

JOHN GRANGER COOK

Roman Attitudes Toward the Christians

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament*

261

Mohr Siebeck

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John Granger Cook

Roman Attitudes Toward the Christians

From Claudius to Hadrian

Mohr Siebeck

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In memoriam
Martin Hengel

In honorem
Paul J. Achtemeier

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¹S. KRAUTER, Studien zu Röm 13,1–7. Paulus und der politische Diskurs der neronischen Zeit, WUNT 1/243, Tübingen 2009.

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Introduction

*excessere omnes adytis arisque relictis / di quibus imperium hoc steterat ...*¹

Only a handful of Roman authors have left evidence for Roman attitudes toward the Christians from the principate of Claudius to that of Hadrian. To my knowledge none of them ever got their hands on a Septuagint, much less a New Testament document.² Nonetheless their approach to Christianity help set the course for the occasional conflict between the new faith and Greco-Roman culture. There is an old tradition of theologians venturing into the field of classical history when it has been particularly important for the understanding of early Christianity.³ The risk is substantial, but the potential rewards are greater because one cannot understand the context of many of the texts in the New Testament without doing it. To that end I have included several sections in the chapters that indicate some of the possible trajectories between the attitudes (and actions) of the Romans toward the Christians and the New Testament itself.

The fundamental objection to monographs on this subject is a comment by T. D. Barnes in his two reviews of Rudolf Freudenberger's "sober" monograph on Pliny.⁴ Barnes' main criticism is that there is nothing new in Freudenberger's work. While many theologians continue (as they should) to make use of Freudenberger's inquiry, few are aware that it received almost uniformly negative reviews in the classical and patristic journals.⁵ Scholars of NT and early Christianity should tread in the fields of Roman literature, his-

¹ Verg. A. 2.351-2 all the gods, on whom the imperium [Troy] depended, have departed, abandoning their shrines and altars. Cf. the comm. in Macr. 3.9.1-15, with reference to Rome's tutelary god and the practice of "devoting" cities about to be captured.

² Cf. my examinations on this theme: J. G. COOK, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism*, STAC 3, Tübingen 2000 and *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism*, STAC 23, Tübingen 2004.

³ See the references in the chapters on Nero and Trajan.

⁴ T. D. BARNES, Review of FREUDENBERGER, *Das Verhalten*, *JTS* 20 (1969) 299-301. Cf. his second, and even more critical review, in *JRS* 61 (1971) 311-12; R. FREUDENBERGER, *Das Verhalten der römischen Behörden gegen die Christen im 2. Jahrhundert dargestellt am Brief des Plinius an Trajan und den Reskripten Trajans und Hadrians*, *Münchener Beiträge zur Papyrforschung und antiken Rechtsgeschichte* 52, Munich, ²1967.

⁵ To include all the bibliographies would be tedious. See the entry in *AnPh*.

tory, law, archaeology, and inscriptions with caution. But it has been done many times before and needs to be done anew in each generation. For those interested in the NT and ancient Christianity a fresh reading of some well known Roman sources offers insights into the conflict that sometimes developed between Roman magistrates and the Christian faithful. Theologians sometimes read the material too quickly. The payoff for the field of NT can be immense for the “slow reader.”

When considering methodology, the decision I reached was that traditional historical approaches were well suited to my purposes of investigating Roman perspectives on the Christians. One concept from post-modernist and post-colonialist methodologies I found useful for understanding the relationship between the Romans and the Christians is that of “othering.” There were some Roman intellectuals and officials who viewed (“constructed”) the Christians as “the other” — a *novum* that they comprehended with difficulty.⁶ Troels Enberg Pedersen, with regard to the Platonist philosophers who rather superficially read the New Testament, has made the point to me that they could have done much better had they been inclined to do so. Probably the Roman intellectuals and governors like Tacitus and Pliny were so disgusted at the phenomenon of Christianity that they lacked the inclination to make any profound explorations into the nature of early Christian faith, morality, and ritual practice. What I have sought to do during this project is develop a sympathy for the Romans’ shock when they had to deal with this “other” — these Christians who were so difficult to conceive using the categories they were familiar with.

Fruitful investigations have looked into the Christians’ understanding of the pagans, and in a sense they are the obverse of this book. Jennifer Wright

⁶ On “othering” (applied to Paul’s constructions of his opponents), cf. the article of E. LISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA (Paul and the Politics of Interpretation, in: Paul and Politics. Ecclesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of KRISTER STENDAHL, ed. R. A. HORSLEY, Harrisburg, PA 2000, 40-57, esp. 45-7). The term is traced to GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK and defined as “the process by which imperial discourse creates its ‘others’” in B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS, and H. TIFFIN, *Post-colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, New York 2007, 156-9. Cf. G. C. SPIVAK, *The Rani of Sirmur. An Essay in Reading the Archives*, *HTh* 24 (1985) 247-72, esp. 252, 255. For the philosophical background, ultimately HEGEL, cf. D. MACEY, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London 2000, 285-6, s.v. “other.” An intriguing postmodern attempt to turn the usual interpretation of the Apocalypse on its head is C. FRILINGOS, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation*, Philadelphia 2004 (p. 12, by rejecting the “dichotomy of book and culture”). In the words of his reviewer (R. M. ROYALTY, *JBL* 124 [2005] 571-5, esp. 575), “Revelation does not so much *oppose* Rome as put Roman culture on display.” The “Other” for FRILINGOS can be Rome in the eyes of the Christians watching a spectacle, but who may become part of the performance themselves (ibid., 2 [with reference to Rev 18:9 in which the Christians watch Babylon burn], 11). FRILINGOS (13) admits “the Apocalypse repeatedly positions itself and its audience over against the monstrous Roman empire.”

