

Chapter Sixteen

The Christian Attack on GrecoRoman Culture. ca. 135 to 235

Over the course of about four hundred years, from the early second century to the early sixth, Greco-Roman civilization was replaced by Christendom. More precisely, the gods were replaced by God and by Satan. When all the other gods were driven from the field the sole remaining god ceased to be a common noun and became instead a proper name, "God."¹ That sole remaining god was the god of the Judaeans and Christians. Satan was his diametrically opposed counterpart, the personification of Evil.

The god of the Judaeans and Christians had begun in the southern Levant, during the Late Bronze Age, as Yahweh *sabaoth* ("Yahweh of the armies"). He became the patron god of the Sons of Israel, and during the reigns of David and Solomon his cult-center was moved to Jerusalem in Judah. In the seventh century BC monolatrist priests and kings in Jerusalem made Yahweh the only god who could be worshiped in Judah and began addressing him as *Adonai* ("my Lord"). For Hellenistic Judaeans he was *Adonai* in Hebrew, and in Greek was *Kyrios* ("Lord") or *ho theos hysistos* ("the highest god"). For the Pharisees and rabbis, who supposed that even the title *Adonai* was too holy to be uttered, he was simply *ha-shem* ("the Name"). Among early Christians he was "the Father" or "our Father," and in the fourth century he became "God the Father," a title which distinguished him from "God the Son."

Although they addressed him with different terms, Judaeans and Christians agreed that they were invoking the same god,² who had created the world, had wiped out almost all living things in Noah's Flood, had been worshiped by all of Noah's immediate descendants, but had then been forgotten by humankind until he made himself known to Abraham. The god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob revealed his name - YHWH - to Moses at the Burning Bush, and on Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb gave to Moses the laws that his worshipers were to obey. From his holy mountain Yahweh brought the people of Israel to the land that he had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

It is known today that in Israel and Judah during the early Iron Age Yahweh was worshiped alongside several other gods, especially El, Baal and Asherah. In Judah from the seventh century BC onward the worshipers of Yahweh, or Adonai, tended to be monolatrist. In the discourses of the Deuteronomist Adonai threatens with dire punishments any worshiper who had anything to do with "the gods of the Gentiles." Among some of the Judahites in the Mesopotamian Diaspora (Deutero-Isaiah, for example) monolatry evolved into a weak form of monotheism. By the Hellenistic period, although many Judaeans still worshiped Adonai because they believed he was *their* god, other Judaeans worshiped him because they believed he was not only their god but also the *only* god, although with the qualification that opposite Adonai was an evil Adversary, Satan.. This Judaeian monotheism, expressed most fully in the works of Philo of Alexandria, was the starting point for New Covenant Christians. By the reign of Justinian (525-565) most people who lived in what had once been the Roman empire worshiped God. Of course there were a few recalcitrants who still paid cult to the old gods, but these few "pagans"

tended to live in out-of-the-way places (*pagani* was the Latin term for “rustics”). By the middle of the seventh century even the tribesmen of Arabia, which had never been part of the Roman empire, threw out their old gods and joined the Judaeans and Christians in worshipping God, the god of Abraham. In Arabic, *Al-lāh* has the same meaning as “God” in English.

In the empire the displacing of the old gods was accomplished by the Christians. This achievement involved an offensive against Hellenism (as well as against the barbarian gods) by Christians in the Greek east, and an offensive against the Roman tradition in the Latin west. Toward the end of the fourth century the Christians were victorious in their campaign: the emperor Theodosius I (379-395) closed the temples and banned sacrifices throughout the empire. But the process was a long one, and at the beginning no one would have guessed that it would turn out as it did.

Monotheism of the New Covenant

Although the word “monotheism” was not coined until the seventeenth century, and did not come into common use until the rise of Unitarianism in the eighteenth century, the belief – that there was only one god, and not many gods – was widespread in the later Roman empire. The people who did most to spread this belief in the second and third centuries were New Covenant Christians. It may be somewhat surprising that New Testament writers rarely expressed their monotheism, although they clearly assumed it. For these writers monotheism was not a novelty, because many Judaeans in the Hellenistic Diaspora had begun to believe that Adonai was the only god. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians shows that his recipients (who included Judaeans, God-fearers, and some who had lately worshiped Greek gods) took it for granted that the Greek gods were merely human inventions.

