore, proconsul, know you that I shall not offer sacrifice to them.”

Optimus by now was furious. “Sacrifice to the gods!” he commanded. “Do not play the fool.”

Such an order from a proconsul was intended to terrify. Quaking dread was the expected response. But Carpus, says the Greek account, just smiled and “gently replied, ‘May the gods be destroyed, who have not made heaven and earth.’” Livid, Optimus stormed, “You *must* offer sacrifice! These are the emperor’s orders!”

“The living,” answered Carpus, “do not offer sacrifice to the dead.”

“Do you think the gods are dead?” demanded Optimus.

Carpus replied that they were not only dead; they had never lived. The only power they possessed was the one conferred upon them by the people who worship them. Take that away, “and you will discover that they are nothing, made of earth’s substance, and eventually they will be destroyed by time itself. Whereas our God, who has created the ages, is timeless and abides eternal and immortal, ever the same.”

Optimus was exasperated. “By allowing you to babble on so much, I have led you to blaspheme the gods, and the august emperors. We must let this go no further.” He ordered Carpus “scraped.” The old man was led before the crowd, now outraged by his defiant smile and screaming for him to suffer. He was “hung up,” says the Greek account, while two men, each armed with metal claws, tore and lacerated his flesh, Carpus meanwhile shouting, “I am a Christian! I am a Christian!” until his voice gave out.

A certain Papyrus was now brought forward, a leading citizen of Thyatira, a town that would become familiar to generations of Bible-reading Christians as the home of Lydia, Paul’s first convert at Philippi, and one of the seven churches listed in the Book of Revelation. Was he a senator? demanded Optimus. He was not, said Papyrus. Did he have children? Many children, he said.



Detail from *The Martyrdom of St. Ignatius*, by Francesco Fracanzano, seventeenth century.

Details from *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* by Gerrit van Honthorst, seventeenth century.



1. The translation is taken from *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* by Herbert Musurillo.

Detail from *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, by Palma Giovane, sixteenth to seventeenth century.



“He means,” shouted someone in the crowd, “he has children in virtue of the faith which the Christians repose in him.”

He had “children in the Lord in every province and city,” said Papylus, and no, he would not sacrifice. “I have served God from my youth, and I have never offered sacrifice to idols. I am a Christian and you cannot hear any more from me than this, for there is nothing greater or nobler.”

Papylus was then hung up and “scraped,” uttering not a sound, says the account, and this no doubt enraged the crowd even further. Optimus ordered him burned. He was thereupon nailed to a stake. But as the wood was brought forward for the fire, he died where he was. “He prayed in peace,” says the account, “and gave up his soul.”

One final vengeance awaited the crowd, because Carpus was still alive. Bleeding from innumerable wounds and barely able to speak, he nevertheless still brazenly smiled. So he was pinned down and nailed to a stake, then raised for the shrieking crowd to behold. As the fire was lit at his feet, he delivered one last taunt, a burst of derisive laughter at the entire enraged assembly. “What are you laughing at?” said a bystander. The faint reply was heard and recorded: “Blessed are you . . . Lord Jesus Christ . . . Son of God . . . Because you thought me, a sinner . . . worthy to share this . . . with you.” With those words uttered, says the account, “he gave up the spirit.”

But the story was still not over. A woman named Agathonike was standing nearby, her young son beside her. She suddenly saw the glory of the Lord, she said, calling to her from heaven. She broke free and rushed towards the flames that were consuming Carpus. “Have pity on your son!” people in the crowd shouted to her. “He has God who can take pity on him,” she called, taking off her cloak and flinging herself on the fire. “God has providence over all.”

Then something astonishing happened. The temper of the crowd appeared at that instant to have changed. Stunned into silence by what the woman had done, they seemed to suddenly revise their view of the whole event. “This is a terrible sentence!” they began to shout. “These are terrible decrees!”

That transformation from outright hatred of Christians, to silent reconsideration

of them, to the perception of injustice against them, and finally to acceptance, if not of their faith at least of their integrity, would gradually take place all over the empire during the next two centuries. What pivotally influenced that change has never been doubted. It was the startling testimony of those who refused on pain of death to renounce their faith. They would be known thereafter in Christian hymnology as “the noble army of martyrs.”