Knust's examination of the Christian construction of pagan sexuality is an intriguing case in point. She concentrates on the vituperative rhetoric of authors like Paul and Justin Martyr, often used to set Christianity off against its pagan context.⁷ The "real facts" behind the rhetoric are probably unknowable, although collections of erotic art and the graffiti in brothels tell us something.⁸ But relying on such sources for the "facts" may be like relying on the depressing sights of Bourbon Street in New Orleans to construct sexuality in Louisiana. We are left, in the case of Roman constructions of Christianity, with a frustratingly small number of sources until the time of Celsus, apparently one of the first Greco-Roman authors to take a real interest in early Christianity. How representative are they of reality?

The problem of fact and fiction is unavoidable. The late professor Hengel used to insist that history (i.e., our sources) is a combination of both and that the task of the historian is to do one's best to distinguish between the two.⁹ In this regard professor Dieter Timpe's reflections on historical methodology in both classical and early Christian studies are unique and sorely needed. Few others have attained the qualifications to do both.¹⁰ My task is somewhat eased because I want to investigate Roman *attitudes* primarily. Consequently,

⁷ J. WRIGHT KNUST, *Abandoned to Lust. Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity*, New York 2006.

⁸ For example: J. R. CLARKE, *Looking at Lovemaking. Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.—A.D. 250*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1998. The graffiti from the brothel (VIII.xii.18-20) at Pompeii are in CIL IV, 2171-2296. Some are translated by A. E. COOLEY and M. G. L. COOLEY, *Pompeii. A Sourcebook*, London/New York 2004, 79. The Latin graffiti are easily available on the Clauss-Slaby database (http://oracle-vm.ku-eichstaett.de:8888/epigr/epigraphik_de). Accessed on Nov. 26, 2009. But what does that tell one about the whole of Roman society — any more than the words scrawled on bathroom stalls in the U.S.A. tell one about American society in general? An extensive investigation of this issue is J. E. HULTIN, *The Ethics of Obscene Speech in Early Christianity and its Environment*, NT.S 128, Leiden 2008, esp. 24 (on various graffiti, but not a specific discussion of the brothel).

⁹ Cf. the able comments on this issue with regard to the *Historia Augusta* by T. D. BARNES, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta*, CollLat 155, Brussels 1978, 13-22. Although aimed at the SHA, BARNES' (*ibid.*, 20) three versions of historical methodology are interesting: the conservative ("believe everything in the *Historia Augusta* not explicitly contradicted by better evidence"), hypercritical (do not accept anything in the *HA* unless there is "independent confirmation," nearly complete scepticism) and critical ("more subtle, and attempts to differentiate between different parts of the *HA*: it recognises the complexity of the problem, renounces a simplistic solution, and endeavours to discover reliable methods of segregating fact from fiction").

¹⁰ D. TIMPE, *Römische Geschichte und Heilsgeschichte*, Hans-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 5, ed. C. MARKSCHIES, Berlin/New York 2001; *idem*, *Antike Geschichtsschreibung. Studien zur Historiographie*, ed. U. WALTER, Darmstadt 2007 (cf. in particular his essay "Was ist Kirchengeschichte? Zum Gattungscharakter der *Historia Ecclesiastica* des Eusebius" 292-328).

although I do not avoid historical questions when I must face them, my purpose is to consider Roman thought with regard to the Christians — particularly the thought of Roman officials.

I have become increasingly convinced that once Christianity, in the eyes of the Romans, separated from Judaism and began converting pagans that some Romans quickly began to suspect that Christianity had the potential of tearing the fabric of Roman society apart. “Atheism” and “atheists” are an important part of the Roman “construct” of Christianity.¹¹ This attitude against questioning the cultural consensus about Greco-Roman religion appears in a rather fascinating text of Plutarch. In a peaceful discussion in his *Amatorius* concerning whether Eros is a god, Plutarch affirms:

Pemptides, you are touching, he said, a great and perilous matter [i.e., questioning the divinity of Eros]; or rather shaking up what should not be shaken¹² of our beliefs about the gods, by demanding proof for each god. The ancestral and ancient faith is sufficient — it is not possible to assert or find demonstrative proof clearer than faith — “No, though of highest intellect wisdom spring”¹³ — faith is a kind of seat and common basis for piety, and if one matter that is certain and customary in faith is disturbed or shaken, it becomes precarious and suspect in every respect. You surely heard what a disturbance arose concerning Euripides when he began his *Melanippê* with this: “Zeus, whoever Zeus is, for I do not know except by tradition.” And he took up another chorus (for it appears he had confidence in the drama, having written showily and excessively), changed the verse into what is now written, “Zeus, as it is now asserted by the truth.” What is the advantage of making the belief about Zeus or Athena or Eros doubtful or uncertain by argumentation? Eros is not now demanding a first altar or sacrifice nor is he a stranger from some foreign superstition,¹⁴ like certain Attises and Adonises as they are named, secretly creeping in through the agency of emasculated men¹⁵ and women, enjoying honors that he does not deserve — with the result that he would be prosecuted for illegal registration as a god and bastardy among the gods.¹⁶

¹¹ The term (atheist) will appear often below. Cf., for example, chapt. 2 § 1.4.2, chapt. 4 § 1.13, 1.19.2, 1.29, 1.31, 1.34.1, chapt. 5 § 1.11.3.

¹² The expression means meddling with sacred things in Herodotus Hist. 6.134. It was proverbial, “moving the immovable” (Plut. Is. Os. 359F-360A, a text similar to the use in *Amat.*, contrasting atheistic Euhemerism with the faith of humankind in the gods; Plato Leg. 684D, 843A, Theaet. 181A).

¹³ Euripides Bacch. 200-3: “’Tis not for us to reason touching Gods. Traditions of our fathers, old as time, We hold: no reasoning shall cast them down, — No, though of subtlest wit our wisdom spring” οὐδὲν σοφίζόμεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν. / πατρίους παραδοχάς, ἅς θ’ ὁμήλικας χρόνῳ / κεκτήμεθ’, οὐδεὶς αὐτὰ καταβαλεῖ λόγος, / οὐδ’ εἰ δι’ ἄκρων τὸ σοφὸν ἤρρηται φρενῶν. Trans. of Euripides III, LCL, ed. and trans. A. S. WAY, New York/London 1912, 21.

