

## Daily Life in the Roman Empire

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Upper level and lower level, no middle class

Upper class emperor, high government officials, wealthy (maybe 3-5% of the population)

Lower class of bureaucrats, religious functionaries, merchants who had some wealth, slaves of the elite, working lower class of artisans, skilled labor, lower-level slaves and poor workers.

Social status was very important.

The churches of Paul seem to have drawn from all classes, with few if any from the very top.

His churches did have some wealthy members who owned slaves, had homes large enough for the church to meet in.

#### Slaves

Perhaps 35% of population. As many as 2 million. Ways people became slaves. Freed often at age 30 or death of owner. Marriages not recognized. Families split

Paul used imagery of slavery often.

Issue in book of Philemon

#### Patron/Client relationships (Phoebe)

#### Marriage and Family Life

Married young (early teens for girls; twenties for men). Norm for people to be married. Paul would have been married.

Divorce by men or women

Extended families –grandparents, slaves

Patriarchal

Women

Was hierarchical

Many examples of women who broke through societal boundaries.

Women who owned estates and were business persons.

Lydia from Thyatira

Many women were active in the work of the church, including with Paul (Euodia and Syntyche, Chloe, Priscilla, Phoebe [deacon and benefactor])

Children – high mortality rate (30% died 1st year; 50% by age 10)

Exposure was practiced (letter from young man in Alexandria to his wife)

Education – Gymnasiums; sometimes teacher was paid by parents; sometimes by city. Lower class would have been less likely to attend. Primarily for boys.

Lower class families would train children and maybe need them in work.

Early church used family as a model

Household of God

Brothers and sisters

Paul occasionally spoke of himself as father

Churches met in homes – Social stratification likely created problems. Perhaps behind the situation in Corinth (factions and Lord's Supper)

#### Urban

Paul's work in cities. Major cities.

Cities were crowded, very dense and noisy.  
Often organized into ethnic or trade neighborhoods  
Great examples of ancient cities—Ephesus, Pergamum, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Miletus in modern Turkey. Philippi, Corinth, Athens in Greece

Various types of buildings:

Agora (forum) shops,

Colonnades

Temples and shrines

Synagogues

Shops – owners sometimes lived in or above

Bema –official announcements, speeches, public hearings

Fountains and monuments –dedicated to a god or emperor, with inscriptions

Theaters

Odeion

Baths

Gymnasiums

Baths

Latrines

Residences

Voluntary associations

Collegia

Trade groups

Ethnic groups

Athletic groups

Funeral associations

Since Christians were united by belief, not by occupation or ethnicity, could be seen as dangerous.

Pliny's letter to Trajan.

Hellenistic and Roman Religions

Domestic gods and goddesses

Household deities were expected to protect the family from disaster and illness. They were also expected to provide for the economic welfare of the family.

Religious practices included the veneration of small statues of the gods and goddesses, sacrifices of grain or meat, or offerings of food and drink on the hearth.

Nature spirits or deities (like Pan, the god of the shepherds, or the river gods) were placated by constructing heaps of stones along the roadways. Travelers would add a stone or an offering.

Civic or state gods and goddesses

Cities often had a patron deity who protected them. Huge temples were built to the gods and goddesses. Compare the temple to Artemis at Ephesus; the altar of Zeus in Pergamum. Cities often had temples to many gods or goddesses. Priests served in the temples; sacrifices were offered; festivals were held. Individuals went to the temple to offer sacrifices, for celebrations, to

pay homage to the god or goddess. Purity was required to enter the temple precincts. Meat that was sacrificed was sold in the market place.

Identification of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.

#### Personal Religions

Asclepius – Cos, Epidaurus, Pergamum, Corinth

#### Mystery Religions

Eleusinian Mysteries—Demeter, mother of grain. Her daughter, Kore-Persephone was carried off to the underworld by Hades. Demeter is unable to find her and withdraws into a fast. As a result the grain does not grow and people are afraid of starving. Zeus intervenes and forces Hades to release Kore who spends two-thirds of the year with her mother and one-third in the underworld. (The dry summer was the time when wheat doesn't grow but must be stored underground in huge grain jars.) Pigs were the primary sacrificial animal for the cult of Demeter.

Mithraism

#### Magic, Astrology, Divination

#### Philosophies

Stoicism – live in conformity with nature. Everyone has a place in the universe. Since one cannot change one's destiny but can only accept it and submit to it, one must learn not to be affected by external circumstances. The wise person will be indifferent to pain and pleasure, to wealth and poverty, to success and misfortune. Compare this attitude with Paulin Phil. 4:11-12: "Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." Paul here even uses a favorite word of the Stoics autarkns—content, self-sufficient. The difference, however, is that the Stoic faced life and death with resources all found within himself. Paul found the secret of his life in his union with Christ.

Epicurus- Pleasure—pleasure – freedom from disturbance, whereby one achieved inner harmony, happiness and peace.

