

Jesus and His Followers through Non-Christian Eyes.

What does Pliny the Younger tell us about Jesus and Christians.

My goal here is to compile primary source data and offer commentary on it delineating what the outside world thought of Christians and Jesus through the end of the second century. It is often wondered why Jesus didn't make more of a splash in world history given all the things he was said to have done. That is not a difficult question to answer. E.P. Sanders writes:

“Jesus became such an important man in world history that it is sometimes hard to believe how unimportant he was during his lifetime, especially outside Palestine. Most of the first-century literature that survives was written by members of the very small elite class of the Roman empire. To them, Jesus (if they heard of him at all) was merely a troublesome rabble-rouser and magician in a small, backward part of the world. Roman sources that mention him are all dependent on Christian reports. Jesus' trial did not make headlines in Rome, and the archives there had no record of it. If archives were kept in Jerusalem, they were destroyed when revolt broke out in 66 CE or during the subsequent war. That war also devastated Galilee. Whatever record there may have been did not survive. When he was executed, Jesus was no more important to the outside world than the two brigands or insurgents executed with him -- whose names we do not know.”¹

There were no newspapers or video reports. Jesus was from a backwater hamlet in an obscure part of the Roman empire. He was also crucified by Rome which means that even if the outside world had heard of him, he was just another Jewish rabble rouser and insurrectionist that was put down. If Jesus was a real God, or God's only Son, how could he have been killed on a Roman cross? Not only that but “Christians” were not very well regarded in many circles, both Jewish and Roman ones. Plus, a lot of literature from the first and second century has not survived. It appears several Roman authors just wanted them to go away. Yet, we know that after the crucifixion of Jesus, Christianity caught on and started spreading and continued to expand in hostile environments. Eventually it conquered the Roman Empire!

So what do the earliest non-Christian sources say about Jesus and his followers? John Dominic Crossan writes: “Three pagan Roman authors, writing within a few years of one another at the start of the second century, agreed completely and emphatically on the nature of the Christian religion. Pliny was a correspondent of Tacitus and a friend of Suetonius, the former both imperial governors from the highest echelons of the aristocracy, the latter an imperial secretary

¹ E.P. Sanders, p 49, The Historical Figure of Jesus.

from its middle reaches. They concurred that Christianity was a “superstition” and differed only on the most appropriate negative adjectives to accompany that pejorative term.”² To Pliny the Younger, the first of these three Roman authors we now turn.

Pliny the Younger’s Persecution of Christians

Pliny the Younger (ca. 61-113 AD) was the adopted son and nephew of Pliny the Elder who died during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Younger Pliny inherited his estate and had a successful career (given consulship at age thirty-nine) and good relations with the emperor Trajan. As far as Roman governors go, he is actually considered by some to be quite humane as an individual.³ Keep that in mind as you read his comments regarding Christian executions and in at least one case, torture. He was a prolific aristocratic writer and his letters are the earliest Roman documents referring to Christians.

Around 111 AD he was sent as an emergency governor to a troubled province that had witnessed charges raised against its two preceding governors. Betty Radice writes, “The mere fact that the province had brought charges against two successive governors indicated that something was very wrong with its affairs, both political and financial, and Pliny was to tour the towns, write reports on his findings, and settle lesser problems on the spot.”⁴ He appears to have died within a few years leaving his work unfinished. Societies were prohibited from forming as presumably the risk of political disturbance was too great. This may not have boded well for Christians in the region—depending on the extent to which it was policed.



As the emergency governor of Bithynia and Pontus (modern day Turkey), Younger Pliny wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan (ca. 112) seeking guidance on how to deal with Christians since this degenerate cult was increasing in number and the worry of mass executions was on his mind.⁵ We know Christianity was established there early given the address of 1 Peter mentions Pontus and Bithynia and Acts 18:2 references Aquila of Pontus.⁶ Christians were referred to as fanatical and he was convinced “their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.” He inquired as to whether young and old should be treated alike and whether or not those who recant of their beliefs should be pardoned. His adopted policy was to ask the suspect if they were a Christian. If they answered in the affirmative the question was repeated.

² Excerpt From: John Dominic Crossan. “The Birth of Christianity.” Apple Books.

³ Betty Radice (*The Letters of the Younger Pliny by Younger Pliny*) writes: “He could of course afford to be generous; his tastes were not extravagant and his capital was solidly invested in land. He might complain about the hazards of weather and failure of crops, but he was able to reduce his tenants’ rents when times were bad (IX: 37) and make concessions to the contractors who stood to lose when the grape harvest was a poor one (VIII:2).”