Until the empire-wide crackdown on Christianity by Decius in the mid-third century, outbreaks of persecution were sporadic, brief, and unpredictable. Apart from the highly profiled martyrdoms at Lyon, Carthage, Rome, and Alexandria, similar, less publicized cases kept occurring all over the empire. History records with little dramatic detail the martyrdom of Sagans, bishop of Laodicea, and Thraseas, bishop of Eumenia, together with his fellow Eumenians, Gaius and Alexander. The proconsul Sergius Paulus is remembered for creating martyrs in the largely Christian town of Sagaris in Laodicea. In a violent outbreak at Philadelphia, 110 miles southeast of Pergamum, eleven men were arrested, tortured, then sent down to Smyrna to be torn to pieces by animals at the provincial games. One of them, Germanicus, had to tug on a reluctant animal before it would eat him, a display that incensed the crowd. Elsewhere, Proconsul Arrius Antoninus, reputedly a bloodthirsty persecutor, was visited by a large crowd of Christians who offered themselves to him. He executed a few, but then contemptuously informed the rest that if they wished to die, they could easily find a rope or a cliff.

From Athens comes the report of a bishop named Publius, put to death along with most of the local Christian community. Even in immediate postbiblical times, Symeon ben Clopas, who had been a young cousin of Jesus and was now an aged bishop of Jerusalem, was “tortured in various manners,” writes the historian Hegesippus, and eventually martyred as a Jewish heretic.

Wrote the pagan scholar Lucian: “The poor wretches have convinced themselves that they are going to be immortal and live for all time. So they despise death and willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers, after they have transgressed by denying the gods, worshiping that crucified sophist himself, and living under his laws.” The persecution was not centrally orchestrated, but local



Detail from *The Martyrdom of a Saint*, by Francesco Granacci, fifteenth to sixteenth century.





Detail from *The Death of St. Agnes*, by Francesco del Cains, seventeenth century.

and spontaneous. Some provinces like Spain and Britain were little touched by it, but especially in the east, it was a dangerous time to be a Christian.

Almost always, the pogrom came in response to popular wrath against the Christians, whose repudiation of the gods was blamed for every flood, famine, fire, or plague. “Rid the earth of the likes of these! They don’t deserve to live,” one mob at Rome had shouted. “Christians shared with murderers and informers the lowest depths of unpopularity,” writes the historian W. H. C. Frend in his exhaustive study, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. Tertullian, the outspo-

ken evangelist and apologist from Carthage, recounts the way Christians were alluded to in street gossip: “It’s surprising that a wise man like Lucius Titius has suddenly become Christian. . . . Such a good man, that Seius Gaius, except that he’s a Christian . . .” and with a sneer, “The smart set, now they’re becoming Christians!” The Roman Caecilius, a literary invention of the Christian apologist Mucianus Felix, writes of the Christians:

Fellows who gather together they illustrate the dregs of the populace and credulous women with the instability natural to their sex . . . a secret tribe that shuns the light, silent in the open, but talkative in hid corners; they despise temples as if they were tombs; they spit upon the gods; they jeer at our sacred rites; they despise titles and robes and honor.

Rome’s officialdom, however, was always loath to act in response to mob fervor, because it invited anarchy. A complaint process was developed under which accusers could levy charges of Christianity against other citizens. If the charge was proved—usually because the accused refused to make the requisite sacrifice or take the oath—the penalty involved the man’s whole family. Not only would he pay with his life or be sent to die working in the mines, but his estate would be seized and his wife and children left impoverished. Since the informant shared in the man’s estate, the process led to horrendous abuse. The emperor Hadrian sought to prevent this by subjecting the informant to the same penalties if the charge was not upheld. However, Hadrian’s successors repealed that reform, and the abuse was resumed.

