

## ROME AND CHRISTIANITY UNTIL A.D. 62\*

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What was the attitude of the Roman State toward Christianity until A.D. 62, that is, up to approximately the first half of Nero's reign? It is generally assumed that the Roman emperors and administrators during this period largely ignored Christianity, treating it at best as one of the several Jewish sects. This essay challenges this prevailing view by reexamining significant biblical and secular data. The available sources suggest, in my view, an early Roman recognition of the basic difference between the politically oriented Jewish messianic movements and the non-political nature of Christianity. This early recognition contributed to a basic policy of Roman tolerance toward Christianity during the period under consideration, with intolerance springing up only thereafter.

### 1. *Tiberius and Christianity, A.D. 14-37*

#### *The Trial of Jesus*

The trial of Jesus, which occurred during Tiberius' reign, offers a logical starting point for our inquiry, since it represents the first major confrontation between the Roman authorities and the Founder of Christianity (Mark 14:1; Luke 23:1-25; John 11:47-50; 18:38; 19:6; Acts 3:13-17).<sup>1</sup> The four Gospels are unanimous in attributing, not to the Roman, but to the Jewish authorities the initiative for the trial and condemnation of Jesus; and similarly, in

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<sup>1</sup>On the juridical and political aspects of the trial of Christ, see T. A. Burkill, "The Trial of Jesus," *VC* 12 (1958): 1-18; Oscar Cullmann, *Dieu et César: Le procès de Jésus* (Neuchâtel, 1958); A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 24-47. On the responsibility attributed to the Jews in the NT for the accusation and condemnation of Christ, see Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1978); and Gerard Sloyan, *Jesus on Trial* (Philadelphia, 1973).

the book of Acts, Peter's speech delivered immediately after Pentecost at Solomon's portico places the responsibility for the condemnation of Jesus squarely upon the Jewish people and their "rulers" (3:13, 14, 17).

It is noteworthy that even John's Gospel, though presumably written at a time when some Christians had already experienced Roman persecution under Nero and possibly under Domitian, excludes any direct Roman interest in Jesus' condemnation, placing exclusively upon the Sanhedrin the decision for the arrest of Jesus (11:47, 57). Pilate's exoneration of Jesus ("I find no crime in him"—John 18:38; 19:6) from the grave charge of political insurrection against Rome (Luke 23:2-5; John 18:30, 33-37) deserves attention, especially in view of the Roman sensitivity to the messianic-political Zealot movement, whose epicenter was apparently in Galilee.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Pilate did intervene ruthlessly in cases (such as those reported by Luke and Josephus)<sup>3</sup> where he felt that the security of the state was at stake, while he pronounced a "not-guilty" verdict on Christ and acceded only reluctantly to the request of the Jewish authorities for permission to crucify him, suggests that he perceived in Jesus' messianic movement no anti-Roman political motivation.

### *Pilate's Policy Toward the Christian Community*

This conclusion is indirectly supported by Luke's account of Pilate's policy of non-intervention against the first Christian community in Jerusalem. Acts reports that a conflict soon erupted between the Jewish Sanhedrin and the apostles on account of the thousands of Jews who accepted the messianic proclamation. The Roman governor could hardly have ignored this new popular messianic movement which the Jewish religious authorities endeavored to silence by jailing the apostles and by stoning Stephen

<sup>2</sup>The chief references to the Zealots in Josephus are *Ant.* 18.1.6; and *Wars* 4.3.9 and 4.7.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 13:1 mentions Pilate's bloody suppression of Galileans who were apparently engaged in a sacrificial gathering. Josephus reports Pilate's massacre of "a great number" of Jews who had organized a demonstration against the building of an aqueduct and his slaughtering of "a great multitude" of Samaritans who were on their way to Mount Gerizim (*Ant.* 18.3.2 and 18.4.1).

to death (see Acts 4:17-18, 3; 5:18; 7:57-60). Luke places the responsibility for this persecution upon the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 4:5, 15; 5:17, 27, 40-41; 6:12; 7:57), but the Roman authorities could not have overlooked the violent reaction of the Jewish religious leaders, especially since they had acted against Roman law by carrying out at least one death sentence, that of Stephen, without due authorization of the Roman governor.<sup>4</sup>

A somewhat similar case occurred almost thirty years later, in A.D. 62, when, according to Josephus, the high priest Ananus, taking advantage of the absence of the Roman governor ("Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road"), "assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others . . . and, when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned."<sup>5</sup> Ananus apparently waited for the propitious occasion offered by the absence of the Roman governor to act against some Christian leaders, presumably because he knew that the Roman authorities would disapprove his action against Christians. At the time of Stephen's execution, however, Pilate seems to have been present in Palestine.<sup>6</sup> Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin presumably chose to confront the governor with a *fait accompli*, seemingly because they knew Pilate would not grant them such permission otherwise.

### *Pilate's Report to Tiberius*

Did Pilate ignore this incident and the concomitant developments in Palestine? He could hardly have done so without weakening the prestige of the Roman authority in Palestine. It was

<sup>4</sup>Some may wish to explain Stephen's death as a popular execution conducted without due process before the Sanhedrin. Such a view, however, is discredited by the references to the charges presented by witnesses before the council (Acts 6:12-13) and by Paul's mention of the "vote" he cast in favor of the death sentence (Acts 26:10).

<sup>5</sup>*Ant.* 20.9.1, as trans. by William Whiston (Philadelphia, 1916), p. 613.

<sup>6</sup>Pilate lived "ten years in Judea" from A.D. 26 to 36. After his massacre of Samaritans at Tirathaba, he was ordered by the Syrian governor Vitellius "to go to Rome, to answer before the emperor to the accusations of the Jews," but before he could get to Rome Tiberius had died. (See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4.2, in Whiston, p. 537.)

customary, as Eusebius informs us, for “the rulers of the provinces, of reporting to the emperor the novel occurrences which took place in them [i.e., their provinces], in order that nothing might escape him.”<sup>7</sup> According to Tertullian (about A.D. 200), this occurred as Emperor Tiberius “received intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ’s divinity.” On the basis of this report, Tertullian says that Tiberius “brought the matter before the senate, with his own decision in favour of Christ. The senate, because it had not given the approval itself, rejected his proposal. Caesar held to his opinion, threatening wrath against all accusers of the Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Tiberius’ Proposal to the Senate*

Tertullian’s account suggests that Pilate reported to Tiberius not only the trial and condemnation of Jesus but also subsequent events indicating his divinity.<sup>9</sup> The existing forged letters of Pilate to Tiberius emphasize especially the darkening of the sun and the

<sup>7</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.2.1, in NPNF, 2d Series, 1:105. A good example of the ongoing extensive correspondence between governors and emperors is provided, of course, by the *Letters of Pliny*, governor of Bithynia, to Emperor Trajan.