Well then, about eating this [meat consecrated to heathen deities]: of course, as you say, ‘A false god has no real existence, and there is no god but one.’ Even though there be so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth – and indeed there are many such gods and many such lords – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for him; there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through him (I Corinthians 8:4-6 (OSB)).

Likewise the author of the Letter of James knew that his readers, among others, believed in only one god: “You have faith and believe that there is one God. Excellent! Even demons have faith like that, and it makes them tremble” (James 2:19 OSB). The New Testament, however, was directed primarily to Judaeans and to God-fearers, attempting to persuade them that they should recognize Jesus as the Son of God, and neither the Judaeans nor the God-fearers needed to be told that the Olympian gods were imaginary. By the reign of Hadrian (117-138) New Covenant Christians had begun to confront Hellenism, and their message became quite different. In this confrontation Jesus the Christ slipped into the background, as the Christians promoted their belief in a single heavenly god – Adonai, whom Christians often called “the Father” – and attacked the Hellenes’ belief in many gods.

For this campaign the Christians were far more motivated than were the Judaeans. Most

Judaeans regarded Adonai as “the god of Israel,” and were willing to share him only with Gentiles who became Judaeans and observed at least the most salient aspects of the torah. Christians, on the other hand, believed that Adonai had always intended to be the god of everyone, that he had given the torah to Moses only as a temporary expedient, and that he had used Israel and Judah to prepare the way for the ultimate revelation of his Son. As a result, New Covenant Christians saw it as their duty to spread to all the world their belief in the One True God.

The Christians and Hellenism: the case against the Olympians

In their attack on the Greek gods Christians nominally addressed themselves to Hellenes, but hoped to persuade the much larger public of non-Hellenes that the Christians were right and the Hellenes were wrong. The Hellenes themselves, by and large, were quite satisfied with their gods, silly though they might be. The Olympians were an indispensable part of the Culture in which Hellenes took justifiable pride. By the Severan period the Hellenes had been living under Roman control for almost four hundred years, but Hellenism had flourished through all that time. The Romans themselves, especially the emperors and the upper class, were students and champions of Hellenism. As for the Olympian gods, they were what they were. Older than Homer and older than the heroes about whom he had sung, the Olympians had from the very beginning defined what it was to be a Hellene.

The Olympians were not nearly so dear, however, to the person who had not memorized long stretches of Homer's poetry, and who had not studied the classical tragedies and learned the Greek myths. For people who had never set foot in the school of the *grammatikos* Hellenism seemed a hobby of the rich. Because Hellenism was the tradition of the governing class it was necessarily admired, but for that very reason it generated some resentment from those who had either been unable or unwilling to acquire an Hellenic education.

So long as there was no cultural alternative, Hellenism had no detractors. In the second century CE, however, an alternative was at hand. During the Hellenistic period Judaeans both in Judaea itself and in the Diaspora had created a culture of their own, *Ioudaismos*. Hellenistic Judaism was expressed in the koine Greek that was widely understood rather than in the arcane Attic dialect that second-century Hellenes affected. Few Judaeans were embarrassed that Judaism was one-dimensional, focused entirely upon God and upon itself. In contrast to Hellenism's rich variety and endless contradictions, Judaism - as Josephus and apparently many others saw it - had the distinct advantage of being contained in only twenty-two books, all of them in harmony.³ Thanks to this strictly monitored tradition, the One God of Judaism was much more believable than were the merry Olympians. From the third century BC until the fourth century CE Hellenistic Judaism attracted millions of God-fearers to the synagogues, and many of these people took the decisive step of becoming Judaeans.

