

# Introduction

The thirteenth chapter of John's Apocalypse describes the rise of a progression of horrifying beast bearing multiple heads, horns, and crowns. These beasts blaspheme God, worship a creature the author describes as "the dragon," and prey upon the church and her saints with a monstrous power and appetite. Like much of Revelation, these passages speak in riddles, appealing to those who have understanding or wisdom to make sense of them. As such, the beasts and their various appendages have long been a source of speculation for readers and students of the New Testament. Hypotheses abound about the institutions or individuals they represent, as well as about the identities of the beasts' horns. Yet while many different theories have been proposed, scholars commonly identify these nightmarish creatures with one or another group of Roman emperors, the rulers and representatives of the empire in which John and most ancient Christians lived. John and his audience evidently experienced these emperors and the Roman authorities at large as blaspheming God and Christ, and as persecuting God's followers. The only hope for relief and vindication for the saints, Revelation suggests, was to suffer on the Lamb's behalf, and await Christ's triumphant return.

John's vision of empire proved persuasive to many Christians, both in his own era and in subsequent centuries. His is not, however, the New Testament's only presentation of civil government. Paul, in the thirteenth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, for example, describes the same emperors John depicts worshipping the dragon as established by God. Whereas in Revelation the empire and its representatives terrorize all Christians, in Romans these authorities hold terror only for those who have done wrong. Whatever right relationship with empire for Christians might mean to the author of Revelation, it must certainly involve deep skepticism and perseverance in Christ even in the face of grave persecution. Romans, by contrast, calls Christians to right relationship with empire by paying, quite literally, their dues, expecting the repayment of good for good and evil for evil, and giving governing authorities honor—if not the honor reserved for Christ. As in the case of Revelation, many Christians in both the first and later centuries found persuasive the vision presented in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 for dealing with government.

The tensions between these texts, already evident in the New Testament corpus, prefigure early Christians' ambivalent relationship with empire and government. The history of the church's relationship with the governing authorities, in other words, unfolds from its very beginnings at the fraught intersection of apprehension and acceptance, collaboration and separation, Revelation 13 and Romans 13. Different eras and different aspects of the tradition emphasize one or the other trajectory, at times embracing civil authority with considerable enthusiasm, at others rejecting its imposition on Christian lives and teachings as hostile or even demonic. Neither voice, however, was ever fully silenced.

This volume is dedicated to helping students chart the

complex, challenging and challenged, narrative that emerges from them in the first six centuries of the Common Era. To divide up this period into a progression of epochs is not without challenges; the process of Christianization and the response to the spread of Christianity by governing authorities progressed at different paces in different parts of the ancient world. From its origins in the Roman province of Judea, Christianity spread across the Roman and the neighboring Sassanid (Persian) Empires. By the end of the sixth century, moreover, the Christian presence had long spread into other parts of the world as well, each presenting different contextual challenges in Christians' relations with civic leaders. Such diversity notwithstanding, we may nevertheless identify a general trend by which Christianity throughout the first few centuries of the Common Era gradually moved from the margins of these empires into their very center. The primary sources elected here track these developments, even if they do so in what is by necessity a piecemeal fashion.

The very end of the early Christian era, the sixth and seventh centuries, also marks the rise of Islam. The latter is of great relevance to both the development of Christianity and to Christians' relationship with empire and civil authorities. Living under Muslim rule presented new challenges for churches, many of whom had existed for centuries in Christian-dominated territories. Christians in the these areas, including particularly Syria and the Greek-speaking East, sought to respond to their changed circumstances in diverse ways. These developments lie beyond the scope of this volume; an appendix at its conclusion nevertheless points interested students to resources for the study of this period, particularly as they concern Christians' efforts to make sense of and engage with the new governing structures.