<sup>8</sup>Tertullian, *Apology* 5, in ANF 3:22. Cf. *Apology* 21, in ANF 3:35, where Tertullian explicitly states that Pilate reported concerning Christ “to the reigning Caesar, who at the time was Tiberius.” Justin Martyr in his *I Apology*, addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and the Roman people, appeals twice to the “Acts of Pontius Pilate”—to substantiate his account of Christ’s crucifixion (chap. 35) and of Christ’s mighty works (chap. 48). “That these things did happen, you can ascertain from the Acts of Pontius Pilate,” he states in chap. 35 (ANF 1:175). It is hard to believe that Justin would challenge Romans to verify his account by reading the “Acts of Pontius Pilate,” if such a document did not exist or was not readily available. The *acta* mentioned by Justin presumably refer to Pilate’s report to Tiberius.

The extant versions of the Acts of Pilate and of the Letters of Pilate are, of course, an obvious Christian forgery, but they were probably based upon a genuine historical tradition. Further discussion of this matter will be given below.

<sup>9</sup>This is indicated, e.g., by the account of the darkening of the sun at the time of Christ’s crucifixion, an account which, Tertullian says, “you yourselves [i.e., Romans] have . . . still in your archives” (*Apology* 21, in ANF 3:35). Eusebius explicitly says that Pilate “gave an account also of other wonders which he had learned of him [i.e., Christ], and how, after his death, having risen from the dead, he was now believed by many to be a God” (*Eccl. Hist.* 2.2.2, in NPNF, 2d Series, 1:105).

appearance of stars and of the moon-like-blood at the time of the crucifixion. On the basis of this report, according to Tertullian, Tiberius proposed to the senate the *consecration* of Christ, that is, Christ's acceptance among the deities of the Roman pantheon and his admission to the cult of the Empire. It is a well-known fact that during the Republican period, the senate had absolute authority on religious matters. Tiberius evidently thought it expedient, at a time when his power was slipping, to show respect for the constitutional jurisdiction of the senate by submitting to its consideration certain proposals<sup>10</sup>—presumably including that for the *consecration* of Christ. The senate, however, rejected Tiberius' proposal. The Emperor, recognizing the judicial consequences for the Christians of this negative decision of the senate, seemingly tried to neutralize its effects by "threatening wrath against all accusers of the Christians."<sup>11</sup>

*Excursus.* Some scholars have rejected the historicity of Tertullian's account, treating it as an apologetic fabrication.<sup>12</sup> A basic contention is that Christianity could hardly have attracted imperial attention at such an early date (about A.D. 35). Certain recent studies, however, have argued in favor of its historicity.<sup>13</sup> Among evidences noted are the facts that the existence of the "Acts of Pilate" is well known to Justin Martyr by the middle of the second century, and is also presupposed by Tacitus' accurate

<sup>10</sup>On the general setting, cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 3:60-63.

<sup>11</sup>Tertullian, *Apology* 5, in ANF 3:22.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., J. Beaujeu, "L'incendie de Rome en 64 et les chrétiens," *Latomus* 19 (1960): 33-40.

<sup>13</sup>An extensive and cogent discussion of Tertullian's account is provided by Marta Sordi in "I primi rapporti fra lo Stato romano e il cristianesimo," *Rendiconti Accademia Nazionale Lincei* 12 (1957): 58-93; in "Sui primi rapporti dell'autorità romana con il cristianesimo," *Studi Romani* 8 (1960): 393-409; and in *Il Cristianesimo e Roma*, Istituto di Studi Romani 19 (Bologna, 1965), pp. 21-31. Sordi argues convincingly in favor of the historicity of Tertullian's account regarding Pilate's report and Tiberius' proposal to the senate. She views the negative decision of the senate as the juridical basis of the later persecution of Christians. Vincenzo Monachino defends basically Sordi's view in *Le persecuzioni e la polemica pagano-cristiana* (Rome, 1974), pp. 21-24. See also G. Papini, *Il Cesare della crocifissione* (Rome, 1934), pp. 40-47; C. Cecchelli, *Studi in onore di Calderini a Paribeni* (Milan, 1956), pp. 351-354.

knowledge of Pilate's condemnation of Christ, as well as by the existence of the later apocryphal "Acts of Pilate."<sup>14</sup>

An analysis of the existing versions of the "Acts of Pilate" has led some scholars to conclude that "the work which lies behind them must have originated very early."<sup>15</sup> The oldest passage in the "Acts of Pilate," according to Johannes Quasten, is "The Report of Pilate to the Emperor Claudius," which is found in similar forms in a Greek version in the "Acts of Peter and Paul" and in a Latin version as an appendix to the Gospel of Nicodemus.<sup>16</sup> It is to this "Report of Pilate" that Tertullian and Eusebius presumably refer, especially since the latter comments at length on Pilate's report while making no mention of any Christian "Acts of Pilate."<sup>17</sup> This omission by Eusebius is striking, for it would have been natural for him to mention such Acts if they existed—especially so, inasmuch as he refers to the pagan, anti-Christian fabrication of the "Acts of Pilate" produced and propagated by edict under the persecutor Maximin.<sup>18</sup>

Considerations such as these have led some scholars to view Pilate's report to the Emperor as "the genesis of the Acts of Pilate."<sup>19</sup> Obviously, the existing versions of Pilate's letters are a Christian forgery, designed to make the Roman procurator a witness to Christ's divinity. Such a forgery, however, could well represent a Christian embellishment of an authentic historical dispatch sent by Pilate to Tiberius. This hypothesis finds support both in the existing practice of the governors to report any significant development in their provinces<sup>20</sup> and in Tertullian's account.