The three bloody clashes between Judaeans and Gentiles in the years 66-135, and the subsequent imperial edicts against circumcision, slowed the rate of conversions to Judaism. By 135, however, a younger sibling had appeared alongside Diaspora Judaism: New Covenant Christianity. The new religion featured the same twenty-two books as traditional Judaism, plus a

few more. Like the Judaeans, New Covenant Christians worshiped God and promised a blessed Afterlife. Unlike Judaism, however, New Covenant Christianity allowed Gentiles to remain Gentiles: converts to Christianity need not worry about circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, abstaining from unclean foods, or any of the minutiae contained in the oral torah of the Pharisees. The Christians had their own community, the *ekklesia*, with congregations in all of the major cities. All of this had been made available to Gentiles by the crucifixion and supposed resurrection of Jesus the Christ, who was said to be the son of God.

Alongside the attractions of Christianity were of course serious disadvantages. Like the Judaeans, the Christians would have nothing to do with the civic gods. This meant absenting yourself not only from the gods' festivals and rituals but also from such things as the theater, the amphitheater, the musical performances and everything else at which even a *pro forma* salute was made to the old gods. It was also troubling that to be a Christian was technically illegal. While Judaism was a legitimate religion, Christians had been formally outlawed by Nero. Nero had issued his edict against the militant *Christiani* who expected that Jesus as the Son of Man would come through the clouds to break the Roman empire and establish an eternal kingdom in Jerusalem. The original *Christiani* had resorted to violence, but the Gentiles who in the second century belonged to the New Covenant resolutely eschewed violence and had eschatological beliefs very different from those of the Judaeans *Christiani*. Although Roman officialdom was only vaguely aware of the differences between the original *Christiani* and the New Covenant Christians, by the end of Hadrian's reign the typical Roman governor recognized that the Christian congregations in his province were no threat to public order and were among the least of his worries. If you decided to be baptized as a Christian, therefore, you were not really risking arrest and punishment, although you knew that your new affiliation was illicit.

The New Covenant Christians, most of whom were Gentiles, were natural enemies of the Greek pantheon. Some of them had for a time been "God-fearers" at synagogues while others had come directly to a church from the idols, but almost all of them felt some measure of dissatisfaction or even disgust with the traditional polytheism. In addition, Paul's interpretation of the gospel was that God had established the New Covenant in order to bring to himself the Gentile world. This meant that New Covenant Christians were obliged to preach the gospel to all nations, and so convert the idol-worshipping Gentiles. The churches - much more so than the synagogues - were therefore necessarily at war with the Olympians and with all of their manifestations in sculpture, myth and poetry.

In some ways, the Christians were doing combat with straw-men. The Greek myths were just that: entertaining stories that few believed and that almost nobody took literally. They had provided amusement since before the days of Homer and Hesiod, and Hellenes learned them because they were an integral part of the Hellenic tradition. In addition to the Greek myths the Christians attacked the Hellenes' anthropomorphic statues of the gods, but in fact few Hellenes were idol-worshippers. A cult-statue stood in every Greek temple, but only the uneducated believed that the statue was itself a god. For most Hellenes, the cult-statue inside the temple was a representation of the god, and not the god himself or herself. Christians nevertheless assumed or pretended that the statues were what the Hellenes worshiped. When passing a temple Christians took care to protect themselves against the demon inside: as apotropaic measures they

hissed, crossed themselves, and spoke the name of Jesus the Christ. When happening, in the open, upon a statue of one or another of the gods, occasional Christians showed their bravado by spitting upon or even striking the statue, thereby proving to themselves and to onlookers that the statue was not a god.⁴

Although the Olympians were not taken very seriously in Hellenic society, they were woven throughout the fabric of Hellenism. Century after century they survived, and on festival days they still received lip-service. Most Hellenes may have doubted that the Olympians existed at all, whether in their temples or in Heaven, but it was the fatal flaw in Hellenism that the Olympians continued to be formally worshiped. Although the Christians were far from the only people who saw that the Olympians were not gods, the Christians claimed to know the One True God and warned that at the End of Time he would send to Hell people who had not worshiped him. That warning gave the Christian denunciation of the “false gods” an unprecedented intensity and urgency. Judaeans were not sure what would happen to the Gentiles at the End of Time: perhaps Gentiles who kept the Noachide commandments and lived an upright life would be allowed into Paradise.⁵ The Christians, on the other hand, were certain that nobody - however upright - who had worshiped the “false gods” would be saved. God had established his New Covenant specifically in order to bring the Gentiles to himself, and anyone who did not take advantage of the opportunity would get what he or she deserved. In short, whether Judaeans or Gentiles, only those people who believed the gospel and were baptized would be saved, and the rest would be damned.

