

## **Appendix for study 7: Revelation Chapter 6**

### **Persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire**

#### ***Introduction***

This material is provided to help us understand the situation faced by the Christians in the first century, particularly in Asia Minor (although the written material covers persecution over a broader area of the Roman Empire).

The material is drawn from Schaff<sup>1</sup>, and from Gibbon<sup>2</sup>. The first section of these notes is my (very abbreviated) summary & précis of the material. You might like to just read the *short version* or if you want further material, then read the entire notes that follow. The notes are an extract from Schaff, and further material can be found from those sources.

#### ***The cause of the persecution***

Gibbon provides some background to *why* the Romans persecuted the Christians.

The polytheistic Romans regarded the Christians as a cult (even as “atheists” because they did not believe in the Roman gods), and they had challenged and attacked the religious constitution of the Empire. The Romans did not understand the Christians, nor the nature of the Christian religion. They abhorred the fact that the Christians did not have *any regard* for the gods who had instituted the framework of the Roman society.

The Romans had *no regard* for spiritual things, and only lived for the temporal world, and could not understand why the Christians did not adopt or accept the same view. As Christianity began to invade all areas of the Roman world, the Christians came on a collision course with the leaders of the Roman world.

As some of the members of the families of the Roman leaders became Christians, the hatred against the Christians increased. At first, the “weird sect” of the Christians became convenient to blame for the fire of Rome (under Nero), but then other factors came into play as Nero regarded cruelty as a sport, and the Christians as being the prime targets to accomplish it.

The unwavering resolve of the Christians not to compromise with the Roman society made them deserving of punishment in the eyes of the Romans. The Jews increased their hatred for the Christians, since the Christians would pronounce the end of the Jewish religion, and espouse its replacement with Christianity. Consequently, the Jews used whatever opportunities that might come along to stir up hatred by the Romans towards the Christians.

#### ***First Wave of Persecution: Under Nero***

The leaders of the Christians (Paul and Peter) were rounded up and brought to Rome under the pretense of responsibility for the fire of Rome. Tradition has them both put to death around the same time in Rome, and only a month before Nero himself died.

The persecution extended from the “leaders” to the wider community of Christians who died in torments embittered by insult and derision. Some were nailed on crosses; others sewn up in the skins of wild beasts, and exposed to the fury of dogs; others again, smeared over with

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<sup>1</sup> Schaff, Philip: “History of the Christian Church – Volume 2 Ante-Nicene Christianity AD100-325” Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids Michigan. ISBN 0-8028-8048-7

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, Edward: “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire – Volume 2 Constantine and the Christian Empire” The Folio Society, London

combustible materials, were used as torches to illuminate the darkness of the night, and the gardens of Nero, which was accompanied with a horse-race and honored with the presence of the emperor, who mingled with the populace in the dress and attitude of a charioteer.

Natural calamities were blamed on the Christians invoking divine justice, and the general populace denounced the Christians as the enemies of gods and men, doomed them to the severest tortures, and required with irresistible vehemence that they should be instantly apprehended and cast to the lions.

### ***General Comments on Persecution***

A Christian accused of persecution essentially faced four alternatives: Firstly, he could flee and hide in some obscure place where time and circumstances might cause the charges to be overlooked; Secondly, he could bribe the magistrate and buy a certificate that falsely said he was innocent and had made sacrifices to the Roman deities; Thirdly, he could publicly denounce the Christian faith and demonstrate his innocence by sacrificing to the Roman gods; or finally he could maintain his Christian faith, deny the pagan sacrifices, and suffer the penalty – most likely death – as a martyr.

The celebrated number of ten persecutions has been determined by the ecclesiastical writers of the fifth century, who possessed a more distinct view of the prosperous or adverse fortunes of the church, from the age of Nero to that of Diocletian. The ingenious parallels of the ten plagues of Egypt, and of the ten horns of the Apocalypse, first suggested this calculation to their minds

### ***Second Wave of Persecution: Domitian & Trajan (81 – 117)***

The persecution at this time was around the time that John wrote Revelation. It was *because of* his preaching of the gospel that he was exiled to Patmos (1:9), and he felt the same sort of tribulation that was being faced by the seven churches.

### ***Third Wave of Persecution: Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Septimus Severus and Caracalla (161 – 217)***

Marcus Aurelius was a wise leader of the Roman Empire, and under his leadership the empire prospered. However, he persecuted Christians, and whilst the empire prospered, the Christians suffered. By a strange twist of fate, the wise leader was replaced by the cruel Commodus, who brought much pain and suffering to the people of the empire. However, some members of his household professed to be Christians (although their deeds denied them), and initially the Christians received protection.

During the reign of Septimus Severus, Christianity had begun to rise, and was again seen as a threat to the Roman culture. Severus issued an edict that was intended to stop the spread of Christianity, but could not be implemented without persecution of all Christians. Behind the edict lay the indulgent spirit of Rome, the polytheistic religious culture, and intolerance of anything that challenged it.

### ***A Renewal of Persecution under Maximinus I, Decius, Valerian and Gallienus (235- 268)***

Although Maximinus was a cruel leader, he was moderated by Philip, one of his advisors, and offered protection to the Christians. However when Philip was replaced by a new administration under Decius, the persecution towards Christians became more intense than at any period since Domitian (AD 97), 140 years earlier.