¹⁴ This might be the equivalent of *superstitio externa*, for which Pomponia Graecina was prosecuted (and found innocent) by her husband. See chapt. 2§ 1.3.9 with reference to Ann. 13.32.2.

¹⁵ Cf. Alex fort. 338C and Lucian Syr. d. 50-1 (the castrated *Galli* and their drums).

¹⁶ Plutarch Amat. 756A-C. Cf. L. T. JOHNSON, *Among the Gentiles. Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*, New Haven 2009, 93-110 (on religion and stability in Plutarch).

‘μεγάλου μοι δοκεῖς ἄπτεσθαι’ εἶπεν ‘καὶ παραβόλου πράγματος, ὃ Περμπτίδη, μάλλον δ’ ὅλως τὰ ἀκίνητα κινεῖν τῆς περὶ θεῶν δόξης ἢν ἔχομεν, περὶ ἐκάστου λόγον ἀπαιτῶν καὶ ἀπόδειξιν. ἀρκεῖ γὰρ ἡ πάτριος καὶ παλαιὰ πίστις, ἥς οὐκ ἔστιν εἰπεῖν οὐδ’ ἀνευρεῖν τεκμήριον ἐναργέστερον ‘οὐδ’ εἰ δι’ ἄκρας τὸ σοφὸν εὗρηται φρενός’ ἀλλ’ ἔδρα τις αὕτη καὶ βάσις ὑφεστῶσα κοινὴ πρὸς εὐσέβειαν, ἣν ἐφ’ ἐνὸς ταράττεται καὶ σαλεύεται τὸ βέβαιον αὐτῆς καὶ νενομισμένον, ἐπισφαλῆς γίνεται πᾶσι καὶ ὑποπτος. ἀκούεις δὲ δήπου τὸν Εὐριπίδην ὡς ἐθορυβήθη ποιησάμενος ἀρχὴν τῆς Μελανίππης ἐκείνην ‘Ζεὺς, ὅστις ὁ Ζεὺς, οὐ γὰρ οἶδα πλὴν λόγῳ,’ μεταλαβὼν δὲ χορὸν ἄλλον (ἐθάρρει γὰρ ὡς ἔοικε τῷ δράματι γεγραμμένῳ πανηγυρικῶς καὶ περιττῶς) ἥλλαξε τὸν στίχον ὡς νῦν γέγραπται ‘Ζεὺς, ὡς λέλεκται τῆς ἀληθείας ὑπο’ τί οὖν διαφέρει τὴν περὶ τοῦ Διὸς δόξαν ἢ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἢ τοῦ Ἑρῶτος εἰς ἀμφίβολον τῷ λόγῳ θέσθαι ἢ καὶ ἄδηλον; οὐ γὰρ νῦν αἰτεῖ πρῶτον βωμὸν ὁ Ἑρῶς καὶ θυσίαν οὐδ’ ἐπὶ πηλὺς ἔκ τινος βαρβαρικῆς δεισιδαιμονίας, ὥσπερ Ἄτται τινὲς καὶ Ἀδωναῖοι λεγόμενοι, δι’ ἀνδρογύνων καὶ γυναικῶν παραδύεται καὶ κρύφα τιμᾶς οὐ προσηκούσας καρπούμενος, ὥστε παρεισγραφῆς δίκην φεύγειν καὶ νοθείας τῆς ἐν θεοῖς.

This discussion of the dangers of questioning Greek religion is closely related to Maecenas’ speech to Augustus in which he warns the emperor of the dangers of atheism and which may itself be a thinly veiled warning against Christianity.¹⁷ To further illustrate the “danger” Christianity posed in the eyes of some Romans, I will appeal to two figures from the Antonine era: the satirist Lucian and the Roman social conservative, Celsus, the middle Platonist.¹⁸

Lucian describes Peregrinus’ study of Christian “wisdom” and books at the hands of their priests and scribes in Palestine after strangling his father in Armenia. An unnamed orator (surely Lucian) has little use for the Cynic, soon to immolate himself at the Olympic festival near Elis.

Then he learned the amazing wisdom of the Christians, associating in Palestine with their priests and scribes. And for what? He quickly made them appear to be children — being their prophet and leader of their religious guild and the leader of the synagogue and everything, himself alone; and he explained their books and interpreted them, and even wrote many himself. And they stood in awe of him as of a god and used him as their lawgiver

¹⁷ Cf. the discussion in chapt. 2 § 1.4.2.

¹⁸ On the date of the *Peregrinus* cf. H.-W. KUHN *Die Kreuzesstrafe während der frühen Kaiserzeit. Ihre Wirklichkeit und Wertung in der Umwelt des Urchristentums*, *ANRW* II.25.1 (1982) 648-793, esp. 654 (165 or soon after) and the forthcoming article by M.-O. GOULET-CAZÉ, *Peregrinus surnommé Proteus* in: DPA, ed. R. GOULET, Paris (165). Cf. the recent fine study by MARGARET M. MITCHELL (Origen, Celsus and Lucian on the “Dénouement of the Drama” of the Gospels, in: *Reading Religions in the Ancient World: Essays Presented to ROBERT MCQUEEN GRANT on His 90th Birthday*, ed. D. AUNE and R. D. YOUNG, NovT.S 125, Brill 2007, 215-36). While there are many excellent studies on Celsus, the one that emphasizes his concern for social order remains É. PÉLAGAUD, *Un conservateur au second siècle. Étude sur Celse et la première escarmouche entre la philosophie et le christianisme naissant*, Lyons et al. 1878.

and endorsed him as their protector, at least after that individual whom they worship, the person in Palestine that was crucified, because he introduced a new rite into the world.¹⁹

Ὅτεπερ καὶ τὴν θαναμαστὴν σοφίαν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐξέμαθεν, περὶ τὴν Παλαιστίνην τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν καὶ γραμματεῦσιν αὐτῶν ξυγγενόμενος. καὶ τί γάρ; ἐν βραχεὶ παίδας αὐτοὺς ἀπέφηνε, προφήτης καὶ θιασάρχης καὶ ξυναγωγεὺς καὶ πάντα μόνος αὐτὸς ὢν, καὶ τῶν βίβλων τὰς μὲν ἐξηγεῖτο καὶ διεδάφει, πολλὰς δὲ αὐτὸς καὶ συνέγραφεν, καὶ ὥς θεὸν αὐτὸν ἐκεῖνοι ἡδοῦντο καὶ νομοθέτῃ ἐχρῶντο καὶ προστάτην ἐπεγράφοντο, μετὰ γοῦν ἐκείνου ὃν ἔτι σέβουσι, τὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐν τῇ Παλαιστίνῃ ἀνασκολοπισθέντα, ὅτι καινὴν αὐτὴν τελετὴν εἰσήγεν ἐς τὸν βίον.