Guiding the churches: the Christian bishops

For the first three or four generations New Covenant Christians' condemnation of the gods was scarcely audible. Paul's main objective was to persuade Judaeans and especially “God-fearers” that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, who by his death and resurrection had established a New Covenant. Paul and his audience took for granted that the Greek gods were not gods at all, but did not belabor the point. Luke, writing in the late 70s or 80s, hoped to assure Roman officialdom that “the brethren of the way” had no quarrel either with the empire or with Greco-Roman culture, and so he was careful to say as little as possible about the Greek and Roman gods. Nero's savage persecution of the *Christiani* was still very much remembered in New Covenant communities when Clement of Rome wrote his letter to the Corinthians, ca. 100, and the last thing that Clement and his readers wanted was to attract the government's attention by denouncing the establishment's gods and cultural traditions.

This discreet conduct was especially important for the bishops. By the early second century the Christians of a typical city were led by a single *episkopos*, or bishop, rather than by a group of *presbyteroi*. As the head of a city's Christians, a bishop's main responsibility was to make sure that his flock's beliefs and practice were correct. It was also part of his pastoral duties, however, to do what he could to protect the flock, both from the general population and from the state. The city's Christians would of course know their bishop by name and by sight, but so would the local authorities. The longevity of Christian bishops in the second and early third centuries is evidence that for the most part Christians were seldom in danger from their polytheist neighbors and rulers. Bishop Demetrios is said to have guided the churches of Alexandria for

forty-three years (189-232), apparently with no trouble from the Roman prefects. In Rome itself, the only second-century bishop who is said to have been martyred was Telesphoros (126-138?), but even Telesphoros had evidently gone about his business for twelve years without incident. The next Roman bishop known to have suffered martyrdom was Fabian, in January of 250.⁶

Attacking Hellenism: the Christian apologists

While Christian leaders were careful not to alienate or antagonize the polytheist majority, some Christians were more reckless. In the Roman Clement's generation the Christians continued to argue with Judaeans, trying to persuade them that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew prophets. That was a difficult task, however, after the calamitous war of 66-70, which had been largely inspired by Judaeans' hopes that Jesus was about to return and topple the Roman empire. By the second century it was clear that the gospel was far more appealing to Gentiles than to Judaeans. If a New Covenant Christian could not convince the Judaeans that Jesus was their Messiah, he or she could address the Gentiles instead. The message to the Gentiles was that their traditional gods were false and that anyone who wished to spend eternity in Heaven should abandon the idols and worship the One True God.

During the reign of Hadrian (117-138), and probably late in his reign, a few New Covenant Christians began to raise their voices against the gods of the Hellenes. By that time it was becoming clear that the *institutum Neronianum* would rarely be enforced, and that - barring an earthquake or some other disaster - most Christians would experience nothing worse from the political and cultural establishments than a sneer or a slander. Some Christians therefore began to speak out against the old gods, and even to show their hostility to the idols by physical gestures or insults. Because of their contempt for the gods, visibly expressed, by the middle of the second century Christians were often called *atheoi* ("atheists," meaning that they denied "the gods").⁷

For extended evidence we can turn to the Christian "apologies" that have come down to us in manuscript tradition from the second century. These tracts are conventionally called *apologiai*, "defenses," although for the most part they are not so much defenses of Christianity as attacks on Hellenism. The dominant theme by far in these so-called apologies is that the traditional Greek gods are not gods at all: the myths are scandalous, the statues are merely lifeless material, and the aniconic gods and goddesses are either inventions or demons (second-class and malevolent divinities).