Decius was motivated by resentment against the accomplishments of his predecessor, and went about to restore the Roman customs and culture. The bishops of the most considerable cities were removed by exile or death. It was the opinion of the Christians, that the emperor would more patiently endure a competitor for Emperor, than endure a bishop in the capital.

Whilst Valerian began with a period of tolerance towards the Christians, in the last three and a half years he adopted the severity, of his predecessor Decius.

Gallienus restored peace to the church, and the Christians obtained a period of peace that was to last for a period of forty years.

### ***Worst Period of Persecution: Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, Maximinus II (284-313)***

Diocletian was a laid back leader, who fundamentally espoused the religious culture of the empire. However, under the influence of those about him, gave liberty to the Christians. The Christian religion grew and flourished, however prosperity had relaxed the nerves of discipline. Fraud, envy, and malice prevailed in every congregation. The rapid rise of Christianity stirred up the polytheists, and invented new modes of pagan worship and rites and philosophies.

Although Diocletian wanted to continue with toleration of Christianity, two co-rulers Maximian and Galerius had the strongest aversion to Christianity, and they exercised a secret persecution against the Christians. Some civil revolt by Christian soldiers hardened the heart of the Galerius against all soldiers who professed Christianity, and dismissed them.

Diocletian was influenced by Galerius to begin a new period of persecution against the Christians, fearing that the sect would rise up militarily against Rome, and attempted to wipe it out before it acquired any military power.

On February 23<sup>rd</sup> 303, a date which coincided with the Roman festival of Terminalia, began to set bounds for the progress of Christianity with a raid on the principal church at Nicomedia, and burnt the volumes of the Holy Scriptures, and razed the church to the ground. The following day, an edict of persecution was published, that all churches (ie church buildings) in all provinces of the empire should be demolished to their foundations. Beyond this, an edict of the punishment of death was issued for all who presume to hold secret meetings for the purposes of religious worship. The bishops and presbyters were commanded to deliver all of their sacred books to the magistrates who were commanded to burn them in a public place. All property of the church was also immediately confiscated. Intolerable hardships were placed on any individuals who still rejected the religion of nature, of Rome, and of their ancestors. Noble persons were declared incapable of holding any honors or employments; slaves were forever deprived of the hopes of freedom, and the whole body of the people were put out of the protection of the law. The judges were authorized to hear and to determine every action that was brought against a Christian. But the Christians were not permitted to complain of any injury which they themselves had suffered; and thus those unfortunate sectaries were exposed to the severity, while they were excluded from the benefits, of public justice.

The edict had scarcely been exhibited to the public view before it was torn down by the hands of a Christian, who expressed his contempt as well as abhorrence for such impious and tyrannical governors. His offence amounted to treason, and deserved death. He was burnt, or rather roasted, by a slow fire; and his executioners, zealous to revenge the personal insult which had been offered to the emperors, exhausted every refinement of cruelty. The Christians, though they confessed that his conduct had not been strictly conformable to the laws of prudence, admired the divine fervor of his zeal.

The edict of persecution was quickly spread to the whole empire. One African bishop refused to comply with the edict, and was beheaded. This precedent, and perhaps some Imperial rescript, which was issued in consequence of it, appeared to authorize the governors of provinces, in punishing with death the refusal of the Christians to deliver up their sacred books.

The resentment, or the fears, of Diocletian, at length transported him beyond the bounds of moderation, which he had hitherto preserved, and he declared, in a series of cruel edicts, his intention of abolishing the Christian name. By the first of these edicts, the governors of the provinces were directed to apprehend all persons of the ecclesiastical order; and the prisons, destined for the vilest criminals, were soon filled with a multitude of bishops, presbyters, deacons, readers, and exorcists. By a second edict, the magistrates were commanded to employ every method of severity, which might reclaim them from their odious superstition, and oblige them to return to the established worship of the gods. This rigorous order was extended, by a subsequent edict, to the whole body of Christians, who were exposed to a violent and general persecution. Instead of those salutary restraints, which had required the direct and solemn testimony of an accuser, it became the duty as well as the interest of the Imperial officers to discover, to pursue, and to torment the most obnoxious among the faithful. Heavy penalties were denounced against all who should presume to save a prescribed sectary from the just indignation of the gods, and of the emperors.

The rigorous edicts of Diocletian were strictly and cheerfully executed by his associate Maximian, who had long hated the Christians, and who delighted in acts of blood and violence. In the autumn of the first year of the persecution, the two emperors met at Rome to celebrate their triumph.

<sup>3</sup>Finally, while the Christian religion has at all times suffered more or less persecution, bloody or unbloody, from the ungodly world, and always had its witnesses ready for any sacrifice; yet at no period since the first three centuries was the whole church denied the right of a peaceful legal existence, and the profession of Christianity itself universally declared and punished as a political crime. Before Constantine the Christians were a helpless and proscribed minority in an essentially heathen world, and under a heathen government. Then they died not simply for particular doctrines, but for the facts of Christianity. Then it was a conflict, not for a denomination or sect, but for Christianity itself. The importance of ancient martyrdom does not rest so much on the number of victims and the cruelty of their sufferings as on the great antithesis and the ultimate result in saving the Christian religion for all time to come. Hence the first three centuries are the classical period of heathen persecution and of Christian martyrdom. The martyrs and confessors of the ante-Nicene age suffered for the common cause of all Christian denominations and sects, and hence are justly held in reverence and gratitude by all.