Once the law had formally spoken, the authorities were free to use the punishment as a means of satiating the blood lust of the mob, and the descriptions of what followed would challenge belief, were they not so unanimously and widely attested to. “Here we are touching one of the most obvious symptoms heralding the moral disintegration of Roman society and its future decadence,”

writes historian Henri Daniel-Rops in *The Church of Apostles and Martyrs*. “This civilization was prepared to debase mankind, and itself, in spectacles of unbelievable bestiality.”

As the crowds screamed and jeered, the victims were hanged by their hands and lashed. Vinegar or salt was rubbed into their wounds. They were nailed to crosses and crucified. Nails were driven between their eyes. They were branded with red-hot metal. Their limbs were hacked off, their bodies torn to shreds. They were tied to posts and burned alive.

The greatest crowd-pleaser, however, was provided by wild animals. Lions, tigers, panthers, wild bulls, and bears were carefully starved, or taught to savor human flesh, or antagonized into a frenzy, then turned loose on a prisoner tied to a stake or bound up and pushed forward on a cart into the faces of the snarling beasts. Usually the animal would leap upon the victim and begin tearing chunks of flesh from an arm or a thigh. But the behavior of such creatures is never predictable. Sometimes they would refuse to attack the victim. In one celebrated case, a wild cat lay down at a woman-martyr’s feet, much to the disgust of the crowd and the awe of her Christian companions.

“A certain taste for blood had always existed at Rome,” notes Daniel-Rops. “The people were fairly accustomed to taking the sight of it for granted. After all, their religion, whose ceremonies had the appearance of veritable butcheries, would not have predisposed the Romans to any refinement of sensibilities. The custom of carrying out capital punishment in public encouraged the mob to enjoy degrading spectacles. It was quite common for a slave to be beaten to death. The public’s taste for blood was systematically used by the government for the ‘distraction of the mob.’ . . . Collective degradation was henceforth a government affair.”

That those who bravely endured such an ordeal should be revered by their comrades in the faith was certainly understandable. Few were men and women of great distinction. Nearly all were simple working people—tradesmen, small merchants, mothers of families; many were slaves. Their bodies, or what was left of them, were carefully gathered up by their fellow Christians—sometimes officials had to be bribed to release them—and reverently buried. Commemorations of their deeds on the anniversaries of their deaths began early on to take place at their tombs, and churches were eventually built atop many of them.

What harried the Christians was the uncertainty. Bloody pogroms developed in some cities, not in others. Some individuals were singled out, some not, and often without regard to their status in the Christian community. It was soon concluded,

Detail from *The Martyrdom of St. Hippolytus* by Dirck Bouts, fifteenth century.





Detail from *The Martyrdom of St. Cecilia*, by Orazio Riminaldi, sixteenth to seventeenth century.

therefore, that it must be God who did the selecting, choosing some and not others for the “honor” of sharing in Christ’s own fate. Martyrs came to be seen as a class apart, those who had come the closest to the imitation of Christ. As they awaited death, their dreams were accepted as prophetic. They were considered to have a special power to forgive other people’s sins.

The word “martyr” derives from the Greek word for “witness,” and the martyr was seen as bearing witness by his sacrifice to the sacrifice made by Christ. But Paul took this idea even further. Not only did the martyr witness to Christ’s martyrdom, he actually fulfilled or completed it. Thus in Paul’s memorable words: “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews sees Christians as “surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” that they should “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily besets us” (Heb. 12:1). “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge,” says the writer of the Book of Revelation. “And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their witness for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image” (Rev. 20:4). Apart from stirring the hearts of the faithful, however, martyrdom also posed ecclesiastical problems. Who exactly was a martyr? If a man was imprisoned rather than executed, was he a martyr? No, the Christians decided, to be a martyr, one must die. Those who suffered without dying were termed “confessors.” What if a man or woman perished in serving Christ—a missionary who drowned, say, or a soldier killed in a just war? It was decided these may be considered heroes of the faith, but not martyrs. For a martyrdom, the death must be caused by a Christian’s refusal to deny Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, while the Christian must expect martyrdom, he must not court it. At Carthage, Tertullian pleaded with the Roman governor to stop the persecutions. “He who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture, becomes an accomplice in the crime of persecution,” writes Clement of Alexandria. Death must not be sought, he adds, because those who court martyrdom are not really martyrs at all. They are calling attention to themselves rather than to Christ. But the state’s authority is beneath that of God, he says, and the state must be defied when it ventures into outright idolatry.