⁴ Betty Radice, *ibid.*

⁵ On the authenticity of the letters see A.N. Sherwin-Whites discussion of letter 96 in *The Letters of Pliny A History and Social Commentary*.

⁶ A.N. Sherwin White (*ibid*) writes, “Later in the century, Lucian indicates that Christians were very numerous in Pontus (Alex. 25, 38.) and Dionysius, bishop of Corinth in the middle of the century, addresses one letter to ‘the church at Amastris and others in Pontus’, and another to the church of Nicomedia. “ Marcion was also from Sinope.

If their answer persisted a third time he had them led away for execution. He reports those who were actual citizens of Rome were sent away for trial. Being a Roman citizen afforded you special rights. Note that in Acts “St. Paul invokes his privilege against the sentence of the governor (Acts xvi. 37, xxii. 25, xxv. 9-12).”⁷

There was a problem however. It seems a witch hunt started. Accusations and charges increased and an anonymous pamphlet with the names of Christians circulated around. Suspects were deemed not guilty only if they recited an invocation formula to the gods, made offerings of wine and incense to a statue of Trajan the Roman emperor and as Pliny writes, “reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do.”

We are told of some who were identified as a Christian by an informer but claimed to have priorly recanted of their beliefs. They admitted their guilt amounted to this: “they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it.” Afterwards they dispersed then came together again for a communal meal. What scoundrels! What does Pliny do next? He apparently became alarmed and decided it was necessary to torture two slave women (called deaconesses) for information. Their torture only leads Pliny to conclude Christianity is “a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.” No evil can be found and afterwards he paused executions awaiting further guidance. The sheer number of accused Christians was a reason for concern. He writes that “a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. ”

Crossan writes, “That description by Pliny is rather extraordinary. If I had read it in a Christian writing, I probably would have attributed it to missionary exuberance or numerical propaganda. Christian numbers are said to be large enough to damage pagan economy and society. They are also spread across rank, age, sex, and location.”⁸ Crossan also appears correct in that “These attacks were probably put forward by pagans whose temples and sacrifices were economically damaged by Christian monotheism.”⁹

At the end of the letter, Pliny seems to suggest this trend is improving as a result of the persecutions. He writes, “. . . there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it. It is easy to infer

⁷ A. N. Sherwin-White, *ibid*.

⁸ Excerpt From: John Dominic Crossan. “The Birth of Christianity.” Apple Books.

⁹ Excerpt From: John Dominic Crossan. “The Birth of Christianity.” Apple Books.

from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent.”

It seems that Christianity was more invasive than Pliny initially knew. Trajan wrote him back and demonstrated some administrative genius. He appeared less worried than Pliny and while he maintained the integrity of Roman law he did so in a way that stymied mass executions. First he tells Pliny that he acted accordingly and goes on to say, “These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age.” Implicit in here is a critique of Pliny. Why are you giving any credence to anonymous associations? Pliny also asked if it was a crime merely to be a Christian or if some actual crime had to be observed. Trajan’s response seems to indicate that being a Christian itself is the crime and the person must recant or be punished accordingly.

A person on trial for murder isn’t going to walk free by offering a defense of the legitimacy of murder. They need to demonstrate that they have not committed such a crime. The Roman view of Christianity is analogous. The crime of Christians is ultimately that they were Christians. They couldn’t defend Christianity, only denounce it! Kinzig writes, “Before the century was out, the Christian orator Tertullian scoffed that on this basis whatever Christians said could never exonerate but only incriminate them. They were to be condemned not on the basis of a demonstrated crime but solely because of their allegiance to a name. While a manhunt was prescribed in the case of criminals, it was deemed impermissible for Christians—which merely showed that they were not criminals. Torture, finally, was being used against Christians to secure not a confession but a denial of the main charge! What a perversion of received principles of justice!”¹⁰

We must be cognizant that Pliny’s letter and Trajan’s rescript only gives us information about one local form of Christianity during a short time period after the turn of the first century and it does not of itself necessarily justify a claim of systematic persecution across the entire empire throughout the second century.¹¹ Given that Pliny has to ask what to do with Christians and he is told specifically by Trajan not to seek them out, this is clear. Trajan quotes no special prior law or edict on the matter and also writes that “it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula” for dealing with Christians. None the less, what seems to be the case is that

¹⁰ Christian Persecution in Antiquity, Wolfram Kinzig. Translated by Markus Bockmuehl.