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<sup>3</sup> Schaff, p. 80

## Schaff: Overview of the Persecution (abridged)

### § 17. Trajan. a.d. 98–117—Christianity Forbidden—Martyrdom of Symeon of Jerusalem, and Ignatius of Antioch.

Trajan, one of the best and most praiseworthy emperors, honored as the "father of his country," but, like his friends, Tacitus and Pliny, wholly ignorant of the nature of Christianity, was the first to pronounce it in form a proscribed religion, as it had been all along in fact. He revived the rigid laws against all secret societies, and the provincial officers applied them to the Christians, on account of their frequent meetings for worship. His decision regulated the governmental treatment of the Christians for more than a century. It is embodied in his correspondence with the younger Pliny, who was governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor from 109 to 111.

Pliny came in official contact with the Christians. He himself saw in that religion only a "depraved and immoderate superstition," and could hardly account for its popularity. He reported to the emperor that this superstition was constantly spreading, not only in the cities, but also in the villages of Asia Minor, and captivated people of every age, rank, and sex, so that the temples were almost forsaken, and the sacrificial victims found no sale. To stop this progress, he condemned many Christians to death, and sent others, who were Roman citizens, to the imperial tribunal. But he requested of the emperor further instructions, whether, in these efforts, he should have respect to age; whether he should treat the mere bearing of the Christian name as a crime, if there were no other offence.

To these inquiries Trajan replied: "You have adopted the right course, my friend, with regard to the Christians; for no universal rule, to be applied to all cases, can be laid down in this matter. They should not be searched for; but when accused and convicted, they should be punished; yet if any one denies that he has been a Christian, and proves it by action, namely, by worshipping our gods, he is to be pardoned upon his repentance, even though suspicion may still cleave to him from his antecedents. But anonymous accusations must not be admitted in any criminal process; it sets a bad example, and is contrary to our age" (i.e. to the spirit of Trajan's government).

This decision was much milder than might have been expected from a heathen emperor of the old Roman stamp. Tertullian charges it with self-contradiction, as both cruel and lenient, forbidding the search for Christians and yet commanding their punishment, thus declaring them innocent and guilty at the same time. But the emperor evidently proceeded on political principles, and thought that a transient and contagious enthusiasm, as Christianity in his judgment was, could be suppressed sooner by leaving it unnoticed, than by openly assailing it. He wished to ignore it as much as possible. But every day it forced itself more and more upon public attention, as it spread with the irresistible power of truth.

This rescript might give occasion, according to the sentiment of governors, for extreme severity towards Christianity as a secret union and a *religio illicita*. Even the humane Pliny tells us that he applied the rack to tender women. Syria and Palestine suffered heavy persecutions in this reign.

Symeon, bishop of Jerusalem, and, like his predecessor James, a kinsman of Jesus, was accused by fanatical Jews, and crucified a.d. 107, at the age of a hundred and twenty years.

In the same year (or probably between 110 and 116) the distinguished bishop Ignatius of Antioch was condemned to death, transported to Rome, and thrown before wild beasts in the Colosseum. The story of his martyrdom has no doubt been much embellished, but it must have some foundation in fact, and is characteristic of the legendary martyrology of the ancient church.

Our knowledge of Ignatius is derived from his disputed epistles, and a few short notices by Irenaeus and Origen. He was, according to tradition, a pupil of the Apostle John. The emperor Trajan, in 107, came to Antioch, and there threatened with persecution all who refused to

sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius was tried for this offence, and proudly confessed himself a "Theophorus" ("bearer of God") because, as he said, he had Christ within his breast. Trajan condemned him to be thrown to the lions at Rome. The sentence was executed with all haste. Ignatius was immediately bound in chains, and taken over land and sea, accompanied by ten soldiers, whom he denominated his "leopards," from Antioch to Seleucia, to Smyrna, where he met Polycarp, and whence he wrote to the churches, particularly to that in Rome; to Troas, to Neapolis, through Macedonia to Epirus, and so over the Adriatic to Rome. He was received by the Christians there with every manifestation of respect, but would not allow them to avert or even to delay his martyrdom. It was on the 20th day of December, 107, that he was thrown into the amphitheater: immediately the wild beasts fell upon him, and soon naught remained of his body but a few bones, which were carefully conveyed to Antioch as an inestimable treasure. The faithful friends who had accompanied him from home dreamed that night that they saw him; some that he was standing by Christ, dropping with sweat as if he had just come from his great labor. Comforted by these dreams they returned with the relics to Antioch.