The earliest known Christian apologists, Quadratus and Aristeides, both addressed their pamphlets to Hadrian himself.⁸ Neither work could have been distinguished. Quadratus' apology did not survive beyond the fourth century, and nothing else is known about him. The Greek manuscript tradition of Aristeides' diatribe was also short-lived, but in 1889 a Syriac translation was found at St. Catharine's Monastery in the Sinai. Aristeides, supposedly of Athens, divided the world's population into four parts: Hellenes, barbarians, Judaeans and Christians, and then went on to show that the Hellenes' gods were absurd, and the barbarians' even worse (the Egyptians, with their animal deities, being at the bottom of the barrel). The Judaeans did for a time know the One True God, but when God took upon himself human form

to be born as his own son - Jesus the Christ - the Judaeans did not accept this further revelation. The Christians, then, are alone in the world in having a true knowledge of God.

An early apologist who was more widely read by later generations of Christians was Justin Martyr (he was martyred at Rome ca. 165). Born in Samaria of Hellenic parents. Justin received a thorough Greek education at Ephesus. He was an admirer of Plato and much else in the Greek philosophical tradition, and after his conversion to Christianity he continued to sport the beard and garb of a philosopher. But Justin saw polytheism as a gross error. Moses, so Justin supposed, wrote long before Homer, and the Greek myths arose from misunderstandings of what the Hebrew writers had meant. Like other early apologists, Justin was not a trinitarian but a monotheist. All the other gods are illusions or fictions, be believed, and there is only one god: the god of the Septuagint and of Paul and the Christian Gospels. Justin's God was revealed both by the Old Testament prophets and by *logos*: first and imperfectly by the *logos* of the Greek philosophers and finally by the incarnate *logos*, Jesus the Christ. In his *First Apology* Justin presented Sokrates as a predecessor of the Christians: Sokrates had been executed by the Athenians because he did not believe in the gods that the city believed in. Sokrates was right in his "atheism," and the Athenians who condemned him were wrong.

Although Justin made some effort to find bridges from Hellenism to New Covenant Christianity, his student Tatian wrote an "in your face" denunciation not only of Greek polytheism but also of Greek literature, philosophy, and in fact the whole of Greek culture. Tatian's native language was Syriac, the dialect of Aramaic spoken in eastern Syria, the land to the east of the Euphrates river. He was given a Greek education, however, and became fluent in the elevated *koine* Greek of his day. By the second century, unfortunately, the vogue among Hellenes of the leisure class was to speak and write not in the contemporary *koine* but in the Attic dialect of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Tatian gamely tried to make his mark as a writer and orator of this classical Attic Greek, but came up somewhat short. Converting to Christianity, he wrote his *Against the Hellenes*, railing against the tradition that he had left, denouncing it as both arrogant and depraved. For the Greeks' most famous philosophers he had nothing but ridicule: Plato was sold into slavery because of his gluttony, and Alexander the Great ordered that Aristotle be hauled around in a cage, like a leopard or a bear. Such canards, some of them borrowed and some Tatian's own inventions, may have worked well enough for Tatian when delivered orally but in a published work they show the superficiality of his encounter with Greek philosophy. In his apology Tatian said nothing about Jesus the Christ, and instead touted God - the god of the Septuagint - at the expense of the Greek gods. Tatian detested sexuality of any kind (he steered the Syriac church toward total abstinence) and took special pleasure in parading the gods and heroes of the Hellenes as lechers and deviants. The Hellenes' proudest feat, the Trojan War, they undertook in order to retrieve the adulteress Helen from her paramour. And although Apollo raped the nymph Daphne he was a model of self-control when compared to Zeus, who raped not only the boy Ganymede and a host of women, but even his own daughter Persephone. So Tatian made his way through the Greek myths, expressing his outrage at stories that every Hellene knew but virtually nobody believed.

In the third quarter of the second century, Christianity - at least Tatian's brand of it - was a very clear alternative to Hellenism. The new religion was a counter-culture, an anti-Hellenism

that appealed to the person who knew something of Greek books and Greek gods but did not like them. How forward the Christians had become in the reign of Marcus Aurelius is indicated by Theophilus, bishop of Antioch from 168 to 180, and author of an apology, *To Autolykos*, in three short books. What the bishop's original name was is unknown. Like many other Christians of his day, he was a convert and had taken the name "Theophilus" to demonstrate his commitment to the Christians' God rather than to the gods. Like those of his predecessors, his "apology" takes the offensive rather than puts up a defense. It does not mention Jesus the Christ, and instead knocks down the straw-man of Greek myth. That a bishop of Antioch - a person of great prominence and with much responsibility - dared so blatantly to publish his "atheism" is good evidence that the Christians of that large city had little to fear from either their fellow citizens or from the local and imperial governments.