It may be quite important that Lucian conceived of a “religious crime” — the crime of introducing a new religious cult.

After being imprisoned in Syria for his new found faith, and being visited in prison by Christian leaders, Peregrinus was read to from the “sacred books” (λόγοι ἱεροί). The Christians called him their “new Socrates.” The narrator describes the people from Asia who brought money to their hero and summarizes the Christian faith and its consequences for Greco-Roman religious tradition:

The poor devils have entirely persuaded themselves that they are immortal and will live forever, and consequently they despise death and many have willingly given themselves up. And then their first lawmaker has persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another, whenever — offending once for all — they deny the Hellenic gods and worship that crucified sophist and live according to his laws. Therefore they hold all things equally in contempt and regard them as common property, accepting such beliefs without any exact proof. If accordingly any cheat or trickster arrives who is able to use opportunities, he immediately becomes very rich, scoffing at ignorant individuals.²⁰

πεπεῖκασι γὰρ αὐτοὺς οἱ κακοδαίμονες τὸ μὲν ὅλον ἀθάνατοι ἔσεσθαι καὶ βιώσεσθαι τὸν ἅει χρόνον, παρ’ ὃ καὶ καταφρονοῦσιν τοῦ θανάτου καὶ ἐκόντες αὐτοὺς ἐπιδιδόασιν οἱ πολλοί. ἔπειτα δὲ ὁ νομοθέτης ὁ πρῶτος ἔπεισεν αὐτοὺς ὡς ἀδελφοὶ πάντες εἶεν ἀλλήλων, ἐπειδὴν ἅπαξ παραβάντες θεοὺς μὲν τοὺς Ἑλληνικοὺς ἀπαρνῆσθωνται, τὸν δὲ ἀνεσκολοπισμένον ἐκείνον σοφιστὴν αὐτὸν προσκυνῶσιν καὶ κατὰ τοὺς ἐκείνου νόμους βιώσιν. καταφρονοῦσιν οὖν ἀπάντων ἐξ ἴσης καὶ κοινὰ ἡγοῦνται, ἄνευ τινὸς ἀκριβοῦς πίστεως τὰ τοιαῦτα παραδεξάμενοι. ἦν τοίνυν παρέλθῃ τις εἰς αὐτοὺς γόης καὶ τεχνίτης ἄνθρωπος καὶ πράγμασιν χρῆσθαι δυνάμενος, αὐτίκα μάλα πλούσιος ἐν βραχεὶ ἐγένετο ιδιώταις²¹ ἀνθρώποις ἐγχανών.

Lucian’s narrator emphasizes the Christians’ denial of the Greek gods — presumably the defining characteristic of Christianity in his eyes.

¹⁹ Lucian Peregr. 11. Peregr. 9: Peregrinus’ adultery, seduction of a youth, and strangulation of his father.

²⁰ Lucian Peregr. 13.

²¹ Celsus used this term for Christians. Cf. Origen C. Celsum 1.27, 4.10 ((SVigChr 54, 29,12; 224,30 MARCOVICH).

Celsus responded to Christianity, apparently toward the end of his treatise with the outlines of an imperial theology, and he encourages adherence to the imperial cult.

If matters are so, what is so terrible about propitiating those who rule here, both the others [i.e., the demons] and those who are rulers and kings among people, for it is not without demonic power that they have been deemed worthy to exist here?

Εἰ ὁδε ἔχοιεν, τί τὸ δεινὸν τοὺς τῆδε ἄρχοντας εὐμενίζεσθαι, τοὺς τε ἄλλους καὶ τοὺς ἐν ἀνθρώποις δυνάστας καὶ βασιλέας, ὥς οὐδὲ τούτους ἄνευ δαιμονίας ἰσχύος τῶν τῆδε (εἶναι) ἡξιωμένους;²²

Celsus draws an important correlation between faith in Zeus and the security and stability of the emperor [I put Origen's words in brackets]:

[Then Celsus next says that] we ought not to disbelieve the ancient man who long ago declared, "Let there be one king, him to whom the son of crafty Kronos gave the power"²³ [And he continues]: For, if you overthrow this doctrine, it is probable that the emperor will punish you. If everyone were to do the same as you, there would be nothing to prevent him from being abandoned, alone and deserted, while earthly things would come into the power of the most lawless and savage barbarians, and nothing more would be heard among people either of your worship or of the true wisdom.

Εἰθ' ἐξῆς φησιν ὁ Κέλσος ὅτι οὐ χρὴ ἀπιστεῖν ἀνδρὶ ἀρχαίῳ, πάλαι προειπόντι τό· Εἷς βασιλεύς, ᾧ ἔδωκε Κρόνου παῖς ἀγκυλομήτεω. Καὶ ἐπιφέρει· Ὡς, ἂν τοῦτο λύσῃς τὸ δόγμα, εἰκότως ἀμυνεῖταί σε ὁ βασιλεύς. Εἰ γὰρ τὸ αὐτό σοι ποιήσειαν ἅπαντες, οὐδὲν κωλύσει τὸν μὲν καταλειφθῆναι μόνον καὶ ἔρημον, τὰ δ' ἐπὶ γῆς ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀνομωτάτοις τε καὶ ἀγριωτάτοις βαρβάροις γενέσθαι, καὶ μήτε τῆς σῆς θρησκείας μήτε τῆς ἀληθινῆς σοφίας ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἔτι καταλείπεσθαι κλέος.²⁴

With regard to Christian missionaries' attempts to evangelize the Romans, Celsus has this to say:

You will certainly not say that if the Romans were persuaded by you, were to neglect the custom of their earlier practices towards gods and people, and should call on your Highest or whomever you wish, he would descend and fight for them, and there would be no necessity for any other force. For the same God earlier made these promises and some much greater than these to those who are devoted to him, as you yourselves say and you see how much he helped both those and you. Instead of being despots over the whole earth, not as much as one clod of earth or hearth is left to them. And as for you, if one should be found still wandering about in secret, he/she is searched out in order to be condemned to die.