#### **§ 18. Hadrian. a.d. 117–138.**

Hadrian, of Spanish descent, a relative of Trajan, and adopted by him on his death-bed, was a man of brilliant talents and careful education, a scholar an artist, a legislator and administrator, and altogether one of the ablest among the Roman emperors, but of very doubtful morality, governed by changing moods, attracted in opposite directions, and at last lost in self-contradictions and utter disgust of life. His mausoleum (Moles Hadriani) still adorns, as the castle of Sant' Angelo, the bridge of the Tiber in Rome. He is represented both as a friend and foe of the church. He was devoted to the religion of the state, bitterly opposed to Judaism, indifferent to Christianity, from ignorance of it. He insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion. He is said to have directed the Asiatic proconsul to check the popular fury against the Christians, and to punish only those who should be, by an orderly judicial process, convicted of transgression of the laws. But he doubtless regarded mere profession of Christianity itself such a transgression.

The Christian apologies, which took their rise under this emperor, indicate a very bitter public sentiment against the Christians, and a critical condition of the church. The least encouragement from Hadrian would have brought on a bloody persecution. Quadratus and Aristides addressed their pleas for their fellow-Christians to him, we do not know with what effect.

#### **§ 19 Antoninus Pius. a.d. 137–161. The Martyrdom of Polycarp.**

Antoninus Pius protected the Christians from the tumultuous violence which broke out against them on account of the frequent public calamities. But the edict ascribed to him, addressed to the deputies of the Asiatic cities, testifying to the innocence of the Christians, and holding them up to the heathen as models of fidelity and zeal in the worship of God, could hardly have come from an emperor, who bore the honorable title of Pius for his conscientious adherence to the religion of his fathers; and in any case he could not have controlled the conduct of the provincial governors and the fury of the people against an illegal religion.

The persecution of the church at Smyrna and the martyrdom of its venerable bishop took place under Antoninus in 155, when Staius Quadratus was proconsul in Asia Minor. Polycarp was a personal friend and pupil of the Apostle John, and chief presbyter of the church at Smyrna, where a plain stone monument still marks his grave. He was the teacher of Irenaeus of Lyons, and thus the connecting link between the apostolic and post-apostolic ages. As he died 155 at an age of eighty-six years or more, he must have been born a.d. 69, a year before the destruction of Jerusalem, and may have enjoyed the friendship of St. John for twenty years or more. This gives additional weight to his testimony concerning apostolic traditions and writings. We have from him a beautiful epistle which echoes the apostolic teaching.

Polycarp steadfastly refused before the proconsul to deny his King and Saviour, whom he had served six and eighty years, and from whom he had experienced nothing but love and mercy. He joyfully went up to the stake, and amidst the flames praised God for having deemed him worthy "to be numbered among his martyrs, to drink the cup of Christ's sufferings, unto the eternal resurrection of the soul and the body in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit." The slightly legendary account in the letter of the church of Smyrna states, that the flames avoided the body of the saint, leaving it unharmed, like gold tried in the fire; also the Christian bystanders insisted, that they perceived a sweet odor, as of incense. Then the executioner thrust his sword into the body, and the stream of blood at once extinguished the flame. The corpse was burned after the Roman custom, but the bones were preserved by the church, and held more precious than gold and diamonds. The death of this last witness of the apostolic age checked the fury of the populace, and the proconsul suspended the persecution.

## **§ 20. Persecutions under Marcus Aurelius. a.d. 161–180.**

Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher on the throne, was a well-educated, just, kind, and amiable emperor, and reached the old Roman ideal of self-reliant Stoic virtue, but for this very reason he had no sympathy with Christianity, and probably regarded it as an absurd and fanatical superstition. He had no room in his cosmopolitan philanthropy for the purest and most innocent of his subjects, many of whom served in his own army. He was flooded with apologies of Melito, Miltiades, Athenagoras in behalf of the persecuted Christians, but turned a deaf ear to them. Only once, in his *Meditations*, does he allude to them, and then with scorn, tracing their noble enthusiasm for martyrdom to "sheer obstinacy" and love for theatrical display. His excuse is ignorance, probably not reading a line of the New Testament, nor the apologies addressed to him.

He considered the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul, with its moral consequences, as vicious and dangerous to the welfare of the state. A law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians. At all events his reign was a stormy time for the church, although the persecutions cannot be directly traced to him. The law of Trajan was sufficient to justify the severest measures against the followers of the "forbidden" religion.

About the year 170 the apologist Melito wrote: "The race of the worshippers of God in Asia is now persecuted by new edicts as it never has been heretofore; shameless, greedy sycophants, finding occasion in the edicts, now plunder the innocent day and night." The empire was visited at that time by a number of conflagrations, a destructive flood of the Tiber, an earthquake, insurrections, and particularly a pestilence, which spread from Ethiopia to Gaul. This gave rise to bloody persecutions, in which government and people united against the enemies of the gods and the supposed authors of these misfortunes. Celsus expressed his joy that "the demon" [of the Christians] was "not only reviled, but banished from every land and sea," and saw in this judgment the fulfilment of the oracle: "the mills of the gods grind late." But at the same time these persecutions, and the simultaneous literary assaults on Christianity by Celsus and Lucian, show that the new religion was constantly gaining importance in the empire.