The late second and early third centuries were the high-point of Christian apology. Late in the 170s Athenagoras of Athens, wrote *A Plea for the Christians*. Much more influential was the *Exhortation to the Hellenes* of Clement of Alexandria. Not a bishop or even a priest,⁹ but head of the Christians' "Catechetical school" in Alexandria, Clement was a Christian teacher and writer from the early 190s until his death ca. 215 and was an important figure in the evolution of Christianity. For a long time a disproportionate number of New Covenant Christians had been the poor, freedmen, women, slaves, and other people who had been marginalized in Greco-Roman society. By the early third century this was beginning to change, and evidently at Alexandria hundreds of Christians were both educated and wealthy. Undoubtedly some of them had once regarded themselves as Hellenes. Clement helped these privileged Christians find their way between the old materialist polytheism on the one side and the new spiritualist dualisms - especially Gnosticism - on the other. One of Clement's four surviving works is an exegesis of the story of the Rich Young Ruler. Because each of the Gospel accounts (Matt 19; Mark 10; Luke 18) of this story ends with Jesus' statement, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (AV), the story was especially worrisome for the wealthy Christians of Alexandria, and Clement's interpretation set them at ease. The "treasure" that one must give away in order to enter the kingdom of God is not something so tawdry as money and material possessions, so Clement explained, but is rather the gospel. If a rich woman shares the gospel with the poor, she is doing what Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler to do. Another of Clement's works, the *Paidagogos*, is a manual of instruction for Christian behavior in polite society: what to wear and how to act at dinner parties, what sorts of entertainments to attend, and how to furnish one's home.

Although Clement's other works show his orthodox belief in Jesus the Christ as redeeming humankind from sin and the torments of Hell, he says very little about Jesus in his apologetic work, *Exhortation to the Hellenes*. Although he nominally addressed himself to the Hellenes, Clement seems to have supposed that many of his readers would be neither Hellenes nor Christians, but wavering between the two "schools." In the *Exhortation to the Hellenes* Clement shows his admiration for Plato and other philosophers, and asserts that the Christian God is the *theos* about whom the philosophers speculated. Clement assumes that his readers will not have made a serious study of philosophy, but that some will have attended the grammarian's school and that all will be familiar with the most salacious pages of Classical Greek literature. He reminds his non-Christian readers again and again how ludicrous are the Hellenes' myths and

gods, and he emphasizes the chronological priority of Moses over Homer.

But Clement was at least appreciative of the Greek philosophic tradition. The philosophers, so he thought, had a premonition of God (remotely derived from the Hebrew Bible), and they therefore gave the Hellenes much that was valuable. Many Christians were either frightened by or contemptuous of the philosophers, and liked to quote Paul's generalization that those who seem to be wise should become fools, for "the wisdom of this world is folly in God's sight" (I Cor 3: 19, OSB). Although Clement did not doubt that the revealed wisdom of the Christian Bible was in all cases superior to "the wisdom of the Greeks," neither did he think that the two were incompatible.