**Voices from the Margins:  
The Early Centuries of Christian Development**

The earliest witnesses to Christians' relationship with their imperial surroundings come from the New Testament itself, including passages like Mark 12:13-17 and its parallels in Matthew and Luke, 1 Pet. 2:13-17, and the two exemplars already discussed here: Romans 13 and Revelation 13. The fledgling faith, by contrast, seems to have made relatively little impression upon the governing authorities and their historians. Tacitus's *Annals*, his account of the history of the Roman Empire during the opening decades of the first century, mention Emperor Nero's scapegoating of Christians. Nero had punished the Christians of Rome to cover up his plot to burn down the city; the result, Tacitus writes, was a groundswell of popular sympathy, even though neither Tacitus himself nor the Roman populace seem to have been favorably impressed by Christians in general.

It was, however, Tacitus's contemporary, **Pliny the Younger**, who left the most interesting testament to imperial authorities' engagement with Christians. A governor of the Roman province of Bithynia, modern-day Turkey, Pliny encountered Christians when they were pointed out to him by anonymous sources. Upon questioning a few of them, Pliny found them, on the one hand, obligingly open about their liturgical practices, and, on the other, unwilling to renounce their affiliation even on his order. Faced with this refusal, Pliny wrote to the Roman **Emperor Trajan** for advice. Trajan's response elucidates well the interests and commitments of Roman officials for much of the first two or three centuries of the church's development. Christians, the emperor declared, were not to be sought out. To give ear to anonymous

denunciation was contrary to the “spirit of the age,” according to Trajan. Once a Christian had to be apprehended, moreover, they were to be given every opportunity to recant and participate in the Roman civic cult. If they failed to do so, however, they were to be punished—for their disobedience to imperial orders, if not for their faith.

The *Acts of the Martyrs of Scili*, the account of a group martyrdom from the later decades of the second century, illustrates what might have occurred before a Roman authority figure like Pliny from the Christian perspective. Unlike other North African martyr-acts, including, for example, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the *Acts* are remarkably brief and spare. The text takes the form of a transcript, recounting the trial of twelve Christians, seven men and five women, before the North African proconsul Saturninus. At the beginning of the document, the group’s allegiances have already been established. Saturninus proceeds to exhort the Christians to “return to the Roman rite,” by swearing by the genius—that is to say, the guardian spirit—of the emperor. The Christians, in turn, affirm their identity, insist upon their blameless behavior, and reject all opportunity to reconsider. At the trial’s conclusion, they are accordingly sentenced to execution and, the author of the *Acts* avers, “crowned with martyrdom.”

How might a modern reader make sense of the Roman imperial response to Christian groups in their midst? Our sources bear witness, on the one hand, to a kind of benign indifference towards Christians’ beliefs and liturgical practices. On the other hand, however, Christians’ insistence on their confessional identity and concomitant refusal to swear by or offer the token sacrifices to the empire’s or emperor’s guardian spirits drew a sharp and frequently violent

response from Roman authorities. Part of this dynamic has to do with the role religion played in the Roman Empire, which was by and large rather different from its conception in contemporary Western countries, including the United States. Roman authorities' approach to religion centered first on cult, that is to say, religious practice, rather than belief; and second on the empire's pragmatic needs. Part of Roman historians' fundamental assumption was that each people group both had and ought to have its own gods: like laws and land, deities and rites were markers of a people's identity. When a group was conquered by Rome, the latter generally did not seek to put an end to its vanquished foes' religious practices. Rather, Roman strategies sought to make use of such peoples' rites to integrate the newly acquired territories into the Roman Empire both practically, by exploiting existing structures for gathering taxes, and metaphysically, by adding the conquered peoples' gods to the Roman pantheon.

This is not to say that Roman officials gave free reign to all religious practices; mystery cults and other groups that thrived on secrecy or sought to foment rebellion against the empire were sharply censored. Christians, too, may have run afoul of such prohibitions, either by association with Jewish communities, who experienced grave persecution in both Palestine and Egypt during the second century; or, more likely, by virtue of the exclusion of the uninitiated—that is to say, the unbaptized—from the mysteries of the Eucharist. Beyond these imperfect analogies, Christianity may have been largely unintelligible on its own terms in the Roman framework of religious thought; it did not boast any ethnic or territorial affiliation, rather drawing, as the second-century writer Bardaisan proudly announced, its people from all over the world and from all manner of demographics.