What, one wonders, were the effects of such exhibitions on the people who attended them? Watching the grisly gladiatorial performances could profoundly affect individuals. In his *Confessions* (written in about A.D. 400), Augustine describes a student friend, Alypius, whose companions cajoled him into attending a

2. “The term martyr is hopelessly overworked and abused,” writes Lacey Baldwin Smith in *Faols, Martyrs, Traitors*. “The hero is not a martyr. There is a profound difference between a willingness to take a risk, even to court destruction, and the deliberate walking into the torture chamber or the fire.” Unlike heroes who affirm a society, martyrs tend to be “offspring of a society in conflict with itself” who “violate the most revered and treasured abstractions that shape a society.” Neither can a martyr be “a blind victim of happenstance. Choice—sometimes desired, sometimes enforced—and premeditation are all important.” Finally, “the death must be part of some long-term enterprise.” The martyr dies for an overwhelming cause.



Detail from *The Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew*, by Giambattista Tiepolo, eighteenth century.

gladiatorial show in Rome over his initial protests:

“The whole place was seething with savage enthusiasm, but he shut the doors of his eyes and forbade his soul to go out into a scene of such evil. . . . (Finally) he was overcome by curiosity and opened his eyes . . . (and) he then received in his soul a worse wound than that man, whom he had wanted to see, had received in his body. . . . He saw the blood and he gulped down savagery. Far from turning away, he fixed his eyes on it. Without knowing what was happening, he drank in madness, he was delighted with the guilty contest, drunk with the lust of blood. . . . He looked, he shouted, he raved with excitement. He took away with him a madness which would goad him to come back again, and he would not only come with those who first got him there; he would go ahead of them and he would drag others with him.”

Joyce E. Salisbury, in her splendid book on the martyrdom of Perpetua at Carthage, *Perpetua’s Passion*, observes that the later amphitheatres offered superb acoustics. Spectators were given an intimate relationship with what was transpiring in the arena. It became a shared experience, reinforced by the ceremonial meal before the show began. So much so that Tertullian warned his fellow Carthaginian Christians to stay away from the amphitheater shows. This shared experience was real, he said. It bonded people, and they need not be bonded with those who collectively enjoyed human suffering.

Imperial officialdom had a different view of these “circuses,” where gladiators routinely butchered each other and the torture-death of Christians was only one highlight of the program. Gladiatorial shows “inspired the audience to noble wounds and to despise death,” wrote Pliny the Younger. There was “no better schooling against pain and death” than watching criminals die, wrote Livy. It taught them not to be afraid of blood and thus made them better soldiers.

Not everyone shared this positive viewpoint. The Christians, who often died fearlessly and courageously, striking awe and respect into many who watched them suffer, also caused some to have second thoughts. That response gradually



*An angel bestows the martyr's crown on St. Cecilia. Detail from the painting by Orazio Riminaldi.*

gained ground until the Christians prevailed and such public exhibitions were prohibited.

But not permanently. One of the most chilling stories of martyrdom describes groups of Christian men being lined up before their tormentor and being asked to renounce Jesus Christ. As each refused, a three-inch nail was hammered into the top of his head while the others watched. That report came neither from the second century nor the third, but from the twenty-first. The scene was a Christian village in southern Sudan under persecution by a militant Muslim government.<sup>3</sup>

The total number of Christians who perished under Roman persecution in the first three centuries is not known, but probably comes to several thousand. The real Age of Christian Martyrdom lay far ahead.

At the close of the twentieth century, organizers of the International Day of Prayer estimated that two hundred million Christians were facing active persecution. A report from the Christian History Institute put the number of twentieth-century Christians killed for their faith at twenty-six million. ■

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3. From a letter written by Dennis Bennett, executive director of the relief group Servant's Heart, to some members of the United States Senate, March 4, 2002.