¹¹ In chapter 5 of his letter to *Scapula*, Tertullian narrates the following incident in the later portion of the second century: “When Arrius Antoninus was driving things hard in Asia, the whole Christians of the province, in one united band, presented themselves before his judgment-seat; on which, ordering a few to be led forth to execution, he said to the rest, “O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have precipices or halts.” He didn’t have all the Christians executed but dismissed most of them telling them there were cliffs and ropes available if they so eagerly sought death.

these Christians were despised and hated by many of the pagans around them. Charges were levelled by other members of society who detested them. As we will see with many other Roman authors, Christians were viewed as inflicted with a pernicious superstition and vilified with all sorts of negative adjectives. Pliny's descriptions above are illustrative: "infected," "wretched cult," "degenerate . . . cult," "stubbornness," "unshakeable obstinacy," etc. We also already witness this sort of thing in the Gospels in the late first century though possibly in the context of Jewish opposition as well. John 15:18-19 reads: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." We can also look to Matthew 10:22 and Luke 21:17 for a similar sentiment, the stoning of Stephen and the prior life of Paul who persecuted the church. Acts 8 describes him as "ravaging the church by entering house after house" and his own statement in Galatians 1 reads: "I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it." There were certainly bouts of localized imperial persecution at times but Trajan very clearly speaks against going door to door looking for Christians. Universal, state-sponsored systematic man-hunts are ruled out here.

A. N. Sherwin White writes, "The limitation of the early persecutions is thus partly the result of official policy, a determination not to take the matter too seriously, as evinced in Trajan's and Hadrian's rescripts, and to confine the issues to real offences (*flagitia, contumacia*). But it results also from the Roman system of jurisdiction, the wide latitude allowed to the provincial governor, and partly again from the checks imposed by the Roman system of private delation. To bring a capital charge was both dangerous and difficult, dangerous because the *calumnia* process enabled the wrongly accused to turn the tables on his accuser, difficult because of the practical limitations on the frequency of capital charges. The *calumnia* process may have checked the prosecution of members of an unobtrusive and even secretive sect about whom evidence to justify prosecution must have been rare, and who only had to take the oath in order to expose the accusation. The difficulty arose because in each province there was only one man who had power to pass capital sentences. This power, unlike the civil jurisdiction, could not be delegated. To bring such charges one must either visit the provincial capital or else await the governor's visit on assize to the regional capitals of the province. Such visits were not always annual. Pliny in Bithynia-Pontus took two seasons to work through a rather small province. This forgotten factor, calling for leisure and money, acted as yet another check on the extent of the early persecutions. It is no accident that the known cases outside Rome occur in the great provincial cities, Lugdunum and neighbouring Vienna, Antioch, Carthage, Smyrna, Pergamum. The number of 'hanging judges' in all Asia Minor would hardly exceed five in the mid-second century."

Candida Moss writes, "When we look at the data things are clearer. Between the death of Jesus around 30 CE and the ascension of Constantine in 313, Christians died as the result of active measures by the imperial government only (1) immediately following the Great Fire of Rome in 64, (2) around 250, during the reign of Decius, (3) briefly during the reign of Valerian in 257–58, and (4) during the "Great Persecution" under the emperor Diocletian, which lasted from 303 to

December 30, 2021

305 and was renewed by Maximinus Daia between 311 and 313. These dates represent the largest time span for active persecution in the period before Constantine. As we will see, not all of these episodes can reasonably be called persecution, and their implementation was often limited to specific regions and to months rather than years. Even putting these caveats aside, we are talking about fewer than ten years out of nearly three hundred during which Christians were executed as the result of imperial initiatives.”¹²

White writes, “In addition to Pliny's letter and Tertullian's instances, Lucian's account of the acquittal of Peregrinus, Eusebius' description of the trial of Polycarp, the early Acts of the Scillitan martyrs, and the Acts of Apollonius, all show the remarkable reluctance of Roman officials to condemn Christians.” Yet we must temper this with Pliny's statement that he has never sat in on Christian interrogations. He is not mentioning this as if it is a novel thing, but a process he knows about. Travis William's writes, “Are we to conclude, then, that the procedure of Pliny (or the rescript of Trajan) breaks new ground in the relationship between the Christian Church and the Roman State within the provinces? Was there no established precedent by which provincial authorities dealt with Christians? Although some have recently attempted to paint Pliny as a great innovator in the treatment of Christians, his actions reveal another story. In the first place, Pliny's feigned ignorance is not a denial that trials against Christians had previously taken place. Pliny himself reveals this much when he admits that he had never been present at such a hearing: *Cognitionibus de Christianis interfui numquam* (Ep. 10.96.2). Instead, the very opposite would appear to be the case, as his absence from (and therefore ignorance of) the proceedings assumes their prior undertaking.”¹³ Continuing in a footnote William's writes, “Nevertheless, this conclusion seems to be demanded by the fact that Pliny's dilemma was not caused by the *novelty* of the relationship between the Church and the roman State—as if Christian trials were altogether unusual or non-existent—but by his own *inexperience* in provincial administration . . . Had he wished to express the non-existence of Christian trials, the blame would have been laid not upon his own shoulders but upon the nature of the circumstances (e.g., “Because there is no precedent for this type of case, I am consequently ignorant of . . .”).”

