

Early Christianity & the Roman Empire



And I saw the souls of those who had been executed because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. **Revelation 20:4**

Christianity in the Roman World

Imagination of Ancient Christianity in the Medieval Mind



Ten Persecutions Against the Christian Church?

Theory of Persecution by Later Christian Writers

Paulus Orosius c. A.D. 415

“The Egyptians carried on persecutions; the Romans also carried on persecutions. In the former case, ten refusals were sent to Moses; in the later ten edicts were directed against Christ.”

Orosius, *Hist.* VII.XXVII

1 54-68 A.D. Nero

6 235-238 A.D. Maximinus

2 81-96 A.D. Domitian

7 249-251 A.D. Decius

3 98-117 A.D. Trajan

8 253-260 A.D. Valerian

4 161-180 A.D. Marcus Aurelius

9 270-275 A.D. Aurelian

5 193-211 A.D. Septimius Severus

10 284-305 A.D. Diocletian

Jewish Persecution of the Christians

Acts 7:58–59

⁵⁸ Then they dragged him [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Acts 22:4–5

⁴ I persecuted this Way [i.e. early Christians] up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. From them I also received letters to the brothers in Damascus, and I went there in order to bind those who were there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Galatians 1:13

For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it;

Ἦκούσατε γὰρ τὴν ἐμὴν ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ, ὅτι καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν,

Stoning of James (the Brother of Jesus)

... when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and **brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ**, whose name was James, and some others, [or some of his companions]; and, when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.

Jewish Antiquities, 20.200

Christian and Early Roman Authorities

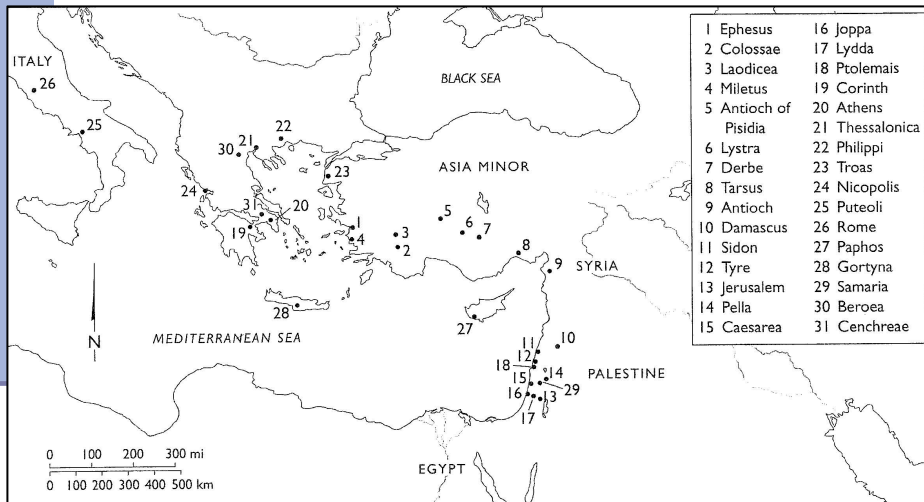
Acts 13:5–12

5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them. 6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. 7 *He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus*, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. 8 But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now listen-- the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. 12 When the *proconsul saw what had happened*, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.

Acts 18:12–17

¹² *But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia*, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. ¹³ They said, "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law." ¹⁴ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; ¹⁵ but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters." ¹⁶ And he dismissed them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But *Gallio paid no attention to any of these things*.