Cynicism -- Diatribe

#### VI. Judaism

Jews, Gentiles, God-fearers

Institutions – temple, synagogue, Sanhedrin

Scriptures

Groups – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes

#### Persecution

The earliest evidence for Roman persecution directed specifically at Christians comes from the time of the emperor Nero, who was remembered in Christian tradition as responsible for the deaths of both Peter and Paul in Rome. Writing in the second century, Tacitus stated that when a massive fire destroyed a large portion of the city of Rome in 64 C.E. Nero blamed the conflagration on the Christians, "a class of men loathed for their vices." Tacitus described the incident as follows: "First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night."

Suetonius also mentioned the persecution of Christians by Nero, but did not connect their treatment with the fire, giving only the explanation that they were "a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition." The extent of Nero's persecution of Christians is not known.

Tacitus's statement that "vast numbers were convicted" is not too helpful. Whereas Nero's reputation as the first persecutor of the church is well-founded, his actions against the Christians were likely limited only to Rome and to a short period of time.

Christian tradition remembered Domitian, who was emperor from 81-96 C.E., as the next great enemy of the church. During his reign he alienated the senate, executing several senators on supposedly false or trivial charges. At his death, the senate issued a *damnatio memoriae* against him, thus obliterating his memory by melting down his coins, destroying his statues, and erasing his name from public records. Other than the book of Revelation, however, little evidence can be garnered to support the idea of Domitian as a major persecutor of Christians. The few isolated incidents mentioned by ancient writers that are sometimes pointed to as evidence of Domitian's hostile actions towards Christians are open to various interpretations. The most interesting mention of persecution of Christians comes from the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of the Roman province of Bithynia and Pontus in northern Asia Minor, and Trajan, Roman emperor from 98-117 C.E. In one of his letters, Pliny wrote to Trajan asking for advice on how to handle Christians who were brought to his attention. He was unsure of the proper procedure because he had never been present at any trial of Christians. Pliny wondered "whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name." He then described what his course of action had been for those brought before him accused of being Christians: "I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished." Once he started dealing with the problem, the number of cases multiplied as a result both of informers and of an anonymous pamphlet with names of people accused of being Christians. Pliny dismissed the charges against anyone who recanted and made offerings to a statue of the emperor and images of the gods.

After investigating the Christians, Pliny could find no specific crime of which they were guilty, stating, "I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths." Even so, he found the group worrisome "in view of the number of persons endangered: for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult." In his reply to Pliny, Trajan affirmed that the governor had followed the proper procedure. He added, however, that Christians were not to be sought out, that anyone who recanted by making offerings to the gods was to be pardoned, and that anonymous accusations should not be allowed. (Also during Trajan's reign, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch of Syria, was transported in chains to Rome to face death in the arena. Unfortunately, the reasons and circumstances of his arrest are unknown.)

Since persecution of Christians was sporadic and localized, no general law against Christianity likely existed during this period. Furthermore, that Pliny did not know the grounds for investigating Christians or the crime for which they were guilty indicates that he was unaware of any official edict against Christianity. In some cases, Christian groups might have run into trouble with the authorities because they were thought to be subversive or illegal. Associations, called *collegia* in Latin, were widespread and numerous in the Roman Empire. These *collegia* were of various types—religious associations, trade and professional guilds, and burial societies. The Roman authorities were often suspicious of these organizations and on several occasions attempted to control or even banish them because they were afraid the groups might become politically active and subversive. For example, in another one of his letters to Trajan, Pliny requested permission for one of the cities in his province to form an association of

volunteer firefighters to provide protection for the city. Trajan declined the request, warning, "It is societies like these which have been responsible for political disturbances in your province, particularly in its towns. If people assemble for a common purpose, whatever name we give them and for whatever reason, they soon turn into a political club."

The situations reflected in 1 Peter, in the letter to Pliny, and perhaps even in Revelation were possibly instances in which Christians first experienced hostility from their non-Christian neighbors who then accused them before the authorities of various "crimes." Writings from the late second century and afterwards mention Christians being accused of atheism, cannibalism, incest, infanticide, and magic. Some of these charges were likely due to misunderstandings of Christian practices. Mistaken ideas of the Lord's Supper (eating the body and drinking the blood) led to charges of cannibalism, while misperceptions of Christian "love-feasts" (or agape meals) and the custom of calling each other "brother" and "sister" led to accusations of incest. The refusal of the Christians to participate in the worship of the various gods and goddesses commonly worshipped by their neighbors led to charges of atheism, while their failure to participate in the imperial cult and other social activities would have labeled them as anti-social at best, and traitors at worst. These accusations are perhaps what Tacitus had in mind when he referred to the Christians as a people "loathed for their vices." Even if these charges against them proved false, the Christians' obstinate refusal to renounce their faith when given the opportunity would have been reason enough for punishment, as the letter from Pliny makes clear.

Hostilities against the early Christians were apparently isolated and few in number. In most places Christians likely lived quietly and peaceably with their neighbors. Occasionally, persecution did occur. Trajan's response to Pliny indicates the precarious situation in which some Christians found themselves. They were not to be sought out, and, as long as they kept a low profile, they were safe. If brought to the attention of the authorities, however, they might be faced with the ultimate test of faith—recant or be killed.