<sup>14</sup>See Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. For an English translation of the various existing versions of the "Acts of Pilate" which are generally dated in the fourth century, see ANF 8:459-463; also M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1926; corrected ed., 1953), pp. 153-155.

<sup>15</sup>Felix Scheidweiler, "The Gospel of Nicodemus," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Edgar Hennecke, (Philadelphia, 1963), 1: 445; cf. p. 447. Scheidweiler notes that the letter from Pilate to Tiberius, the so-called Anaphora of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, is regarded "as the genesis of the Acts of Pilate" (p. 481).

<sup>16</sup>Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht, 1950), 1: 116. James, p. 153, n. 1, states that "a letter of Tiberius to Abgar of Edessa, quoted by Moses of Choreme (*History of Armenia*, II, ch. 33) gives exactly the same account of the proceedings in the Senate, and mentions the report of Pilate."

<sup>17</sup>See Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.2.3-6.

<sup>18</sup>See *ibid.*, 1.9.2-3; 9.5.1.

<sup>19</sup>Scheidweiler, p. 481; cf. Quasten, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup>See n. 7, above.

To appreciate the latter, one must not forget that Tertullian addressed his "Apology" to Roman magistrates (around A.D. 200) to protest against the moral and juridical injustice of existing anti-Christian laws. To challenge such legislation, Tertullian urges magistrates to "consult" their "histories" in order to trace its origin. It is in this context that Tertullian mentions Pilate's report, Tiberius' proposed *consecratio* of Christ, and the senate's negative decision. The latter he views as the origin of the anti-Christian legislation which was implemented later only by impious men, namely, Nero and Domitian.<sup>21</sup>

What reasons would Tertullian have to fabricate the story of Pilate's report, of Tiberius' proposed *consecratio* of Christ and of the senate's refusal, when he mentions these events incidentally, merely to explain the origin of anti-Christian laws? A Christian apologist would hardly have had any interest in inventing a story of a negative senate decision (*senatus consultus*) which offered a legal basis for future persecution of Christians. Moreover, could Tertullian have urged magistrates to "consult" their histories, if the facts to be verified did not exist in their records because they were solely a Christian fabrication? Considerations such as these lend support to the historicity of Pilate's report and of Tiberius' proposal, which are dated by Eusebius in his *Chronicon* to A.D. 35.<sup>22</sup> The violent anti-Christian persecution, which, according to the canonical book of Acts, was stirred up at that time in Palestine by the Sanhedrin, could explain why Pilate deemed it necessary to inform Tiberius about the events which led to the establishment of Christianity and to its conflict with Judaism.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Tertullian, *Apology* 5.

<sup>22</sup>Eusebius, *Hieronymi Chronicon*, in *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, 7, ed. R. Helm (Leipzig, 1956), pp. 176-177. Eusebius' *Chronicon* is used by the seventh-century Byzantine author of the *Chronicon Paschale* to establish the date A.D. 35 for Pilate's report, on the basis that it was issued during the consulate of Gallus and Nonianus (*Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. Dindorf in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* [Bonn, 1832], p. 430).

<sup>23</sup>Presumably Pilate sent more than one report to Tiberius. This is suggested by the fact that Justin mentions the "Acts of Pilate" only to support the account of the crucifixion, while Tertullian refers to Pilate's report relating to "events" which transpired in Palestine since Christ's death (*Apology* 5). In view of what we know about the frequent epistolary exchanges between governors and emperors and about the existing conflict between the Jewish authorities and the Christian community, it seems reasonable to assume that Pilate more than once reported to, and consulted, Tiberius on the conflict.

Tiberius' proposal to the senate to accept Christ among the Roman deities could well have been motivated by both superstitious and political considerations. The account of the mysterious "wonders" surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection which the Emperor received from Pilate, and presumably also from his Samaritan chronographer Thallus, could well have favorably predisposed Tiberius toward Christ, especially in view of his superstitious faith in astrological signs<sup>24</sup> and of his skepticism toward the traditional religion.<sup>25</sup> Political interest could also have been an important factor. Tiberius was well informed about the Jewish nationalistic-messianic ferment existing in Palestine. A few years earlier he ordered Pilate to revoke certain measures which the governor had taken against Jewish privileges, in order not to heighten the existing anti-Roman tension. The report that Tiberius received from Pilate about the rapid growth of the Christian messianic movement, a movement which—contrary to that of the Zealot revolutionaries—had no nationalistic and anti-Roman aspirations, could well have suggested to the Emperor the possibility of utilizing Christianity to solve the thorny Palestine Jewish problem. By granting to Christianity the same legal recognition (*religio licita*) accorded to Judaism, Tiberius presumably intended to ensure its free expansion among Jewish people, thus exempting it from the jurisdiction conferred by Rome on the Sanhedrin over Jewish religious questions. A Christian penetration of the Jewish masses would be advantageous for Rome, since Christianity could offset anti-Roman sentiments through its teaching of "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt 22:21).<sup>26</sup>

Tiberius' proposed *consecratio* of Christ was, however, rejected by the Roman senate, as we have seen, and Tertullian views this

<sup>24</sup>See Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 57.15.7-9; and Tacitus, *Annals* 6.20. On the influence of the astrologer Thrasyllus on Tiberius' policies, see Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia, 1954), pp. 92-108.

<sup>25</sup>E.g., Tiberius seems to have rejected the worship of the emperor as instituted by Augustus, declaring before the senate: "To be consecrated in the image of the deity through all the provinces would be vanity and arrogance, and the honor paid to Augustus will soon be mockery . . ." (Tacitus, *Annals* 4.37, trans. John Jackson [Cambridge, Mass., 1946], p. 67).

<sup>26</sup>Sordi, *Il Cristianesimo e Roma*, pp. 25-31, 57-60, offers an extensive and persuasive defense of this new view.



negative decision of the senate as the genesis of the anti-Christian legislation. The Emperor "held to his opinion" and, as we have also seen, apparently endeavored to neutralize the possible negative consequences of the senate's refusal by "threatening wrath against all accusers of the Christians."<sup>27</sup> The "accusers" Tiberius had in mind were presumably the Palestinian Jewish authorities who had launched a bitter attack against the followers of Christ (Acts, chaps. 8 and 9). Roman officials had not yet taken punitive actions against Christians.