In 177, the churches of Lyons and Vienne, in the South of France, underwent a severe trial. Heathen slaves were forced by the rack to declare, that their Christian masters practised all the unnatural vices which rumor charged them with; and this was made to justify the exquisite tortures to which the Christians were subjected. But the sufferers, "strengthened by the fountain of living water from the heart of Christ," displayed extraordinary faith and steadfastness, and felt, that "nothing can be fearful, where the love of the Father is, nothing painful, where shines the glory of Christ."

The most distinguished victims of this Gallic persecution were the bishop Pothinus, who, at the age of ninety years, and just recovered from a sickness, was subjected to all sorts of abuse, and

then thrown into a dismal dungeon, where he died in two days; the virgin Blandina, a slave, who showed almost superhuman strength and constancy under the most cruel tortures, and was at last thrown to a wild beast in a net; Ponticus, a boy of fifteen years, who could be deterred by no sort of cruelty from confessing his Saviour. The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets, were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil. At last the people grew weary of slaughter, and a considerable number of Christians survived. The martyrs of Lyons distinguished themselves by true humility, disclaiming in their prison that title of honor, as due only, they said, to the faithful and true witness, the Firstborn from the dead, the Prince of life (Rev. 1:5), and to those of his followers who had already sealed their fidelity to Christ with their blood.

About the same time a persecution of less extent appears to have visited Autun (Augustodunum) near Lyons. Symphorinus, a young man of good family, having refused to fall down before the image of Cybele, was condemned to be beheaded. On his way to the place of execution his own mother called to him: "My son, be firm and fear not that death, which so surely leads to life. Look to Him who reigns in heaven. To-day is thy earthly life not taken from thee, but transferred by a blessed exchange into the life of heaven."

Of isolated cases of martyrdom in this reign, we notice that of Justin Martyr, at Rome, in the year 166. His death is traced to the machinations of Crescens, a Cynic philosopher.

Marcus Aurelius was succeeded by his cruel and contemptible son, Commodus (180–192), who wallowed in the mire of every sensual debauchery, and displayed at the same time like Nero the most ridiculous vanity as dancer and singer, and in the character of buffoon; but he was made to favor the Christians by the influence of a concubine, Marcia, and accordingly did not disturb them. Yet under his reign a Roman senator, Apollonius, was put to death for his faith.

## **§ 21. Condition of the Church from Septimius Severus to Philip the Arabian. a.d. 193–249.**

With Septimius Severus (193–211), who was of Punic descent and had a Syrian wife, a line of emperors (Caracalla, Heliogabalus, Alexander Severus) came to the throne, who were rather Oriental than Roman in their spirit, and were therefore far less concerned than the Antonines to maintain the old state religion. Yet towards the close of the second century there was no lack of local persecutions; and Clement of Alexandria wrote of those times: "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."

In the beginning of the third century (202) Septimius Severus, turned perhaps by Montanistic excesses, enacted a rigid law against the further spread both of Christianity and of Judaism. This occasioned violent persecutions in Egypt and North Africa.

In Alexandria, in consequence of this law, Leonides, father of the renowned Origen, was beheaded. Potamiaena, a virgin of rare beauty of body and spirit, was threatened by beastly passion with treatment worse than death, and, after cruel tortures, slowly burned with her mother in boiling pitch. One of the executioners, Basilides, smitten with sympathy, shielded them somewhat from abuse, and soon after their death embraced Christianity, and was beheaded. He declared that Potamiaena had appeared to him in the night, interceded with Christ for him, and set upon his head the martyr's crown.

In Carthage some catechumens, three young men and two young women, probably of the sect of the Montanists, showed remarkable steadfastness and fidelity in the dungeon and at the place of execution. Perpetua, a young woman of noble birth, resisting, not without a violent struggle, both the entreaties of her aged heathen father and the appeal of her helpless babe upon her breast, sacrificed the deep and tender feelings of a daughter and a mother to the Lord who died for her. Felicitas, a slave, when delivered of a child in the same dungeon, answered the jailor, who reminded her of the still keener pains of martyrdom: "Now I suffer, what I suffer; but then another will suffer for me, because I shall suffer for him." All remaining firm, they were cast to

wild beasts at the next public festival, having first interchanged the parting kiss in hope of a speedy reunion in heaven.

The same state of things continued through the first years of Caracalla (211–217), though this gloomy misanthrope passed no laws against the Christians.

Alexander Severus (222–235) was addicted to a higher kind of religious eclecticism and syncretism, a pantheistic hero-worship. He placed the busts of Abraham and Christ in his domestic chapel with those of Orpheus, Apollonius of Tyana, and the better Roman emperors, and had the gospel rule, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," engraven on the walls of his palace, and on public monuments. His mother, Julia Mamaea, was a patroness of Origen.

His assassin, Maximinus the Thracian (235–238), first a herdsman, afterwards a soldier, resorted again to persecution out of mere opposition to his predecessor, and gave free course to the popular fury against the enemies of the gods, which was at that time excited anew by an earthquake. It is uncertain whether he ordered the entire clergy or only the bishops to be killed. He was a rude barbarian who also plundered heathen temples.