Christian Communities Before A.D. 70





Revelation 17:4–6, 9

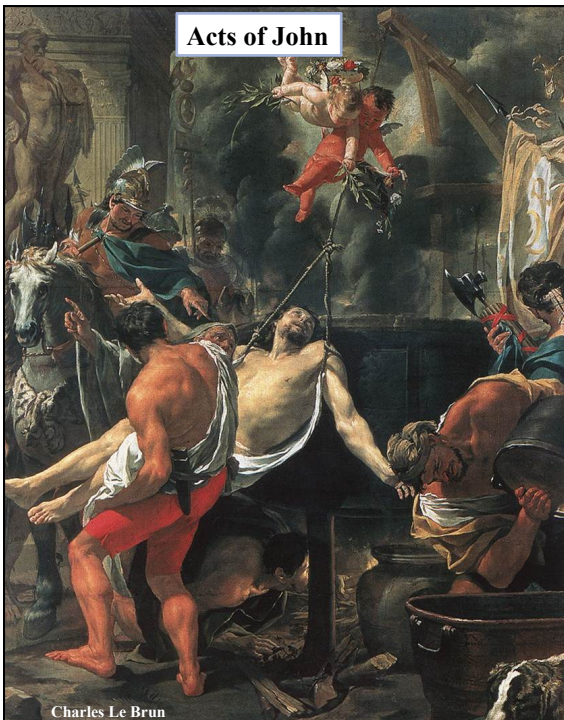
⁴ The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication;

⁵ and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: “**Babylon the great**, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations.” And I saw the woman *drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus*: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration. . . .

⁹ “This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated:



Rome known as *urbs septicollis* (“city of seven hills”)



Acts of John

Next after Nero, **Domitian** persecuted the Christians, and under him the apostle **John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where, as they say, he saw in vision the Apocalypse**, which Irenaeus explains. . . Domitian ordered the descendants of David to be put to death that no one of Jewish royalty might be left. Bruttius writes that many Christians suffered martyrdom under Domitian.

Also Flavia Domitilla, the daughter of the sister of the consul Flavius Clemens, escaped to the Island of Pontia, since she confessed that she was a Christian.

Jer. Ab.Abr. CCXVIII. XIV, XVI

This story presupposes a date sometime in the early AD 90s

Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the **number of the beast**: for it **is the number of a man**; and his number **is Six hundred threescore and six**.

Revelation 13:18

Isopsephy (Grk.)

A B Γ Δ Ε Σ Ζ Η Θ Ι
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Greek form

Neron Caesar (נרון קסר)

= 666

Gematria (Heb.)

Letter	Value	Letter	Value	Letter	Value
א	1	י	10	ק	100
ב	2	כ	20	ר	200
ג	3	ל	30	ש	300
ד	4	מ	40	ת	400
ה	5	נ	50	ך	500
ו	6	ס	60	ם	600
ז	7	ע	70	ן	700
ח	8	פ	80	ף	800
ט	9	צ	90	ץ	900

Latin form

Nero Caesar (נרו קסר)

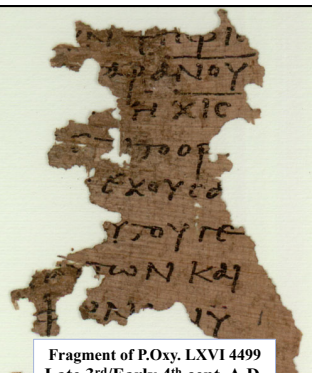
=616

X = 600

I = 10

Σ = 6

= 616



Fragment of P.Oxy. LXVI 4499
Late 3rd/Early 4th cent. A.D.

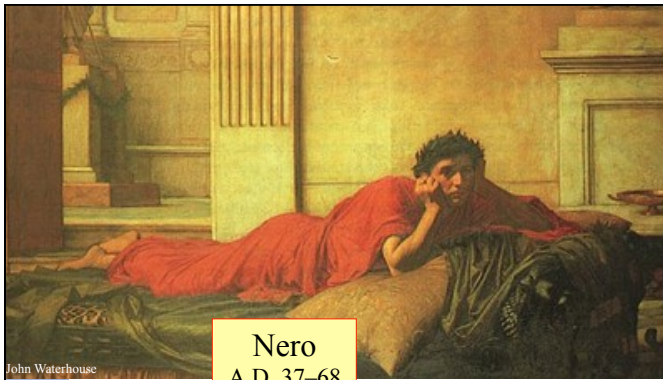
Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.29.2, 30.1

And there is therefore in this beast, when he comes, a recapitulation made of all sorts of iniquity and of every deceit, in order that all apostate power, flowing into and being shut up in him, may be sent into the furnace of fire.