How did Tiberius' action affect the Christians especially in Palestine, the epicenter of the conflict? Both Josephus and the Acts of the Apostles provide significant clues.

#### *From Persecution to Peace*

Josephus informs us that Vitellius, the Roman governor of Syria, "came into Judea, and went up to Jerusalem" (about A.D. 36), "deprived Joseph, who was also called Caiaphas, of the high priesthood, and appointed Jonathan the son of Ananus, the former high priest, to succeed him."<sup>28</sup> Josephus offers no explanation for Vitellius' removal of Caiaphas from office. A clue is suggested by the book of Acts when it speaks of a sudden change at that time from a situation of "great persecution" (Acts 8:1) to one of "peace": "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and . . . it was multiplied" (Acts 9:31). The reason for this sudden peace could well have been the intervention of Tiberius' legate, Vitellius, who deposed Caiaphas, the promoter of the persecution of the Church. A similar situation occurred in A.D. 62, when the Roman legate Albinus deposed the high priest Ananus for his arbitrary execution of James and other Christian leaders.<sup>29</sup> Vitellius' action could, then, represent the implementation of Tiberius' policy of tolerance toward Christians.

This policy may also be reflected in the adoption of the term *Christianus* for the first time in Antioch (Acts 11:26), the capital city of the Syrian province, where the Roman legate resided. The

<sup>27</sup>Tertullian, *Apology* 5, in ANF 3:22.

<sup>28</sup>Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4.3, in Whiston, pp. 537-538.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.9.1.

Latin formation of the adjective *Christianus* (-ianus ending) suggests, as noted by several scholars, that the term was coined by Roman authorities as an official designation of the new movement.<sup>30</sup> Such a Roman recognition of Christianity as an independent entity from Judaism may have been favored by Tiberius' policy, which Vitellius implemented in Syria. Moreover, if the name *Christianus* arose in the government circles of the provincial governor, it would mean that the Roman authorities were not ignorant, but rather well-informed, about the Christian movement.

### 2. Caligula and Christianity, A.D. 37-41

During the reign of Tiberius' successor, Gaius Caligula (A.D. 37-41), the situation for the Christians remained practically unchanged. We have no indications that Caligula dealt with Christians. But the severe conflict which developed between the Jews and the Emperor on account of the latter's theocratic tendencies reflected in his senseless effort to install a statue of himself right in the Temple of Jerusalem, may have indirectly contributed to peace for the Christians.<sup>31</sup> The Jewish authorities, concerned at this critical time about their own survival, could hardly afford planned actions against Christians. It was presumably during the reign of Caligula that the Christian mission reached out beyond the Jews in Palestine and Antioch to convert Romans, like the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:24, 34-35), and "Greeks also" (Acts 11:20).

### 3. Claudius and Christianity, A.D. 41-54

#### *Palestine: Situation of the Church*

The reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54) can be characterized as a restoration of Tiberius' policy of religious tolerance. To the Jews

<sup>30</sup>F. D. Gealy notes that "the word *Christianos* is a Latinism. The expected Greek ending would be ετος. Since there were only exceptional Greek formations in ταυος, a Syrian origin of the title, although possible, is brought into question" (*IDB*, 1962 ed., 1:572). See also E. Peterson, "Christianos," *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati* 1 (1946): 355-372; H. B. Mattingly, "The Origin of the Name Christiani," *JTS* 9 (1958): 26-37.

<sup>31</sup>On Caligula's order to the Syrian legate Petronius to install his statue in the Jerusalem Temple and on King Agrippa's intervention on behalf of the Jews before Caligula, see Josephus, *Ant.* 18.8.1-9.

Claudius restored by edict in A.D. 41 their religious privileges and placed Judea directly under a Jewish king, Agrippa I (A.D. 41-44).<sup>32</sup> These measures did not prevent, however, a Jewish uprising, which resulted in the expulsion of Jews from Rome (A.D. 49)<sup>33</sup> and in ruthless suppression of the Jewish revolts in Palestine.<sup>34</sup>

Claudius' policy toward Christians can be deduced primarily from Luke's account of the actions taken by his magistrates when dealing with Christians. For example, Luke suggests that the temporary cessation of direct Roman control over Judea during the reign of the Jewish King Agrippa I (A.D. 41-44) resulted in the immediate resumption of persecution against Christ's followers: "Herod the king laid violent hands upon some. . . . He killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also" (Acts 12:1-3). The situation changed at Agrippa's death (A.D. 44). Judea returned under direct Roman control and, according to Luke, the Palestinian Church experienced no significant persecution until Paul's arrest (about A.D. 58).

#### *Cyprus: The Conversion of the Proconsul Sergius Paulus*

Luke makes it evident that in the diaspora the Roman administration at this time favored the expansion of Christianity even more than in Palestine, by restraining or hindering the Jewish persecution of the Church. In Cyprus, for example, where the first

<sup>32</sup>The text of Claudius' letter to the Alexandrians urging mutual tolerance and respect between Greeks and Jews, and confirming the latter's privileges, is analyzed by H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (London, 1924), pp. 1-37. Josephus reports the text of two different edicts issued by Claudius on behalf of the Jews, one sent to Alexandria and the other sent to other parts of the empire (*Ant.* 19.5.2-3).

<sup>33</sup>According to Roman historian Suetonius in his *Claudius* 25.4, the Emperor "banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus [Lat. *impulsore Chresto*]. The *impulsore Chresto* has generally been interpreted as referring not to an actual person but to the Christian proclamation of Christ, which supposedly caused the rioting and the expulsion from Rome of Jews and Christians. This interpretation, however, is hardly supported by Luke, who explicitly says that "Claudius had commanded *all the Jews* to leave Rome" (Acts 18:2), but makes no mention of Christians being affected by this imperial disposition.

<sup>34</sup>An account of the various Jewish revolts in Palestine is given by Josephus, *Ant.* 20.5-7.

Christian encounter with Roman authorities occurred outside Palestine (about A.D. 46-47), the proconsul Sergius Paulus, in spite of the dissuasion of a Jewish prophet named Bar-Jesus, "summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:7). The curiosity of this Roman official for the Christian message, which he accepted, suggests not only a favorable disposition toward Christianity but also some prior knowledge of it, presumably through government channels.

