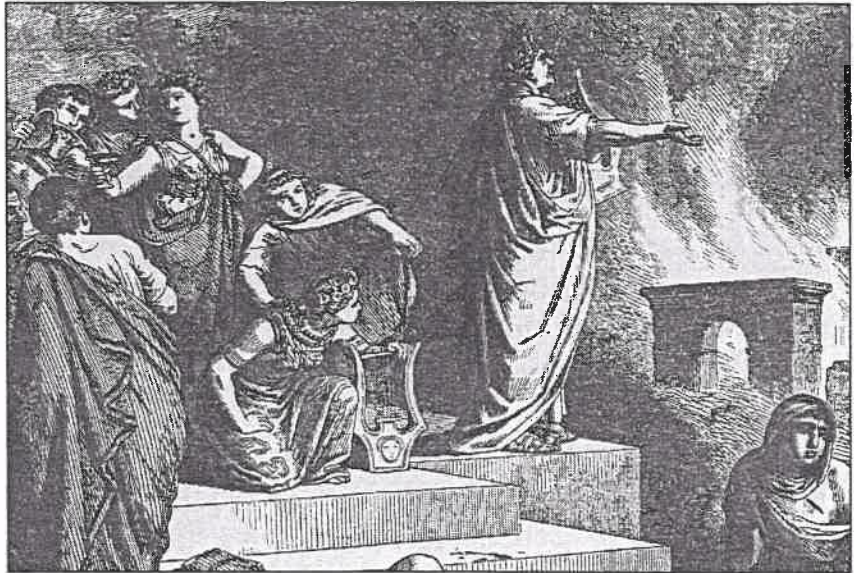


The Treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire

Rome first became aware of Christianity around A.D. 30. It did nothing to stop it. Emperor Tiberius thought the sect might weaken the Jewish religion. He asked the Senate to legalize the Christian faith and make Christ a Roman god. But the Senate refused. Instead, it made Christianity an "illegal superstition," a crime under Roman law.

Christianity was now illegal, but Tiberius ordered Roman officials not to enforce the law. This policy lasted about 30 years, until the time of Nero.

Local people, however, often attacked and rioted against



In A.D. 64, a great fire burned Rome. The emperor, Nero, blamed Christians for the fire.

Christians. They especially targeted Christian preachers.

Nero's Persecution

On the night of July 18, A.D. 64, a fire began at the Circus Maximus. This was the great arena in Rome for chariot races and games. The fire spread quickly and for six days burned much of the city, including Emperor Nero's palace.

A rumor spread that Nero himself had caused the great fire. He was also accused of playing the lyre (like a small harp) while watching the fire. He probably did play the lyre. But he did not cause the fire. Even so, the people of Rome blamed him.

Pronunciation Key

Constantine (KON stun teen)
Decius (DEE shus)
Diocletian (die oh KLEE shun)
Gallienus (gal eye EE nus)
Nero (NEAR oh)
Tacitus (TASS i tuss)
Theodosius (THEE oh doh shus)
Trajan (TRAY jun)

Fearful that Roman mobs would turn on him, Nero looked for a scapegoat to blame for the fire. He decided to blame the Christians. The Christian religion was still illegal. So it was easy to order mass arrests, trials, and executions. The public began blaming the Christians rather than Nero for the great fire.

The Christians suffered horrible deaths. The Roman historian Tacitus described Nero's methods of execution:

Dressed in wild animal skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be lit after dark Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus

For years, Christians lived in fear. Many Roman pagans wanted to see the illegal sect destroyed. But Christians kept gaining new believers. In 110, Emperor Trajan tried a compromise. He stated that Christians "are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished" In other words, the religion was still illegal, but officials were not to look for Christians.

For the next 100 years, Christians practiced their faith openly. Rome's system of roads helped Christians spread the gospel throughout the empire. And the Christians' openness to people from all groups and

classes helped them gain many converts.

But in 250, Emperor Decius started persecuting Christians again. He wanted Romans to follow the pagan religion. Many Christians died. But when Gallienus became emperor, he halted the persecution. Gallienus then went one step further. He recognized Christianity as a legal religion for the first time. Gallienus hoped to bring religious peace to the empire.

Christian Bloodbath

For almost 40 years, the Christian Church thrived. Then, in 303, Emperor Diocletian began the last terrible persecution.

Diocletian had come to power in a crisis. Prices of goods were soaring. German tribes threatened the western part of the empire. The Persian Empire was attacking in the east.

Diocletian moved boldly. He set price controls. He doubled the size of the army. To govern the empire more easily, he broke it into two parts—the Greek-speaking east and the Latin-speaking west. Diocletian ruled the eastern part.

Suspicious of Christians, Diocletian started persecuting them. He demanded that all Christian soldiers resign from the army. He forbid Christian worship services. He ordered churches destroyed. He had Christian members of the government tortured and killed.

When Christian uprisings took place, he got tougher. He ordered the arrest, torture, and killing of priests. In 304, Rome ordered that all Christians honor the pagan gods or face death.

Diocletian and the western emperor retired in 305. Diocletian named their successors, but a civil war broke out. Other Romans claimed the right to be emperor. The war raged on for almost a decade. Even so, the persecution of Christians continued. Galerius, Diocletian's handpicked successor in the eastern empire, hated Christians and started killing them. Christians were crucified and burned alive. Crowds in Roman arenas shouted, "Down with Christians!"

Galerius saw that he had failed to stamp out the Christian religion. Dying of cancer, he stopped the persecution in 311. He begged for Christians to pray for his health. But the killing started again when he died.

Constantine was fighting for control of the western empire. He had a vision that he would win a big battle if he fought under the sign of the cross. He had workers mark his soldiers' shields with crosses before the battle. When they won, Constantine converted to Christianity.

Constantine won the civil war and became the new western emperor. Constantine supported the

Christian religion. The eastern emperor supported the pagan religion. In 313, they agreed to compromise and allow every person "to follow the religion that he chooses."

The two emperors, however, kept battling one another. In 324, Constantine won and became emperor of both parts of the Roman Empire. With Constantine's backing, Christianity became the strongest religion in the empire.

In 395, Emperor Theodosius made Christianity Rome's new state religion. Christians, who had endured so much, started attacking the pagan religion. They closed temples and banned sacrifices to pagan gods. They even changed some pagan celebrations into Christian ones. For example, the church changed the birthday of the sun god on the 25th of December into the celebration of the birth of Christ.

For Discussion

1. Why did Nero target the Christians?
2. What helped the spread of Christianity throughout the empire?
3. What different policies did Rome have toward the Christian religion? Which do you think was the best policy? Why?