Christians' failure to participate in the central civic and religious rites of the Roman Empire no doubt made them suspect to their neighbors; once they had been called before imperial authorities, moreover, their refusal to sacrifice for the good of the empire resulted in their punishment, by flogging and execution, for insubordination. Even in a world as fraught with violence as the Roman Empire, these dramatic displays apparently drew much public attention. Tertullian, a North African writer at the turn of the third century, argued that the very practice of making martyrs ultimately contributed to the spread of the faith: "Because those who see us die, wonder why we do, for we die like the men [e.g., the ancient philosophers] you admire, not like slaves or criminals. And when they find out [why we die], they join us."<sup>1</sup>

The martyrdom of a Christian or a group of Christians, in other words, could generate much public curiosity. Once roused, such inquiries nevertheless called for a persuasive and winsome defense of the faith. The so-called "apologists," Christian writers including many who had benefited from philosophical training, sought to provide such a defense. The resulting genre, the "Christian apology," consists of writings, treatises, and dialogues, that elucidate Christianity's practices and commitments. Many of these documents are addressed to imperial authorities—to emperors, governors, and the Roman senate—and purportedly seek to win for Christians the right to freely practice their religion. Accordingly, the apologists frequently depict Christians as model citizens, and their faith as benefiting the empire. That the apologies in question actually reached their addressees is, however, doubtful in the extreme; rather, they were read and copied by Christians, who were no doubt encouraged both by the defense of their

1. Tertullian, *Apology* 50 (ANF 3.55).

tradition and by the affirmation of their continued Roman identity.

A particularly apt example of this genre comes from the pen of **Justin Martyr**, a second-century self-styled Christian philosopher: his *First Apology*. Some Christians, Justin conceded, acted in morally or even legally offensive fashion, and the Roman authorities were right to punish them. The empire's task, however, was to search out each individual's responsibility rather than treating all identified with the name of Christ as guilty. Indeed, true Christians were *more* likely to follow the laws of the Empire, since they conducted themselves in constant awareness of being watched by a divine authority who prized ethical comportment. To illustrate his point, Justin also adduces Jesus's teachings on such matters as speaking the truth, doing no harm to another, and paying taxes with pleasure and punctuality. In short, Justin argues, "to God alone [Christians] render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment."<sup>2</sup>

Justin's appeals, and those of his fellow apologists, frequently fell on deaf ears, if they reached the ears of imperial authorities at all. Indeed, Justin's by-name—"the Martyr"—suggests just how closely the practice of Christianity's intellectual defense was connected to the willingness to suffer for one's convictions. Yet the assertion that Christianity was wholly compatible with citizenship in the empires of this world, if only those empires were prepared to recognize it as such, sounds prominently in Justin's and his contemporaries' writings. Nor are the sources included here intended to suggest that Christians faced death always and everywhere in the

2. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 17; see *infra* at XXX.

Roman Empire until the rise of its first Christian emperor, Constantine. Most persecutions were local, instigated either by mob violence or by a local governor. Accordingly, while some parts of the empire generated many martyrs, Christians in other locations lived in a relatively unmolested fashion. It was not until the middle of the third century that an edict by Emperor Decius (201–251 CE) for the first time led to empire-wide persecution of Christians.

### **The Move Towards the Center**

The third century was an era of internal and external struggle for the Roman Empire. Civil war, natural disasters and the resulting food shortages, and the constant press against the empire's boundaries by its eastern and northern neighbors all contributed to great instability of imperial leadership: more than twenty emperors succeeded one another in a span of only fifty years. At times, civil authorities sought to remedy the crisis by returning the empire to its religious roots; in 250 CE Decius's edict, for example, required all Roman citizens to sacrifice "for the well-being of the empire." The edict neither mentioned nor presumably explicitly targeted Christians, who were still a small minority among the empire's citizens. Yet its impact fell disproportionately on Christians, particularly in parts of the empire like North Africa where the local authorities were prepared to enforce its requirements with recourse to violence if necessary.

The legacy of the martyrs and their commemoration in churches' liturgical calendars notwithstanding, Christians' response to Decius's edict was far from unanimous. Some indeed refused to sacrifice, suffering martyrdom or torture as a result. Others, however, fled, apostasized and in the process