*Rome: Knowledge of Christianity in Government Circles*

Support for this view is indirectly offered by other sources. A fragment of the historian Thallus is significant in this regard. Thallus is mentioned by several Christian writers<sup>35</sup> and is generally identified with the Samaritan freedman of Tiberius referred to by Josephus.<sup>36</sup> According to the Christian writer Julius Africanus (about A.D. 160-240), Thallus in the third book of his *Histories of the Greeks*, argues that the three hours of darkness which accompanied Jesus' death were not a miraculous but a natural phenomenon, namely, a solar eclipse. The text reads: "Thallus, in his third book of his histories, attributes this darkness to a solar eclipse, but in my view this is without reason."<sup>37</sup> This fragmentary testimony of Thallus presupposes, as noted by Maurice Goguel, that "the tradition of the Gospels was known in Rome by the middle of the first century in a circle very close to the imperial family."<sup>38</sup> The importance of this information is noted also by R. Eisler, who writes: "It seems to me an important fact that already under Emperor Claudius, half a century before the well known testimony of Tacitus, a Samaritan hellenist closely attached to the imperial court mentioned Christ's crucifixion, attempting to eliminate

<sup>35</sup>Passages from Thallus are cited by Julius Africanus, Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Lactantius, Georgius Syncellus, and Ioannes Malalas. See Maurice Goguel, "Un nouveau témoignage non-chrétien . . ." *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 98 (1928): 5-6.

<sup>36</sup>See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.6.4.

<sup>37</sup>Julius Africanus' reference to Thallus has been preserved by the Byzantine historian George Syncellus (ca. A.D. 800) and has been published by D. Emil Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, 4th ed. (Leipzig, 1909), 3: 494.

<sup>38</sup>Goguel, p. 7.

through a rationalistic interpretation the prodigies which supposedly had been observed."<sup>39</sup>

An additional indication of the knowledge and presence of Christianity within imperial circles is provided possibly by a Roman inscription prior to A.D. 38, which mentions a certain *Iucundus Chrestianus*, a servant of Tiberius' sister-in-law, Antonia Drusi.<sup>40</sup> The name "*Chrestianus*," derived from "*Chrestus*," a frequent misspelling of "Christus," suggests a Christian affiliation.<sup>41</sup> More significant is the friendship of "Iulia Drusi," daughter of Antonia Drusi and Tiberius' niece, with "Pomponia Graecina," wife of Aulus Plautius, the conqueror of Britain, and most probably an early convert to Christianity. According to Tacitus, Pomponia Graecina was accused of "foreign superstition" (*superstitio externa*), a charge frequently leveled against Christians.<sup>42</sup> Her possible conversion to Christianity is suggested also by the burial of a Christian descendant, "*Pomponios Grekeinos*," in the catacomb of St. Callistus. Tacitus traces back Pomponia Graecina's adoption of a new and austere lifestyle to the death of Iulia Drusi (in A.D. 43).<sup>43</sup>

It is possible that this noble Roman matron justified her withdrawn lifestyle, adopted at the time of her conversion to Christianity, by claiming to be mourning for her friend Iulia Drusi. This cautious and circumspect style of Christian living was presumably characteristic among Roman believers, since Paul at his arrival in Rome comments that "most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment and are

<sup>39</sup>Cited by Goguel, p. 8. F. F. Bruce similarly remarks: "It is worth noting that about the middle of the first century A.D. the traditional story of the death of Christ was known in non-Christian circles at Rome" (*The Spreading Flame* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1958], p. 137).

<sup>40</sup>CIL, vol. 6, n. 24944.

<sup>41</sup>Tacitus in his report of the Neronian persecution spells the name in such a manner (*Annals* 15.44). On the evolution of the name, see A. Ferrua, "Christianus sum," *Bulletin du Cange* 5 (1929/1930): 69-88; also cf. n. 30, above.

<sup>42</sup>Tacitus, *Annals* 13.32. On the charge of "superstition" used against Christians, see, e.g., *ibid.*, 15.44; Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.96.

<sup>43</sup>Tacitus, *Annals* 13.32.

much more bold to speak the word of God without fear" (Phil 1:14).<sup>44</sup> The probable nexus between the conversion in A.D. 43 of Pomponia Graecina, a noble lady of a senatorial family, and the death of Tiberius' niece, suggests a knowledge of, and interest in, Christianity among some persons of the imperial and senatorial circles.<sup>45</sup>

*Achaia: Proconsul Gallio and Paul*

This conclusion is indirectly supported also by the action of certain Roman officials such as the Proconsul of Achaia, Junius Lucius Gallio (brother of Seneca), before whom Paul was accused in Corinth by the Jews (about A.D. 51). The accusation leveled against Paul of "persuading men to worship God contrary to the law" (Acts 18:12) was presumably aimed at placing Paul in conflict with Claudius' edict which guaranteed the Jews, "who are in all the world under us," the right "to keep their ancient customs without being hindered so to do."<sup>46</sup> As a violator of the Jewish religious traditions which the Emperor wanted to be respected, Paul was made responsible for the kind of turmoil Claudius' edict aimed at preventing.

Such an accusation had juridical validity, and if true, it deserved careful examination by the Proconsul. But, according to Luke, Gallio ignored the charge, declaring the matter to be merely "questions about words and names and your own [Jewish] law" (Acts 18:15). The Proconsul's speed and certainty in handling the case reveals some understanding of Christianity, namely, that Christian teachers and teachings were not the cause of Jewish unrest and thus they did not violate the intent of Claudius' dispositions. This benevolent neutrality favored, rather than hindered, the initial expansion of Christianity in the Jewish diaspora.

<sup>44</sup>The reservation of the Roman believers is also implied by Luke's comment about the Jewish leaders in Rome who told Paul they had received no report about him (Acts 28:21) and who requested the Apostle to inform them about Christianity: "We desire to hear from you what your views are; for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (Acts 28:22).

<sup>45</sup>This conclusion is supported by Paul's reference to the members of "Caesar's household" who sent salutations to the Philippians (Phil 4:22).

<sup>46</sup>Josephus, *Ant.* 19.5.3, in Whiston, p. 578. Josephus reports the text of two edicts issued by Claudius to restore the rights of the Jews, one addressed to the Alexandrians and one to the other provinces of the Empire. The text cited is from the latter edict.