Fittingly, therefore, shall his name possess the number six hundred and sixty-six, since he sums up in his own person all the commixture of

wickedness which took place previous to the deluge . . . Such, then, being the state of the case, and this number being found in all the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John

bearing their testimony [to it]; while reason also leads us to conclude that the number of the name of the beast, [if reckoned] according to the Greek mode of calculation by the [value of] the letters contained in it, will amount to six hundred and sixty and six; that is, the number of tens shall be equal to that of the hundreds, and the number of hundreds equal to that of the units (for that number which [expresses] the digit six being adhered to throughout, indicates the recapitulations of that apostasy, taken in its full extent, which occurred at the beginning, during the intermediate periods, and which shall take place at the end),—I do not know how it is that some have erred following the ordinary mode of speech, and have vitiated the middle number in the name, deducting the amount of fifty from it, so that instead of six decades they will have it that there is but one. [I am inclined to think that this occurred through the fault of the copyists, as is wont to happen, since numbers also are expressed by letters; so that the Greek letter which expresses the number sixty was easily expanded into the letter Iota of the Greeks.



John Waterhouse

Nero
A.D. 37–68
Reign 54–68



Ancient graffito portrait of Nero found at the *Domus Tiberiana*.

“A calculation new: Nero his mother slew.”
νεόψηφον· Νέρων ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε.
Suetonius, *Nero* 39.2

Νερων = 1005

$\nu = 50 + \epsilon = 5 + \rho = 100$ $\omega = 800 + \nu = 50$

$\text{ἰδίαν} = 75 + \text{μητέρα} = 454 + \text{ἀπέκτεινε} = 476 = \mathbf{1005}$

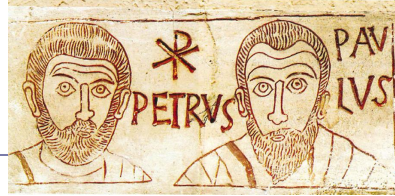
Nero



“When the government of Nero was now firmly established, he began to plunge into unholy pursuits, and armed himself even against the religion of the God of the universe. . . But with all these things this particular one in the catalogue of his crimes was still wanting, that he was the first of the emperors who showed himself an enemy of the divine religion. . . Thus publicly announcing himself as the first among God’s chief enemies, he was led on to slaughter the apostles. It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified.”

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25

Peter & Paul



1 Clement 5

2 Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most righteous pillars were persecuted and fought to the death. 3 Let us set before our eyes the good apostles. 4 There was **Peter**, who because of unrighteous jealousy endured not one or two but many trials, and **thus having given his testimony went to his appointed place of glory**. 5 Because of jealousy and strife **Paul** showed the way to the prize for patient endurance. 6 After he had been seven times in chains, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, and had preached in the east and in the west, he won the genuine glory for his faith, 7 having taught righteousness to the whole world and having reached the farthest limits of the west. **Finally, when he had given his testimony before the rulers, he thus departed from the world and went to the holy place, having become an outstanding example of patient endurance.**

Fire of Rome

July 18–23, A.D. 64



Fire in Rome & the Christians

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a Single man.

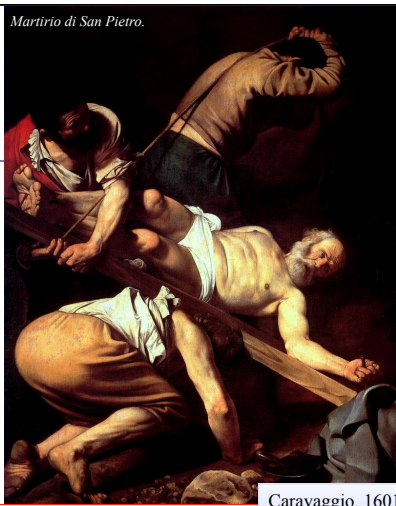
Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44



Henryk Siemiradzki, 1876

... many [Christians] were crucified or given to flames, still others were used as a nightly illumination after the daylight had faded. Nero had offered his gardens for this spectacle, and was giving games fit for the circus, where in the dress of a charioteer he mingled with the people or else stood on high in his chariot.

Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44

1 Peter 1:1, 5:13 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout . . . <i>The church that is at Babylon</i>, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son.	 Martirio di San Pietro. Caravaggio, 1601
1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the <i>fiery ordeal</i> that is taking place among you to test you (τῇ ἐν ὑμῖν πυρώσει πρὸς πειρασμὸν ὑμῖν γινομένη), as though something strange were happening to you.	
1 Peter 4:16 Yet if any man <i>suffer as a Christian</i> (εἰ δὲ ὡς Χριστιανός), let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.	
Tacitus Ann. 14.44 First, then, <i>the confessed members of the sect were arrested</i> (Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur) next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race	John 21:18–19 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

Domitian and the Christians: An Alleged Story?



The same Domitian gave orders for the execution of those of the family of David and an ancient story goes that some heretics accused the grandsons of Judas (who is said to have been the brother, according to the flesh, of the Saviour) saying that they were of the family of David and related to the Christ himself. Hegesippus relates this exactly as follows: “Now there still survived of the family of the Lord grandsons of Judas, who was said to have been his brother according to the flesh, and they were delated as being of the family of David. These the officer brought to Domitian Caesar, for, like Herod, he was afraid of the coming of the Christ. He asked them if they were of the house of David and they admitted it. Then he asked them how much property they had, or how much money they controlled, and they said that all they possessed was nine thousand denarii between them, the half belonging to each, and they stated that they did not possess this in money but that it was the valuation of only thirty-nine plethra of ground on which they paid taxes and lived on it by their own work.” They then showed him their hands, adducing as testimony of their labour the hardness of their bodies, and the tough skin which had been embossed on their hands from their incessant work. They were asked concerning the Christ and his kingdom, its nature, origin, and time of appearance, and explained that it was neither of the world nor earthly, but heavenly and angelic, and it would be at the end of the world, when he would come in glory to judge the living and the dead and to reward every man according to his deeds. At this Domitian did not condemn them at all, but despised them as simple folk, released them, and decreed an end to the persecution against the church.

Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.19–20

Domitian and the Christians: An Alleged Story?



Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 12.2

The Jewish tax was exacted most assiduously. To the *Fiscus Judaicus* were reported those who lived as Jews without declaring this, or who by concealing their origin did not pay the tribute imposed on their people. I recall when I was a young man being present when an old man in his nineties was examined by a procurator and very large number of advisors to see whether he was circumcised.

Dio Cassius 67.14

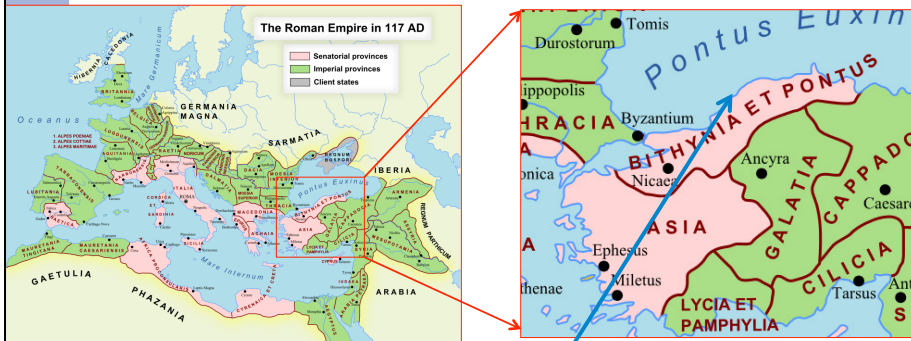
During this period the road leading to Puteoli was paved with stones. And the same year Domitian slew among others *Flavius Clemens the consul* [A.D. 95], though he was a cousin and had as wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor. *The complaint brought against them both was that of atheism, under which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned.* Some of these were killed and the remainder were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria; but Glabrio, colleague of Trajan in the consulship, after being accused of various stock charges, and also of fighting with wild beasts, suffered death.