Gordianus (208–244) left the church undisturbed. Philip the Arabian (244–249) was even supposed by some to be a Christian, and was termed by Jerome "*primus omnium ex Romanis imperatoribus Christianus*." It is certain that Origen wrote letters to him and to his wife, Severa.

This season of repose, however, cooled the moral zeal and brotherly love of the Christians; and the mighty storm under the following reign served well to restore the purity of the church.

## § 22. Persecutions under Decius, and Valerian. a.d. 249–260. Martyrdom of Cyprian.

Decius Trajan (249–251), an earnest and energetic emperor, in whom the old Roman spirit once more awoke, resolved to root out the church as an atheistic and seditious sect, and in the year 250 published an edict to all the governors of the provinces, enjoining return to the pagan state religion under the heaviest penalties. This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it. In truth it was properly the first which covered the whole empire, and accordingly produced a far greater number of martyrs than any former persecution. In the execution of the imperial decree confiscation, exile, torture, promises and threats of all kinds, were employed to move the Christians to apostasy. Multitudes of nominal Christians, especially at the beginning, sacrificed to the gods, or procured from the magistrate a false certificate that they had done so, and were then excommunicated as apostates; while hundreds rushed with impetuous zeal to the prisons and the tribunals, to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown. The confessors of Rome wrote from prison to their brethren of Africa: "What more glorious and blessed lot can fall to man by the grace of God, than to confess God the Lord amidst tortures and in the face of death itself; to confess Christ the Son of God with lacerated body and with a spirit departing, yet free; and to become fellow-sufferers with Christ in the name of Christ? Though we have not yet shed our blood, we are ready to do so. Pray for us, then, dear Cyprian, that the Lord, the best captain, would daily strengthen each one of us more and more, and at last lead us to the field as faithful soldiers, armed with those divine weapons (Eph. 6:2) which can never be conquered."

The authorities were especially severe with the bishops and officers of the churches. Fabianus of Rome, Babylas of Antioch, and Alexander of Jerusalem, perished in this persecution. Others withdrew to places of concealment; some from cowardice; some from Christian prudence, in hope of allaying by their absence the fury of the pagans against their flocks, and of saving their own lives for the good of the church in better times.

Among the latter was Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, who incurred much censure by his course, but fully vindicated himself by his pastoral industry during his absence, and by his subsequent martyrdom. He says concerning the matter: "Our Lord commanded us in times of persecution to

yield and to fly. He taught this, and he practised it himself. For since the martyr's crown comes by the grace of God, and cannot be gained before the appointed hour, he who retires for a time, and remains true to Christ, does not deny his faith, but only abides his time."

Under Gallus (251–253) the persecution received a fresh impulse thorough the incursions of the Goths, and the prevalence of a pestilence, drought, and famine. Under this reign the Roman bishops Cornelius and Lucius were banished, and then condemned to death.

Valerian (253–260) was at first mild towards the Christians; but in 257 he changed his course, and made an effort to check the progress of their religion without bloodshed, by the banishment of ministers and prominent laymen, the confiscation of their property, and the prohibition of religious assemblies. These measures, however, proving fruitless, he brought the death penalty again into play. The most distinguished martyrs of this persecution under Valerian are the bishops Sixtus II. of Rome, and Cyprian of Carthage.

When Cyprian received his sentence of death, representing him as an enemy of the Roman gods and laws, he calmly answered: "*Deo gratias!*" Then, attended by a vast multitude to the scaffold, he proved once more, undressed himself, covered his eyes, requested a presbyter to bind his hands, and to pay the executioner, who tremblingly drew the sword, twenty-five pieces of gold, and won the incorruptible crown (Sept. 14, 258). His faithful friends caught the blood in handkerchiefs, and buried the body of their sainted pastor with great solemnity.

The much lauded martyrdom of the deacon St. Laurentius of Rome, who pointed the avaricious magistrates to the poor and sick of the congregation as the richest treasure of the church, and is said to have been slowly roasted to death (Aug. 10, 258) is scarcely reliable in its details, being first mentioned by Ambrose a century later, and then glorified by the poet Prudentius. A Basilica on the Via Tiburtina celebrates the memory of this saint, who occupies the same position among the martyrs of the church of Rome as Stephen among those of Jerusalem.

### § 23. Temporary Repose. a.d. 260–303.

Gallienus (260–268) gave peace to the church once more, and even acknowledged Christianity as a *religio licita*. And this calm continued forty years; for the edict of persecution, issued by the energetic and warlike Aurelian (270–275), was rendered void by his assassination; and the six emperors who rapidly followed, from 275 to 284, let the Christians alone.

During this long season of peace the church rose rapidly in numbers and outward prosperity. Large and even splendid houses of worship were erected in the chief cities, and provided with collections of sacred books and vessels of gold and silver for the administration of the sacraments. But in the same proportion discipline relaxed, quarrels, intrigues, and factions increased, and worldliness poured in like a flood. Hence a new trial was a necessary and wholesome process of purification

### § 24. The Diocletian Persecution, a.d. 303–311.

The forty years' repose was followed by, the last and most violent persecution, a struggle for life and death. The accession of the Emperor Diocletian is the era from which the Coptic Churches of Egypt and Abyssinia still date, under the name of the 'Era of Martyrs.' All former persecutions of the faith were forgotten in the horror with which men looked back upon the last and greatest: the tenth wave (as men delighted to count it) of that great storm obliterated all the traces that had been left by others. The fiendish cruelty of Nero, the jealous fears of Domitian, the unimpassioned dislike of Marcus, the sweeping purpose of Decius, the clever devices of Valerian, fell into obscurity when compared with the concentrated terrors of that final grapple, which resulted in the destruction of the old Roman Empire and the establishment of the Cross as the symbol of the world's hope.