*Ephesus: Civil Authorities Protect Christian Preachers*

Luke's account of the tumult which broke out in Ephesus about A.D. 56-57 (Acts 19) provides an additional example of Roman tolerance toward Christianity. The tumult was caused by an interplay of factors: economic interest in view of business losses suffered by silversmiths and retailers of Artemis' shrines as a result of Paul's preaching; religious concerns over the threat posed by Christian preaching to the fame of the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:27); and Jewish instigation of the crowd (Acts 19:33). It is worth noting that in Ephesus the civil authorities were not influenced by these various concerns of the crowd. On the contrary, they took measures to protect the Christian preachers. While the town clerk exonerated Paul's associates, Gaius and Aristarchus, from the charge of sacrilegious acts against Artemis (Acts 19:37), the "Asiarchs who were friends of his [Paul], sent to him and begged him not to venture into the theater" (Acts 19:31).

The Asiarchs were the representatives of the provincial cities to the commune of Asia, and thus they represented the closest link between the provincial administration and the Roman government. The action of the Asiarchs and of the Ephesian magistrates in advising and protecting Paul and his associates from the fanaticism of the crowd reflects an understanding on their part of the harmless nature of Christianity and an implementation of the tolerant Roman policy toward it. This favorable situation, however, was short-lived. The wide spread of Christianity soon came to be regarded as a threat to economic interests and to the religious, social, and political order. Consequently, in the second and third centuries, some Roman officials such as the Proconsul of Asia, who ordered the arrest of Polycarp in A.D. 156, no longer rejected popular charges levelled against Christians, but on the contrary tried those who professed to be Christians as transgressors of Roman law.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup>The account of the martyrdom of Polycarp—the most ancient which has come down to us—provides a fitting example of the radical change in attitude from those Roman magistrates who tried Paul to those who condemned Polycarp. In the latter case, not only did the Proconsul fail to protect Polycarp, as Gallio had done for Paul, but even took the initiative to arrest, interrogate, and condemn him. For other examples and a cogent discussion of the juridical basis for the persecution of Christians, see V. Monachino, *Il fondamento giuridico delle persecuzioni nei primi due secoli* (Rome, 1955), pp. 1-39.

## 4. Nero and Christianity until A.D. 62

*Palestine: Arrest and Trial of Paul*

Roman policy toward Christianity during the first half of Nero's reign (until A.D. 62) appears to have been basically a continuation of the Tiberian-Claudian tradition. This is suggested, for example, by the way Roman officials handled the trial of Paul as well as the execution of James, "the Lord's brother" in A.D. 62. The arrest of Paul in Jerusalem in the late spring of A.D. 57 or 58 was accomplished for security reasons by the Roman tribune Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26), who rescued Paul from an infuriated crowd that was attempting to lynch him because they falsely believed that he had profaned the temple by bringing into its court some Greeks. According to Luke, interrogation of Paul before the Sanhedrin convinced the tribune that Paul "was accused about questions of their [Jewish] law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment" (Acts 23:29). When informed of a plot against Paul, the tribune decided as a precautionary measure to send Paul by night and well-escorted to the tribunal of the procurator Felix in Caesarea (Acts 23:23-33).

It is worth noting Luke's account of how Antonius Felix first, and his successor Porcius Festus later (Acts 24:27), handled the political and religious charges formalized by Tertullus, the official spokesman of the Sanhedrin. *Politically*, Paul was accused of being a "pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). The charge that Paul was an "agitator," instigating seditions, could hardly be ignored by Roman officials, who were watching closely the sectarian nationalistic ferment that troubled the Jewish world at that time. *Religiously*, Paul was charged with attempting "to profane the temple" (Acts 24:6) by introducing into it Gentiles, who were warned by an inscription to stay out or risk their lives. Any transgressor could be executed without permission by the Romans.<sup>48</sup> Both charges reported by Luke sound authentic, since they represent grievous transgression of Roman law.

Fully aware of the political nature of the accusation, Paul, according to Luke, took pains in his defense to refute the charges

<sup>48</sup>See Josephus, *Ant.* 15.11.5.



of sedition: "They did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues, or in the city" (Acts 24:12).<sup>49</sup> The line of defense adopted by Paul before both Jewish and Roman authorities was to reduce the charge for his arrest exclusively to religious reasons: "With respect to the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you this day" (Acts 24:21; see also 23:6; 26:6-7). It can hardly be denied that in the Acts and the Pauline epistles, the resurrection of Christ constitutes the focus of Paul's teaching.

How did the Roman officials react to these charges and to Paul's defense? None of them, according to Luke, from the tribune Claudius Lysias to the procurators Felix and Festus, and to King Agrippa II, took seriously the political accusation of sedition. Why? Presumably because they knew sufficiently of the non-political, irenic nature of the Christian messianic movement. Felix, for example, according to Luke, had a "rather accurate knowledge of the Way" (Acts 24:22). On the basis of this knowledge, the procurator adopted a diplomatic course of action, putting off the trial indefinitely, while at the same time keeping Paul in prison with "some liberty" (Acts 24:23) in order "to do the Jews a favor" (Acts 24:27). The same desire motivated his successor, Festus, to advise Paul to be tried in his presence in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin (Acts 25:9). These compromise measures reflect the concern of the imperial government to avoid actions which could antagonize Jewish religious sentiments, thus fueling unrest and revolts. Yet, it is noteworthy that even these political considerations did not induce Festus to hand Paul over to Jewish authorities for condemnation. His awareness that Paul "had done nothing deserving death" (Acts 25:25) apparently restrained him from granting to the Sanhedrin the right to try the apostle.

Agrippa II, who was appointed king over Philip's tetrarchy and neighboring territories, manifested the same attitude.<sup>50</sup> After examining Paul at Festus' request, Agrippa concurred that "this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment" (Acts 26:31). Such a verdict presupposes some knowledge of the pacifistic, non-political nature of the Christian movement. The latter is

<sup>49</sup>Paul gave the same defense before the next procurator, Festus (Acts 25:8).