Tertullian, early Latin Christianity, and the offensive against Roman culture

Tertullian, in contrast, thought just that. One of his most often quoted epigrams is, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" A North African, Tertullian was the first Christian who made a name for himself as a Latin writer.¹⁰ By the early second century Christianity had come to the Roman provinces of "Africa" (today largely in Tunisia) and "Mauretania" (today the Algerian and eastern Moroccan coast), and at the end of the second century there were churches in all of the major cities in these provinces. Here the establishment language was Latin rather than Greek, while in the countryside villagers still spoke Punic and much of the nomadic population spoke one of the Berber dialects. North African Christians seem to have made early translations (*versiones*) of the New Testament into Latin, and several of these were copied and circulated in the churches. The *vetus Latina* translations were somewhat crude, and in the late fourth century Jerome improved on them with a new *versio vulgata*. But an old North African Latin version was used by Tertullian, Cyprian, and fourth-century writers up to and including Augustine. In Tertullian's day (ca. 200) Latin-speaking Christians were perhaps still numbered in the tens of thousands, while at the same time well over a million Christians spoke Greek. Latin Christians were concentrated in North Africa, and Christianity's relative success here - compared to its slow progress in Spain, Gaul, Britain, Pannonia, and Italy outside of Rome itself - may to some extent have been because of the subversive or counter-cultural character of Christianity. In the grand strategy for the defense of the empire the legions were concentrated on the Rhine and Danube frontiers and in Syria, and the North African provinces were not very important (the Berber tribesmen in the Sahara desert were nuisances but not serious dangers). Until the accession of Septimius Severus all of Rome's emperors had come from Italy, Spain and Gaul, and the cities of North Africa felt somewhat peripheral to the imperial government.

Like their counterparts in the Greek east, Christian apologists in the Latin west attacked the political, cultural and religious establishment, as well as the society over which the establishment presided. For the apologists, "we" are the Christians and "you" are the powers that be: the emperor, magistrates, senators and city councillors, poets, orators and philosophers. Because "you" have spread calumnies against the Christians, it is the apologist's duty to show to the world just how dreadful Roman Culture and society is. Tertullian was very much up to the task. Before his conversion to Christianity Tertullian was a jurist, a pleader in court, and so had received the standard education of a gentleman in the Latin west. He held Roman citizenship and had once counted himself a Roman, but now renounced that identity.¹¹ In his *Apologeticus* he

railed against one aspect after another of the Romans whom he knew so well: their brutality, their sexual promiscuity, their love of luxury and costly display, their history, and their literature.

But most of all Tertullian assailed the myths and the gods of Greco-Roman society. Because the “entertainment” of the *munera* sometimes featured the victims costumed as mythical figures who had suffered some horrible fate, and the executioners costumed as gods or heroes, Tertullian was able in one paragraph to lambast both the polytheistic religion and the savagery of the death-shows. Thus he tells what, before his conversion to Christianity, he had himself witnessed in the amphitheater:

We have seen at one time or another Atys, that god from Pessinus, being castrated; and a man who was burned alive had been rigged out as Hercules. We have laughed, amid the noon’s blend of cruelty and absurdity, at Mercury using his burning iron to see who was dead. We have seen Jupiter’s brother, too, hauling out the corpses of gladiators, hammer in hand.¹²

How ludicrous were the gods of the (Greeks and) Romans! Venus, mother of Aeneas, was wounded by Diomedes and withdrew weeping from the field at Troy. Even great Jupiter was reduced to tears at the death of his beloved Sarpedon. Larentia, worshiped as the mother of Romulus and Remus, was a whore. Although he knows the hundreds of gods in the Roman pantheon, Tertullian forbears “to run over them in detail, in all their number and greatness, new gods and old, barbarian, Greek, Roman, foreign, captive, adoptive, private, public, male, female, rustic, urban, naval, military.” In contrast to all this polytheistic nonsense he produces the god of Genesis:

What we worship is the One God; who fashioned this whole fabric with all its equipment of elements, bodies, spirits; who by the word wherewith He commanded, by the reason wherewith He ordered it, by the might wherewith He could do it, fashioned it out of nothing, to the glory of His majesty.¹³

Another Latin Christian apologist, Minucius Felix (perhaps early in the third century), had more literary polish than Tertullian, but was just as scathing in his denunciation of Roman and Greek Culture. In the *Octavius* the Christian spokesman Octavius reminds his interlocutor, Caecilius, of all the dreadful deities that the Romans have worshiped in their long history: Picus the Woodpecker, Cloacina the guardian spirit of sewers, Febris the dispenser of fevers. Such were the original deities of your vaunted city!¹⁴ Your purported Vestal Virgins are promiscuous, and your auspices and auguries are ludicrous. And what a history your city boasts! Your founder was Romulus, who killed his own twin brother, Remus. When your founder and his gang of criminals could find no wives they perpetrated the Rape of the Sabines. After that it got much worse, as you conquered and pillaged the earth, while adopting the gods of the peoples whom you slaughtered!