Diocletian (284–305) was one of the most judicious and able emperors who, in a trying period, preserved the sinking state from dissolution. He was the son of a slave or of obscure parentage, and worked himself up to supreme power. He converted the Roman republican empire into an Oriental despotism, and prepared the way for Constantine and Constantinople. He associated with himself three subordinate co-regents, Maximian (who committed suicide, 310), Galerius (d. 311), and Constantius Chlorus (d. 306, the father of Constantine the Great), and divided with them the government of the immense empire; thereby quadrupling the personality of the sovereign, and imparting vigor to provincial administration, but also sowing the seed of discord and civil war.

In the first twenty years of his reign Diocletian respected the toleration edict of Gallienus. His own wife Prisca his daughter Valeria, and most of his eunuchs and court officers, besides many of the most prominent public functionaries, were Christians, or at least favorable to the Christian religion. He himself was a superstitious heathen and an oriental despot. Like Aurelian and Domitian before him, he claimed divine honors, as the vicar of Jupiter Capitolinus. He was called, as the Lord and Master of the world, *Sacratissimus Dominus Noster*; he guarded his Sacred Majesty with many circles of soldiers and eunuchs, and allowed no one to approach him except on bended knees, and with the forehead touching the ground, while he was seated on the throne in rich vestments from the far East. "Ostentation," says Gibbon, "was the first principle of the new system instituted by Diocletian." As a practical statesman, he must have seen that his work of the political restoration and consolidation of the empire would lack a firm and permanent basis without the restoration of the old religion of the state. Although he long postponed the religious question, he had to meet it at last. It could not be expected, in the nature of the case, that paganism should surrender to its dangerous rival without a last desperate effort to save itself.

But the chief instigator of the renewal of hostility, was Diocletian's co-regent and son-in-law, Galerius, a cruel and fanatical heathen. He prevailed on Diocletian in his old age to authorize the persecution which gave a disgraceful end to his glorious reign.

In 303 Diocletian issued in rapid succession three edicts, each more severe than its predecessor. Maximian issued the fourth, the worst of all, April 30, 304. Christian churches were to be destroyed; all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and at last all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death. Pretext for this severity was afforded by the occurrence of fire twice in the palace of Nicomedia in Bithynia, where Diocletian resided. It was strengthened by the tearing down of the first edict by an imprudent Christian (celebrated in the Greek church under the name of John), who vented in that way his abhorrence of such "godless and tyrannical rulers," and was gradually roasted to death with every species of cruelty.

The persecution began on the twenty-third day of February, 303, the feast of the Terminalia (as if to make an end of the Christian sect), with the destruction of the magnificent church in Nicomedia, and soon spread over the whole Roman empire, except Gaul, Britain, and Spain, where the co-regent Constantius Chlorus, and especially his son, Constantine the Great (from 306), were disposed, as far as possible, to spare the Christians. But even here the churches were destroyed, and many martyrs of Spain (St. Vincentius, Eulalia, and others celebrated by Prudentins), and of Britain (St. Alban) are assigned by later tradition to this age.

The persecution raged longest and most fiercely in the East under the rule of Galerius and his barbarous nephew Maximin Daza, who was intrusted by Diocletian before his retirement with the dignity of Caesar and the extreme command of Egypt and Syria. He issued in autumn, 308, a fifth edict of persecution, which commanded that all males with their wives and servants, and even their children, should sacrifice and actually taste the accursed offerings, and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine. This monstrous law introduced a reign of terror for two years, and left the Christians no alternative but apostasy or starvation. All the pains,

which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed to gain the useless end.

Eusebius was a witness of this persecution in Caesura, Tyre, and Egypt, and saw, with his own eyes, as he tells us, the houses of prayer razed to the ground, the Holy Scriptures committed to the flames on the market places, the pastors hunted, tortured, and torn to pieces in the amphitheatre. Even the wild beasts, he says, not without rhetorical exaggeration, at last refused to attack the Christians, as if they had assumed the part of men in place of the heathen Romans; the bloody swords became dull and shattered; the executioners grew weary, and had to relieve each other; but the Christians sang hymns of praise and thanksgiving in honor of Almighty God, even to their latest breath. He describes the heroic sufferings and death of several martyrs, including his friend, "the holy and blessed Pamphilus," who after two years of imprisonment won the crown of life (309), with eleven others—a typical company that seemed to him to be "a perfect representation of the church." Eusebius himself was imprisoned, but released. The charge of having escaped martyrdom by offering sacrifice is without foundation.