<sup>50</sup>Josephus, *Ant.* 19.9.2; 20.5.2; *Wars* 2.12.1; 2.7.1.

suggested also by Paul's remark to Agrippa: "For the King knows about these things . . . for I am persuaded that none of these things have escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Though of Jewish lineage (great-grandson of Herod the Great), Agrippa grew up in Rome throughout the Great War (A.D. 66-70) and its aftermath.<sup>51</sup> It is possible, therefore, that Agrippa had learned about Christianity in the government circles of Rome.

It must not be overlooked, as Marta Sordi points out,<sup>52</sup> that Agrippa refers to Paul's faith, not with the Jewish designation "Nazarene" (Acts 24:5), but the new term "Christian" (Acts 26:28). This is a term used in Acts only once before—in conjunction with its origin in Antioch (Acts 11:26), most probably, as noted earlier, in government circles. The keen interest to learn about Christianity by men like King Agrippa, as well as the consistent rejection of the charge of sedition and temple profanation by all the above-mentioned Roman officials who had a part in Paul's trial in Palestine, suggests Roman familiarity with, and tolerance toward, Christianity. This picture, portrayed by Luke, agrees substantially with the scanty information provided by other sources.

### *Palestine: Execution of Christian Leaders*

Mention must be made at this juncture of the execution of James and other leaders in A.D. 62. We noted earlier that, according to Josephus, the high priest Ananus was able to have these church leaders prosecuted and executed during the temporary absence of a Roman procurator, caused by the sudden death of Festus and the delay in the arrival of his successor, Albinus.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the high priest took advantage of the death of Festus to act immediately against church leaders suggests that the presence of the governor had prevented such actions against Christians. In fact, the new procurator Albinus, while yet in Alexandria, wrote to Ananus, strongly condemning him for his action; and Agrippa for the same

<sup>51</sup>See, e.g., Agrippa's famous speech to the Jews in which he attempted to dissuade them from making war on the Romans (*Wars* 2.16.4-5).

<sup>52</sup>Sordi, *Il Cristianesimo e Roma*, p. 41.

<sup>53</sup>See n. 5, above.

reason had Ananus deposed from the high priesthood.<sup>54</sup> By moderating and restraining Jewish actions against Christianity, Roman authorities favored the expansion of the latter.

### *Rome: Imprisonment and Trial of Paul*

Paul's Roman imprisonment and trial offer further insight into the attitude of Roman authorities toward Christianity. Upon his arrival in Rome, Paul was delivered to the commander of the imperial guards (Acts 28:16).<sup>55</sup> This post was held from A.D. 51 to 62 by Sextus Afranius Burrus,<sup>56</sup> who together with Lucius Afranius Seneca, was Nero's most influential and trusted adviser in the earlier part of his reign.<sup>57</sup> In closing his account of Paul's life, Luke speaks of the freedom enjoyed by the apostle while a prisoner awaiting trial: "And he lived there two whole years in his own hired dwelling, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ *quite openly and unhindered*" (Acts 28:30-32, emphasis supplied).<sup>58</sup>

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul implicitly confirms Luke's account when he writes: "It has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ" (Phil 1:13). The freedom granted Paul freely to receive visitors at his guarded residence, openly to propagate his faith even among the praetorian guards and "Caesar's household" (Phil 4:21), and unimpededly to write pastoral letters to his

<sup>54</sup>Josephus, *Ant.* 20.9.1.

<sup>55</sup>The phrase "he was delivered to the prefect of the praetorians" (a variant reading of Acts 28:16) has been rejected by recent editors because it is not found in the most authoritative manuscripts. Nevertheless, as noted by J. B. Lightfoot, "the statement does not look like an arbitrary fiction, and probably contains a genuine tradition, even if it was no part of the original text" (*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [New York, 1913 reprint of the 4th ed.], p. 8 [cont. of n. 4 from p. 7]).

<sup>56</sup>See Tacitus, *Annals* 12.42; 14.51.

<sup>57</sup>Tacitus writes: "The death of Burrus shook the position of Seneca: for not only had the cause of decency lost in power by the removal of one of its *two champions*, but Nero was inclining to worse counsellors" (*Annals* 14.52, emphasis supplied).

<sup>58</sup>Henry J. Cadbury observes that "to understand the passage [Acts 28:30-31] in its proper proportions one must remember that Luke . . . wishes in the first place to show that the Roman authorities were not hostile to Christianity" (*The Beginnings of Christianity, The Acts of the Apostles* [London, 1933], p. 329).

churches, presupposes favorable dispositions on the part of the Roman authorities to which he had been entrusted—specifically, the praetorian guards and their prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus.

What role, if any, Burrus played in Paul's trial, we do not know. In some cases, the emperor delegated his authority to hear appeals.<sup>59</sup> Some modern authorities have proposed that possibly it was the prefect Burrus himself who acquitted Paul at his first trial (2 Tim 4:16-17), which presumably took place two years after his arrival in Rome (Acts 28:31-32).<sup>60</sup> Even if Nero himself heard the case, he would have been assisted by his close advisers, who formed his *consilium*. If Paul's first trial took place in A.D. 62, as is commonly maintained, it is conceivable that Burrus and Seneca were part of Nero's *consilium*, since until that year both were Nero's key advisers. In that case, both could have been influential in determining Paul's first acquittal.

Moreover, the opposition which Paul apparently faced in Rome from Jewish converts, as indicated by his complaint that Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus were "the only men of the circumcision" who supported him (Col 4:10-11) could have predisposed Seneca—well known for his anti-Semitic sentiments<sup>61</sup>—favorably toward Paul, who was regarded by the Jews as a renegade from their religion (Acts 21:21). The surge that took place in the 60s of a wave of literary attack against the Jewish race and Jewish customs could indirectly have favored a Roman attitude of tolerance toward Christians, especially since the latter endeavored to clarify to Roman authorities their severance from Judaism.<sup>62</sup>

The relative freedom enjoyed by Paul during his Roman imprisonment and the favorable response to his gospel proclamation among both the praetorian guards and the palace personnel

<sup>59</sup>Suetonius says that appeals from the provinces were delegated by Augustus to "consular men familiar with the administration of a particular province" (*Vita Augusti* 33).

<sup>60</sup>This possibility is suggested by Sordi, *Il Cristianesimo e Roma*, p. 72.

<sup>61</sup>Seneca railed against the Jews "as the most wicked race [*sceleratissime gentis*]," attacking especially their religious customs (*De superstitione*, cited by Augustine, *The City of God* 6.11).