²² Origen C. Cels. 8.63 (579,22-25 MARCOVICH). My trans., but confer the magisterial one (and notes) by H. CHADWICK, Origen: *Contra Celsum*. Translated with an Introduction & Notes, Cambridge 1953. All the translations from Celsus are mine unless noted.

²³ Homer Il. 11.205

²⁴ Origen C. Cels. 8.68 (584,7-15 MARCOVICH). Trans. of CHADWICK, Origen, 504.

Οὐ μὲν δὴ τοῦτο φήσεις, ὥς, ἂν πεισθέντες σοι Ῥωμαῖοι καὶ τῶν νενομισμένων αὐτοῖς πρὸς θεοῦς τε καὶ ἀνθρώπων (προτέρων νόμον)²⁵ ἀμελήσαντες τὸν σὸν Ὑψιστον, ἣ ὄντινα βούλει, προσκαλέσωνται, καταβάς ὑπερμαχεῖται αὐτῶν, καὶ οὐδεμιᾶς ἄλλης ἀλκῆς δεήσει. Καὶ γὰρ πρότερον ὁ αὐτὸς θεὸς τοῖς προσέχουσιν αὐτῷ ταυτά τε καὶ πολὺ μείζω τούτων, ὥς ὑμεῖς φατε, ὑπισχνόμενος ὁρᾷτε ὅσα ὠφέλησεν ἐκείνους τε καὶ ὑμᾶς· ὃν τοῖς μὲν ἀντὶ <τοῦ> γῆς ἀπάσης εἶναι δεσπόταις οὐδ' ὅποια τις βῶλος οὐδ' ἐστίᾳ λείπεται, ὑμῶν δὲ καὶ πλανᾶται τις ἔτι λανθάνων, ἀλλὰ ζητεῖται πρὸς θανάτου δίκην.²⁶

Although Elysée Pélagaud ends his trenchant analysis of Celsus with a paean to his humanity, this comment indicates Celsus was rather enthusiastic about persecution (and the imperium).²⁷ Celsus may anticipate some of the thinking of officials that were active in the “great persecution” (and perhaps the deliberations of Decius if we knew them), although he expresses himself in terms of conversion of the emperors themselves and the possible devastation of the empire that would result. If he had lived a century later, Celsus could not have blamed Valerian’s capture in 259 by the Persians on the Christians, but undoubtedly he would have blamed the fall of Rome in 410 on the Christians — had he been alive to experience it.²⁸

It would also not be acceptable for you to say that if those who now rule over us were persuaded by you and captured, that you would persuade those who rule next, then others, and if those should be taken, then others after others, until when all those persuaded by you are taken [by the enemy], one in authority will come to his senses and know beforehand what is happening and before he is destroyed first, will utterly destroy all of you with your whole race.

Οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ ἐκεῖνο ἀνεκτόν σου λέγοντος, ὥς, ἂν οἱ νῦν βασιλεύοντες ἡμῶν σοι πεισθέντες ἄλῳσι, τοὺς αὖθις βασιλεύοντας πείσεις εἴτ' ἄλλους, ἂν κακέينوι ἄλῳσι, καὶ ἄλλους ἐπ' ἄλλοις, μέχρι πάντων τῶν σοι πειθομένων ἀλίσκομένων μία τις ἀρχὴ σωφρονήσασα καὶ προειδομένη τὸ συμβαῖνον πάντας ὑμᾶς, πρὶν αὐτὴν προαπολέσθαι, παγγενεὶ διολέσει.²⁹

²⁵ Added by MARCOVICH based on Origen’s response in 8.69 (586,7-9 MARCOVICH).

²⁶ Origen C. Cels. 8.69 (585,18-586,6 MARCOVICH).

²⁷ PÉLAGAUD, *Un conservateur*, 461: in a comment contrasting Celsus’ philosophical pen which replaces the sword of the persecutors: “un grand exemple de sagesse, de modération, et tolérance, et d’humanité” (a grand example of moderation, wisdom, tolerance and humanity).

²⁸ On Valerian’s capture, which is proudly inscribed on the walls of a Zoroastrian temple, cf. P. HEATHER, *The Fall of the Roman Empire. A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford/New York 2007, 58-9 (the inscription mentions 70,000 soldiers accompanied Valerian), 60-1, 66. Cf. *ibid.*, 227-9 (Alaric). The charge that Christians bring disasters from the gods is well known (cf. COOK, *New Testament*, 123-5 for references and bibliography).

²⁹ Origen C. Cels. 8.71 (587,24-588,3 MARCOVICH). On the rhetoric of the “great persecution” see chapt. 4 § 1.34.1.

Celsus apparently thinks the goal of Christian evangelism is socio-political and completely absurd:

If only it were possible for the inhabitants of Asia, Europe, Libya, both Greeks and barbarians all the way to the ends of the earth, to agree on one law [thinking this to be impossible he adds] the one who thinks this knows nothing.