He also points out that Pliny was not as ignorant as some scholars have thought. He clearly knew to execute those who affirmed their Christian status and Trajan approved of this action. Williams writes in another footnote, “Of course, one could argue that the actions of Pliny prior to the arrival of Trajan's rescript were merely hasty decisions performed in thoughtless ignorance. The bulk of his correspondence to the emperor weighs heavily against this, however. The extreme caution he shows in administering his province—in some cases, to the annoyance of Trajan— would suggest that he had full confidence in the validity of his actions. therefore, as e. g. Hardy, *Studies in Roman History: First Series* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1906) 83, has

¹² Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*.

¹³ Travis B. Williams, *Persecutions in 1 Peter, Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering*, pg 203-204

appropriately noted, “to suppose that Pliny took this perfectly definite and decided course without precedent is quite impossible.”

Limits are clearly set but we cannot be completely dismissive of state-sponsored Christian persecution before the middle of the third century. Pliny clearly represents evidence such actions preceded him in the Empire and that the mere designation Christian was punishable. We have a lot of solid evidence of persecution outside of this letter and admittedly a lot more that is legendary which is not equivalent to completely non-historical. Wolfram Kinzig writes, “However juridically questionable, Trajan’s principles appear to have been deployed by most governors until the middle of the third century. This meant in practice that the name of Christ as such was punishable and that the governors could prosecute Christians nearly at will, as indeed they did whenever there were tensions between the Christian and non-Christian populations. A simple named accusation with the authorities sufficed to activate the machinery of justice against the Christians. The legal situation was thus resolved de jure but remained de facto extremely uncertain. At the same time, if the extant reports about trials against Christians are to be believed, imperial officials generally had no interest in wholesale death sentences against Christians. On the contrary, we know numerous cases in which they repeatedly offered the defendants the opportunity to disavow their Christianity. However, they were motivated in many cases not by humanitarian concern but by a political calculus: mass executions were liable to entail unforeseeable political consequences and were for this reason distinctly out of favor.”¹⁴

The correspondence does bring down to earth what is found in 1 Peter 4:15-16, “¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. ¹⁶ Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.” No evil could be found in the Christians tortured and executed by Younger Pliny. He will not be the last Roman author to suggest this and this letter and rescript definitely help provide bit of extra context for some Scriptural passages.

Admittedly, we do not learn much about Jesus from Pliny’s letter, only that Christians took their name from the person they followed, who they sang hymns to as if he were a god. These followers of this Christ also exemplify very high standards of ethical behavior even in the face of persecution. This incident may have had a larger impact on Church history as a whole. Crossan thinks Trajan’s response here might have helped pave the way for Christianity to become the official religion of the Roman Empire later on. He writes, “That imperial reply established three principles that would guide 150 years of official imperial policy toward Christianity. Do not go searching for Christians. Do not punish them if they repent. Do not accept anonymous accusations. When, in the middle of the third century, that policy was changed to investigative persecution, it was far too late for Roman paganism.”

¹⁴ Wolfram Kinzig, *Christian Persecution in Antiquity*.

Here is the Letter in Full. Source: Betty Radice from Penguin Classis

From Pliny to Trajan #96: I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature of the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name.

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are-Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.

There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.

Now that I have begun to deal with this problem, as so often happens, the charges are becoming more widespread and increasing in variety. An anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of a number of accused persons. Amongst these I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods), and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do.

Others, whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said that they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously, and some of them even twenty years ago. They all did reverence to your statue and the images of the gods in the same way as the others, and reviled the name of Christ. They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies. This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.

I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you. The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration, especially in view of the number of persons endangered; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. I think though that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends, for there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it. It is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent.

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