<sup>62</sup>For a study of Roman literary anti-Semitism, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome, 1977), pp. 173-177; J. N. Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World* (Leiden, 1975).

can hardly be treated as isolated cases determined by the favorable disposition of local or single magistrates during Nero's time. Our survey of the period from Tiberius to approximately the first half of Nero's reign suggests the existence of a rather consistent policy of Roman toleration toward Christianity. Indeed, we have found that this policy was initiated by Tiberius and that it was implemented during the reigns of Claudius and Nero by such Roman-government officials as the following: the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus; the proconsul of Achaia, Junius Lucius Gallio; the magistrates and "Asiarchs" of Ephesus; the Roman tribune Claudius Lysias; the Palestinian procurators Felix, Festus, and Albinus; the praetorian prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus; and possibly Seneca himself.

#### 5. A.D. 62: *A Turning Point in Nero's Policy*

The year A.D. 62 marks the *terminus post quem* of the period of Neronian tolerance toward Christians. Outside Rome, in that year the Jerusalem high priest Ananus was severely censured and deposed for his role in the execution of some Christian leaders during the absence of the Roman procurator. In Rome itself, Paul was probably acquitted at this time by the Neronian government. But the end of the year 62 marks a decisive change in Nero's political policy. This change in Nero's policy is indicated and/or was influenced by several concomitant events: the mysterious death of the prefect Burrus,<sup>63</sup> Seneca's withdrawal from political life, Nero's repudiation of his lawful wife Octavia in order to marry his Jewish mistress Poppaea, and the emperor's break with the senatorial class.

The removal of the restraining influence of Stoic advisers, such as Seneca, enabled Nero to implement his irresponsible absolutistic policy, which resulted in the condemnation not only of Christians but also of influential Stoics, such as Barea Soranus and Thrasea Paetus. In the case of the latter, it is noteworthy that he was charged with refusing to offer "a sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor," living an "austere" (*tristes*) life in order to condemn the

<sup>63</sup>Tacitus, *Annals* 14.51, reports the rumor that the death of Burrus was caused by a "poisonous drug" administered him at Nero's instruction.

Emperor's "wantonness" (*lasciviam*), "deserting the public service," and treating the "forum and theatre and temple as a desert."<sup>64</sup> Basically the same charges were frequently leveled against Christians and were often summarized under the popular rubric of "hatred of the human race" (*odium generis humani*).<sup>65</sup> A similar situation occurred about thirty years later when Domitian, to implement his theocratic absolutism, acted first against influential Stoics, such as Junius Arulenus Rusticus and Herennius Senecio,<sup>66</sup> and then against Christian nobles, such as Acilius Glabrio, Flavius Clement, and the latter's wife Domitilla.<sup>67</sup>

It would appear, as argued by Sordi, that "in the first century every time the imperial autocracy imposed the oriental forms of the deification of the living emperor . . . it collided almost contemporaneously both with the old senatorial aristocracy, to whose traditional ideals stoicism had given an ideological justification and with the new religion [Christianity] which . . . had found sympathizers even among the praetorian and palatin."<sup>68</sup> Though Christianity and Stoicism differed profoundly in their religious conceptions, they were strikingly similar in their view of moral values, of civil rights and duties, and of the non-deity of the emperor.<sup>69</sup>

The Stoic idealism that influenced Roman emperors and administrators may provide a clue to the reasons for the early Roman tolerance toward Christianity and also for the Christian respect for the Roman government. Both shared similar civil and moral ideals. These common ideals may have influenced Roman officials, as we have seen, to reject the popular charges of sedition and sacrilegious acts leveled against Christians, since they understood that the Christian movement posed no threat to the security of the state. On their part, Christians refrained from attacking Roman policies. The apostolic writings urge submission to, and respect for, "governing authorities" as being "instituted by God" (Rom 13:1).

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 16.22, 28.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 15.44.

<sup>66</sup>See, e.g., Tacitus, *Agricola* 2.1.

<sup>67</sup>See Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 67.14.

<sup>68</sup>Sordi, *Il Cristianesimo e Roma*, p. 75.

<sup>69</sup>For a perceptive comparison of the similarities between Stoicism and Christianity, see Lightfoot, pp. 270-333.

The only anti-Roman Christian voice is to be found in the book of Revelation, which reflects the new political climate when the theocratic demands of the emperors (Nero, Domitian) collided frontally with the exclusive Christian acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ.

In the second century, when Christians faced the contempt not only of the masses but also of intellectuals and magistrates, they remembered and appealed to the early Roman tolerance toward Christianity.<sup>70</sup> Melito of Sardis, for example, in his apology addressed to Marcus Aurelius about A.D. 175, reminds the Emperor that his "ancestors also honored [Christianity] along with the other religions." He then argues that "a most convincing proof that our doctrine flourished for the good of an empire happily begun, is this—that there has no evil happened since Augustus' reign, but that, on the contrary, all things have been splendid and glorious, in accordance with the prayers of all. Nero and Domitian, alone, persuaded by certain calumniators, have wished to slander our doctrine, and *from them* it has come to pass that the falsehood has been handed down."<sup>71</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Melito's argument that Roman intolerance toward Christianity began with Nero—an argument repeated by other apologists<sup>72</sup>—can hardly be treated as a fabrication of second-century Christian apologetic. The sources investigated in this essay suggest that until the earlier part of Nero's reign (about A.D. 62), the Roman government facilitated the expansion of Christianity by restraining those anti-Christian hostile forces.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup>See, e.g., the apologies of Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Melito of Sardis, and Tertullian.

<sup>71</sup>Cited by Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 4.26.7, trans. in NPNF, 2d Series, 1: 206.

<sup>72</sup>See, e.g., Tertullian, *Apology* 5; and *Ad nationes* 7; also Sulpicius Severus, *Chronica* 2.29.3.

<sup>73</sup>The early Christian writers generally identify the restraining power mentioned by Paul in 2 Thess 2:7 as being the Roman Empire. Tertullian, e.g., writes, "For we know that a mighty shock impending over the whole earth—in fact, the very end of all things threatening dreadful woes—is only retarded by the continued existence of the Roman empire" (*Apology* 32, in ANF 3:42-43). See also Augustine, *City of God* 20.19.