Εἰ γὰρ δὴ οἷόν τε εἰς ἓνα συμφρονῆσαι νόμον τοὺς τὴν Ἀσίαν καὶ Εὐρώπην καὶ Λιβύην Ἕλληνας τε καὶ βαρβάρους ἄχρι περάτων νενεμημένους, ἀδύνατον τοῦτο νομίσας εἶναι ἐπιφέρει ὅτι ὁ τοῦτο οἰόμενος οἶδεν οὐδέν.³⁰

It is not my intention to go deeply into Celsus' theological and political philosophy here.³¹ The words speak for themselves. Celsus viewed Christianity as a great danger to the Roman social order. One has only to look closely at a text like the *Calendar of Filocalus* (in a volume from 354) with all its gladiatorial combats, spectacles dedicated to the gods, and circus games dedicated to emperors and gods to see the transformation that Christianity would bring.³² Tertullian's rather vicious *On Spectacles* foresaw the end of a good deal that held the social fabric together too. The importance of the Roman liturgical calendar for Romans was surely equivalent to the importance of the Christian liturgical calendar for Christians.

One can overemphasize reactions like that of Celsus. The persecutions were, after all, only sporadic. The relations between Christians and Romans (i.e., pagans) during the era between Claudius to Hadrian were undoubtedly complex. Much of the time the imperial officials probably tolerated the Christians, unless they were accused by enemies. The sum total of Christians who died as a result of the Roman persecutions in the era before Constantine was less than the number of Protestants who died at the hands of Charles V in the Netherlands, according to Edward Gibbon.³³ It is difficult to assess such

³⁰ Origen C. Cels. 8.72 (588,12-16 MARCOVICH). My trans.

³¹ Cf. COOK, *New Testament*, 377 (index to pages, which will refer the reader to the necessary bibliography).

³² InscrIt 13/2, 42. Cf. the numbering of the various events in DUNCAN FISHWICK's investigation of the imperial cult in: *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West. Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, III/3, RGRW 147, Leiden/Boston 2003, 305: 10 days for gladiatorial combats, 64 for *circenses* (circus games) and 101 for *scaenici* (theatrical performances). A translation of the month of April may be found in M. BEARD, J. NORTH, and S. PRICE, *Religions of Rome. Vol. 2. A Sourcebook*, Cambridge 1998, 67-9 and cf. their whole sections on the calendar (60-77). Cf. also M. R. SALZMAN's investigations: *On Roman Time. The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley et al. 1990. She argues the calendar indicates the continued vitality of paganism in the fourth "Christian" century (16-19), and she counts 98 days of *ludi* and *circenses* in honor the imperial cult (131). The evidence is also collated in the handbooks of Roman Religion: G. WISSOWA, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, HAW 5/4, Munich ²1912, 567-93 and K. LATTE, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, HAW 5/4, Munich 1960, 433-44.

³³ E. GIBBON, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. II, ed. J. B. BURY, London 1909, chap. XVI, 139 (and n. 186-7), The irenic Grotius estimated 100,000 deaths,

statistics, given the absence of a *Prosopographia damnatorum imperii Romani* (*Prosopography of the condemned of the Roman empire*).³⁴ Those condemned to die usually left no surviving name in what little genuine historical evidence remains. In the analyses of the various Roman texts describing the authorities' treatments of the Christians from the time of Claudius to that of Hadrian, I have attempted to place the authors' perspectives on the Christians in as much cultural context as I could to help illuminate the occasional intolerance Christians experienced under the imperium.³⁵

It is only an analogy, but in a sense the subject matter in the pages that follow is as important to New Testament studies as axioms are to the geometer. One example will suffice. It is unnecessary to list the New Testament scholars who have axiomatically assumed the existence of a Domitianic persecution of the Christian church. One could compare that assumption, itself based on very thin historical data, to Euclid's faith in his parallel postulate. That postulate serves every high school geometer well, but has been dispensed with by several famous geometers, with important implications for many fields of study including philosophy, physics, and mathematics.³⁶ The Nero-nian and Trajanic persecutions, likewise, are "axioms" in the field of New Testament research. We can dispense with Domitian's persecution, but the other two are of central importance for understanding early Christianity.

while Fra Paolo estimated about 50,000. Charles V, after the treaty of Augsburg (with the Lutherans), retired to a monastery — faced with the inconsistency of persecuting Protestants in one part of his kingdom and tolerating them in another. I owe the reference to T. D. BARNES, *Tertullian. A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford, 1971, 162. O. F. ROBINSON, *The Repression of Christians in the Pre-Decian Period: A Legal Problem Still*, *The Irish Jurist* 25-7 (1990-92) 269-92, esp. 286 estimates 100-200 deaths in a 200 year period (with ref. to Origen C. Cels. 3.8 [158,23-5 MARCOVICH]). The evidence is scanty for such a thesis.

³⁴ This would be a counterpart to the survey of the ruling classes, which has appeared in two editions under the auspices of the Berlin Academy. The second edition, which has been suspended, is *Prosopographia Imperii Romani saeculi I, II, III* (vols. 1-8.1; ed. E. GROAG et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1933-). The first edition was *PIR* (vols. 1-3; ed. E. KLEBS et al.; Berlin: Georgium Reimerum, 1897-8).

³⁵ Such a project inevitably leads to overemphases (e.g., on a negative view of Christian experience in the empire). Larger overviews are necessary to put it all into the correct perspective. One in particular by an expert on the pagan critique of Christianity is: G. RINALDI, *Cristianesimi nell'antichità. Sviluppo storici e contesti geografici (Secoli I-VIII)*, Chieti-Roma 2008. Although I cannot agree with all his conclusions, RINALDI's article on 1 Peter is a model for the use of Greco-Roman historical data to create a picture of the setting of the letter (*La Prima epistola di Pietro. Per una 'mappa' dei rapporti tra cristiani ed impero nell'Asia romana*, in: *Roma, La Campania e l'Oriente cristiano*, ed. L. CIRILLO and G. RINALDI, Naples 2004, 295-312).

³⁶ A convenient source is S. HAWKING, ed. with commentary, *God Created the Integers. The Mathematical Breakthroughs that Changed History*, Philadelphia/London, 2007 (containing pioneering essays on the subject by N. I. LOBACHEVSKY [704-42], J. BOLYAI (750-95] and B. RIEMANN [1031-42]).