In this, as in former persecutions, the number of apostates who preferred the earthly life to the heavenly, was very great. To these was now added also the new class of the *traditores*, who delivered the holy Scriptures to the heathen authorities, to be burned. But as the persecution raged, the zeal and fidelity of the Christians increased, and martyrdom spread as by contagion. Even boys and girls showed amazing firmness. In many the heroism of faith degenerated to a fanatical courting of death; confessors were almost worshipped, while yet alive; and the hatred towards apostates distracted many congregations, producing the Meletian and Donatist schisms.

#### § 25. The Edicts of Toleration. a.d. 311–313.

This persecution was the last desperate struggle of Roman heathenism for its life. It was the crisis of utter extinction or absolute supremacy for each of the two religions. At the close of the contest the old Roman state religion was exhausted. Diocletian retired into private life in 305, under the curse of the Christians; he found greater pleasure in planting cabbages at Salona in his native Dalmatia, than in governing a vast empire, but his peace was disturbed by the tragical misfortunes of his wife and daughter, and in 313, when all the achievements of his reign were destroyed, he destroyed himself.

Galerius, the real author of the persecution, brought to reflection by a terrible disease, put an end to the slaughter shortly before his death, by a remarkable edict of toleration, which he issued from Nicomedia in 311, in connexion with Constantine and Licinius. In that document he declared, that the purpose of reclaiming the Christians from their wilful innovation and the multitude of their sects to the laws and discipline of the, Roman state, was not accomplished; and that he would now grant them permission to hold their religious assemblies provided they disturbed not the order of the state. To this he added in conclusion the significant instruction that the Christians, "after this manifestation of grace, should pray to their God for the welfare of the emperors, of the state, and of themselves, that the state might prosper in every respect, and that they might live quietly in their homes."

This edict virtually closes the period of persecution in the Roman empire.

For a short time Maximin, whom Eusebius calls "the chief of tyrants," continued in every way to oppress and vex the church in the East, and the cruel pagan Maxentius (a son of Maximian and son-in-law of Galerius) did the same in Italy.

But the young Constantine, who hailed from the far West, had already, in 306, become emperor of Gaul, Spain, and Britain. He had been brought up at the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia (like Moses at the court of Pharaoh) and destined for his successor, but fled from the intrigues of Galerius to Britain, and was appointed by his father and proclaimed by the army as his successor. He crossed the Alps, and under the banner of the cross, he conquered Maxentius at the Milvian

bridge near Rome, and the heathen tyrant perished with his army of veterans in the waters of the Tiber, Oct. 27, 312. A few months afterwards Constantine met at Milan with his co-regent and brother-in-law, Licinius, and issued a new edict of toleration (313), to which Maximin also, shortly before his suicide (313), was compelled to give his consent at Nicomedia. The second edict went beyond the first of 311; it was a decisive step from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality and protection, and prepared the way for the legal recognition of Christianity, as the religion of the empire. It ordered the full restoration of all confiscated church property to the *Corpus Christianorum*, at the expense of the imperial treasury, and directed the provincial magistrates to execute this order at once with all energy, so that peace may be fully established and the continuance of the Divine favor secured to the emperors and their subjects.

This was the first proclamation of the great principle that every man had a right to choose his religion according to the dictates of his own conscience and honest conviction, without compulsion and interference from the government. Religion is worth nothing except as an act of freedom. A forced religion is no religion at all. Unfortunately, the successors of Constantine from the time of Theodosius the Great (383–395) enforced the Christian religion to the exclusion of every other; and not only so, but they enforced orthodoxy to the exclusion of every form of dissent, which was punished as a crime against the state.

Paganism made another spasmodic effort. Licinius fell out with Constantine and renewed the persecution for a short time in the East, but he was defeated in 323, and Constantine became sole ruler of the empire. He openly protected and favored the church, without forbidding idolatry, and upon the whole remained true to his policy of protective toleration till his death (337). This was enough for the success of the church, which had all the vitality and energy of a victorious power; while heathenism was fast decaying at its root.

With Constantine, therefore, the last of the heathen, the first of the Christian, emperors, a new period begins. The church ascends the throne of the Caesars under the banner of the once despised, now honored and triumphant cross, and gives new vigor and lustre to the hoary empire of Rome. This sudden political and social revolution seems marvellous; and yet it was only the legitimate result of the intellectual and moral revolution which Christianity, since the second century, had silently and imperceptibly wrought in public opinion. The very violence of the Diocletian persecution betrayed the inner weakness of heathenism. The Christian minority with its ideas already controlled the deeper current of history. Constantine, as a sagacious statesman, saw the signs of the times and followed them.

What a contrast between Nero, the first imperial persecutor, riding in a chariot among Christian martyrs as burning torches in his gardens, and Constantine, seated in the Council of Nicaea among three hundred and eighteen bishops (some of whom—as the blinded Confessor Paphnutius, Paul of Neocaesarea, and the ascetics from Upper Egypt clothed in wild raiment—wore the insignia of torture on their maimed and crippled bodies), and giving the highest sanction of civil authority to the decree of the eternal deity of the once crucified Jesus of Nazareth! Such a revolution the world has never seen before or since, except the silent, spiritual, and moral reformation wrought by Christianity itself at its introduction in the first, and at its revival in the sixteenth century.