Pliny and Trajan



Trajan
98–117

Pliny and Trajan



- In A.D. 111 Pliny (“the Younger”) was appointed governor of Bithynia Pontus by Trajan
- The Province had been in decline and Pliny was charged with restoring order and prosperity to the province.
- Pliny spent his first while in the province touring and collecting information
- It was not until Pliny traveled to **Amastris** in the eastern part of the province in the late summer or early autumn of 112 CE that he first mentions encountering Christians.

Pliny *Ep. 10.96*

PLINY TO THE EMPEROR TRAJAN

IT is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance.

I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature or 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.

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Pliny *Ep.* 10.96

Group #1

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.

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- *If Roman citizens felt they would not get a fair trial, or if it was a capital crime, they could “appeal” to be heard by Caesar himself.*

“Provoco” = “I appeal” (Latin)



Pliny *Ep.* 10.96

Group #2

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. Among 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 images of the god), and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do.

Pliny *Ep.* 10.96

Group #3

Others, whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and denied it; they said 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 among themselves in honor 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 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.

Pliny *Ep.* 10.96

Group #3

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.

Pliny *Ep.* 10.97

Trajan's Response

You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. 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.

And yet we find it is forbidden even to hunt us down. For when Plinius Secundus was governing his province and had condemned some Christians and driven others from their steadfastness, and still the sheer numbers concerned worried him as to what he ought to do thereafter, he consulted the Emperor Trajan. He asserted that, apart from an obstinacy that refused to sacrifice, he had learnt nothing about the Christian mysteries—nothing beyond meetings before dawn to sing to Christ and to God, and to band themselves together in discipline, forbidding murder, adultery, dishonesty, treachery, and the other crimes. Trajan replied in a rescript that men of this kind were not to be sought out, but if they were brought before Pliny they must be punished. What a decision, how inevitably entangled! He says they must not be sought out, implying they are innocent; and he orders them to be punished, implying they are guilty. He spares them and rages against them, he pretends not to see and punishes. Why cheat yourself with your judgment? If you condemn them, why not hunt them down?

Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.6–8

The persecution which at that time was extended against us in many places was so great that Plinius Secundus, one of the most distinguished governors, was disturbed at the number of the martyrs, and reported to the Emperor the number of those being put to death for the faith, and in the same document mentioned that he understood them to do nothing wicked or illegal except that they rose at dawn to sing to Christ as though a God, and that they themselves forbade adultery, murder and similar terrible crimes, and that they did everything in obedience to the law. In answer to this Trajan issued a decree to the effect that the tribe of Christians should not be sought for but punished when it was met with. By this means the imminent threat of persecution was extinguished to some extent, but none the less opportunities remained to those who wished to harm us. Sometimes the populace, sometimes even the local authorities contrived plots against us, so that with no open persecution partial attacks broke out in various provinces and many of the faithful endured martyrdom in various ways.

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.33.1–2

Rescript of Minucius Fundanus

HADRIAN TO MINUCIUS FUNDANUS¹

I have received the letter addressed to me by your predecessor Serenius Granianus,² a most honorable man; and I am unwilling to pass over this report in silence, lest innocent persons be disturbed and occasions be given to the informers to practice villainy. Accordingly, if the provincials will so far support this petition of theirs as to accuse the Christians in some court of law, I do not forbid them from doing so. But I will not allow them to make use of mere requests and outcries. For it is far more just, if anyone desires to bring an accusation, that you give judgment upon it. If therefore, anyone brings an accusation, and gives proof that the said persons do anything contrary to the laws, you will punish them in proportion to the offenses. And this, by Hercules, you must give special heed to, that if anyone through mere calumny bring an accusation against any of these persons, you will punish him with more severe penalties in proportion to his offense.

¹ C. Minucius Fundanus was consul in 107 C.E. and proconsul of Asia c. 125 C.E.

² Q. Licinius Serenius Granianus was consul in 106 C.E. and proconsul of Asia C. 123–124 C.E.

Effectively reconfirms what Trajan had already stated to Pliny