Chapter one

Claudius and the Christians

1 *Chrestus, Jews, and Christians*

There is only one tantalizing reference in the biographer Suetonius to Claudius' policy with regard to disturbances instigated by a *Chrestus*, and a number of scholars have questioned whether Suetonius intended to refer to Jesus Christ. The evidence which survives only mentions "Jews" as the object of Claudius' actions, and there are conflicting reports in Cassius Dio and Suetonius that can only be harmonized with difficulty. Although I will touch on the manifold chronological problems of the evidence, it is not my intention to focus on that issue but rather on what, if anything, can be gleaned from the material concerning Roman attitudes toward Christ or Christianity during Claudius' reign.

1.1 *Claudius' Relations with the Jews*

Claudius was well disposed toward the Jews, particularly since Agrippa I had helped him secure the imperium when the senate initially opposed him.¹ In return Claudius increased Agrippa's own territory by giving him Judaea, Samaria, Trachonitis and Auranitis.² Claudius acceded to Agrippa's request and issued an edict to the Alexandrians and to Syria (Josephus does not preserve the edict to Syria).³ In that edict Claudius made reference to the Jews' refusal

¹ Josephus B.J. 2.206-14, A.J. 19.236-47. He was also a personal friend of Claudius (cp. A.J. 18.165).

² Josephus A.J. 19.274, B.J. 2.215. Gaius had already given him the tetrarchies of Philip and Lysanias (A.J. 18.237), and later in his reign he gave Agrippa Herod's tetrarchy (A.J. 18.252, 19.351 [the fourth year, between March 16, 40 and Jan. 21, 41] and cp. B.J. 2.181-3. On the chronology of the succession to Herod Antipas, who was deposed in 39, see H. W. HOEHNER, *Herod Antipas. A Contemporary of Jesus Christ*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1980, 262-3.

³ A.J. 19.279-85. On the basic authenticity of the edict to the Alexandrians see E. M. SMALLWOOD, *The Jews and Roman Rule. From Pompey to Diocletian. A Study in Political Relations*, Boston/Leiden 2001, 229 and the able defense by L. H. FELDMAN, *Josephus, Jewish Antiquities Books XVIII-XIX*, vol. IX, LCL, Cambridge, MA/London 1965, 344-9 (the Jews claim they are "Alexandrians" in the words of Claudius' edict). Cp. MILLAR's doubts concerning the authenticity of the edict due to this issue in E. SCHÜRER, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. III/1, rev. and ed. G. VERMES, F. MILLAR, and M. GOODMAN, Edinburgh 1986, 128. The edict does not mention Claudius' consulate. He

to go against their own religion and call Gaius “god.” He also encourages the Alexandrians and the Jews not to create disturbances after the publication of the edict (μηδεμία ταραχή). In an empire wide decree Claudius stated that the Jews should be allowed to keep the customs of their ancestors (πάτρια ἔθη) unhindered everywhere, including in Greek cities: “I enjoin upon them also by these presents to avail themselves of this kindness in a more reasonable spirit, and not to set at naught the beliefs about the gods held by other peoples but to keep their own laws” (οἷς καὶ αὐτοῖς ἤδη νῦν παραγγέλλω μου τάυτη τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ ἐπεικέστερον χρῆσθαι καὶ μὴ τὰς τῶν ἄλλων ἐθνῶν δεισιδαιμονίας ἐξουθενίζειν, τοὺς ἰδίους δὲ νόμους φυλάσσειν).⁴ Claudius did not always accede to Agrippa’s desires and forced him to stop fortifying the walls of Jerusalem, because Claudius suspected sedition (νεωτερισμόν).⁵

Claudius’ famous letter to the Alexandrians is contained in an edict of Nov. 10, 41 (he is emperor and consul designate) and includes his concern to uphold Jewish privileges and to prevent disorder:

As for the question, which party was responsible for the riots and feud (or rather, if the truth be told, the war) with the Jews, although in confrontation with their opponents your ambassadors, and particularly Dionysios the son of Theon, contended with great zeal, nevertheless I was unwilling to make a strict inquiry, though guarding within me a store of immutable indignation against whichever party renews the conflict. And I tell you once and for all that unless you put a stop to this ruinous and obstinate enmity against each other, I shall be driven to show what a benevolent Prince can be when turned to righteous indignation. Wherefore, once again I conjure you that, on the one hand, the Alexandrians show themselves forbearing and kindly towards the Jews who for many years have dwelt in the same city, and dishonor none of the rites observed by them in the worship of their god, but allow them to observe their customs as in the time of the Deified Augustus, which customs I also, after hearing both sides, have sanctioned; and on the other hand, I explicitly order the Jews not to agitate for more privileges than they formerly possessed, and not in the future to send out a separate embassy as though they lived in a separate city (a thing unprecedented), and not to force their way into gymnasiarchic or cosmetic games,

held the first consulate July 1-Sept. 12, 37. Cf. D. KIENAST, *Römische Kaisertabelle. Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, Darmstadt 1990, 91.

⁴ Josephus A.J. 19.286-91. Trans. of L. H. FELDMAN, LCL. SMALLWOOD, *The Jews*, 246 notes that since Claudius was consul II designate (19.286), the general decree would have been after the March elections. Since that title is lacking in the edict to the Alexandrians, it was probably before March. The date of consular elections, however, probably varied and usually took place in the last quarter of the year (A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary*, Oxford, 1966, 23-6 who refers to T. MOMMSEN, *Le droit public romain* vol. 2, Paris 1892, 254 = *Römisches Staatsrecht*, vol. I, Leipzig³ 1887, 588-9). Some of the evidence: no consular elections had taken place before Claudius’ death on Oct. 13, 54 [Suet. Cl. 45-6]; elections had taken place when Nero died in June, 68 [Tac. Hist. 1.6.1, 1.14.1, 1.77.2]; Vitellius held consular elections, in haste, after the battle of Cremona in Oct. 69 [Tac. Hist. 3.55.2 *properus festinare comitia*, hastened the elections].

⁵ Josephus A.J. 19.326-7.

while enjoying their own privileges and sharing a great abundance of advantages in a city not their own, and not to bring in or admit Jews who come down the river from Syria or Egypt, a proceeding which will compel me to conceive serious suspicions. Otherwise I will by all means take vengeance on them as fomenters of what is a general plague infecting the whole world. If, desisting from these courses, you consent to live with mutual forbearance and kindness, I on my side will exercise a solicitude of very long standing for the city, as one which is bound to us by traditional friendship.⁶

Column 4,73 τῆς δὲ πρὸς Ἰουδαίους ταραχῆς καὶ στάσεως μᾶλλον δ' εἰ χρὴ τὸ ἀληθὲς 74 εἰπεῖν τοῦ πολέμου πότεροι μὲν αἴτιοι κατέστησαν καίπερ 75 ἐξ ἀντικαταστάσεως πολλὰ τῶν [ὑμετέρων] ημετέρων πρέσβων 76 [φιλοτιμηθέντων] φιλοτιμηθέντων καὶ μάλιστα Διονυσίου τοῦ Θεών[ο]ς ὅμως 77 οὐκ ἐβουλήθη ἀκριβὼς [ἐξελέγχει] ἐξελενῆσαι, ταμιευόμενος ἐμαυτῷ 78 κατὰ τῶν [πάλιν] παλιν ἀρξαμένων ὁργὴν ἀμεταμέλητον· 79 ἀπλῶς δὲ [προσαγορεύω] προσαγορεύωι ὅτι ἂν μὴ [καταπαύσῃτε] καταπαύσῃται τὴν [ὀλέ-80 θριον] ολεθροῦ ὁργὴν ταύτην κατ' ἀλλήλων αὐθάδιον ἐγβιασθήσομαι 81 [δεῖξαι] διξαι [οἶον] οὐν ἐστὶν ἡγεμῶν [φιλάνθρωπος] φιλάνθρωπος εἰς ὁργὴν δικαίαν μεταβεβλη- 82 μένος, διόπερ ἔτι καὶ νῦν [διαμαρτύρομαι] διαμαρτυρομε [ἴνα] εἴνα Ἀλεξανδρεῖς μὲν 83 πράεως καὶ [φιλάνθρωπος] φιλάνθρωπος [προσφέρωνται] προσφέροντε [Ἰουδαίον<ς>] ιουδαῖος τοῖς 84 τὴν αὐτὴν [πόλιν] πολεῖν ἐκ πολλῶν χρόνων [οἰκοῦσι] οἰκουσιν Column 5,85 καὶ μηδὲν τῶν πρὸς [θρησκείαν] θρησκείαν αὐτοῖς νενομισμένων 86 τοῦ θεοῦ [λυμαίνωνται] λοιμωμένων ἀλλὰ ἐδῶκεν αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἔθεσιν 87 χρῆσθαι [οἷς] υς καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ Σεβαστοῦ, ἅπερ καὶ [ἐγὼ] ἐγῶι 88 διακούσας ἀμφοτέρων ἐβεβαίωσα· καὶ [Ἰουδαίους] ιουδαῖοις δὲ 89 ἄντικρυς [κελεύω] κελυωι μηδὲν [πλήω] πληωι ὧν πρότερον 90 ἔσχον περιεργάζεσθαι μηδὲ ὥσπερ ἐν [δυσί] δυσει [πόλεσιν] πολεσεῖν κα- 91 τοικοῦντας δύο πρεσβείας ἐκπέμπειν τοῦ λοιποῦ, 92 [ὅ] ω μὴ πρότερόν ποτε [ἐπράχθη] ἐπραχθη, μηδὲ ἐπισπαίρειν 93 γυμνασιαρχικοῖς ἢ κοσμητικοῖς [ἀγῶσι] ἀγῶσει, 94 καρπουμένους μὲν τὰ [οἰκεία] οἰκία [ἀπολαύοντας] ἀπολαύοντας δὲ 95 ἐν ἀλλοτρίᾳ πόλει περιουσίας [ἀπάντων] ἀπ.ν... ἀγαθῶν, 96 μηδὲ ἐπάγεσθαι ἢ [προσιεσθαι] προσιεσθαι ἀπὸ Συρίας ἢ [Αἰγύπτου] αἰγυπου 97 καταπλέοντας Ἰουδαίους ἐξ οὗ μείζονας ὑπονοίας 98 [ἀναγκασθήσομαι] ἀναγκασθῶμε λαμβάνειν· εἰ δὲ με μή, 99 πάντα τρόπον αὐτοὺς ἐπεξελεύσομαι καθάπερ κοινὴν 100 τινὰ τεινα τῆς οἰκουμένης νόσον ἐξεγείροντας. ἐὰν 101 τοῦτων ἀποστάντες ἀμφοτέροι μετὰ πρῶότητος 102 καὶ [φιλάνθρωπίας] φιλάνθρωπείας τῆς πρὸς ἀλλήλους ζῆν ἐθελήσῃτε 103 καὶ [ἐγὼ] ἐγῶι πρόνοιαν τῆς πόλεως [ποιήσομαι] ποιήσομαι τὴν [ἀνωτάτω] ἀνατατῶι 104 καθάπερ ἐκ προγόνων [οἰκείας] οἰκίας [ἡμῖν] υμῖν υμῶν [ὑπαρχούσης] υπαρχουσας.

The occasion for the letter was almost certainly the second outbreak of hostilities in Alexandria in 41 in which Josephus says that the Jews were the aggressors (A.J. 19.278).⁷ Although the date given above is for the formal publication of the prefect's edict, Claudius would have sent the letter in the autumn.

⁶ P. Lond. 1912 = CPJ II, 153. Trans. from Select Papyri, vol. 2, Non-Literary Papyri. Public Documents, ed. A. S. HUNT and C. C. EDGAR, Cambridge, MA/London 1934, 85-7. I have placed the corrections to the Greek text in square brackets.

⁷ See the commentary in CPJ II.47-54.