In the second and early third century Latin-speaking Christians quite clearly were a counter-culture in Greco-Roman society. Although they posed no physical danger to the Roman empire and claimed (how truthfully, we do not know) that they prayed for the emperor’s well-

being, they did not regard themselves as Romans. That perception was correct, since officially they were outlaws. In the Greek east, the Christians did not consider themselves barbarians but just as emphatically they were not Hellenes. Most Christian writers - even Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria - presented themselves as opponents of Greco-Roman culture. Although they were sometimes confused with Judaeans, the Christians knew themselves to be separate from the Judaeans, who had failed to accept the New Covenant that God had offered them. The Christians were thus a distinct community of "brothers and sisters," closed to outsiders but eager to convert them and bring them in.

The Hellenes and Romans had their stories about the Christians, most of them false and all of them negative. The Christians' celebration of the eucharist at their weekly gatherings gave rise to the rumor that the Christians practiced cannibalism. The Christians' *agape* or "love feast" suggested to many outsiders that after the meal was over an orgy commenced, as the participants in the *agape* made indiscriminate love to each other. The Christians' practice of referring to each other as "brothers" or "sisters" persuaded some that for the Christians incest was a normal form of marriage. Thus Greco-Roman society looked with suspicion at the Christian counter-culture, while the Christians openly condemned most of Greco-Roman society. Many Christians did not attend the games, the theater, the *munera* and other forms of urban entertainment. Most important, all Christians shunned and some Christians mocked and insulted the civic cults that the rest of the city still enjoyed.

Persecution of the Christians

It is not surprising, then, that from time to time in the second and early third centuries Christians were persecuted. Except for a brief episode under Septimius Severus, the empire-wide persecutions did not begin until 249. In the century and a half before that, however, there were sporadic local persecutions. Although Nero's imperial edict was the basis for the persecutions, they usually resulted from a demand by a local population because of some local emergency. Provincial governors were not eager to arrest and punish Christians, because it was generally admitted that except for their religious association the Christians were not lawbreakers. However, when a city was struck by what we would call a natural disaster it was almost inevitable that the credulous would suppose that the gods had punished the city for tolerating the Christians in its midst.

Christians who were executed simply because they were Christians, and refused to worship the traditional gods, were looked upon by their fellow believers as *martyrs*.¹⁵ The Greek word *martyr* meant "witness." It was a word familiar in court proceedings, in which a witness would testify under oath, and slaves would routinely be forced to give their testimony while being tortured. So the Christian martyr was one who "kept the faith" despite torture and the threat of execution, maintaining until death that he or she was a Christian and recognized no god but God. In Christian parlance, when Christians died because of their faith they "attained the crown," the martyr's crown. In Heaven, so it was believed, martyrs occupied the highest places, above priests and bishops and directly below the apostles.

If under coercion and torture a Christian maintained the faith but for one reason or

another was not killed, he or she was accorded the title of *confessor*. In other words, confessors were Christians who had shown that they were ready to die for their faith but were spared. Needless to say, after their ordeals were over the confessors had great personal authority in their local congregations.

One of the first executions of a New Covenant Christian about which we have detailed evidence is the martyrdom of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. It is certain that Ignatius was martyred under Trajan, but the precise date is in dispute. Two ancient sources date the martyrdom to Trajan's ninth or tenth year (107 or 108), but there are better reasons to think that it occurred in 116.¹⁶ If the later date is correct, Ignatius was probably sentenced to death because of the disasters that had by then traumatized the Antiochenes. The reciprocal massacres of Judaeans and Gentiles, in which hundreds of thousands died, had begun in Alexandria by October of 115. By 116 the violence seems to have spread from Egypt and Cyrene to Cyprus, which lay a day's sail from Antioch. Because the Judaeans and Gentile elements at Antioch were fairly evenly matched, had the violence spread to Antioch the consequences for the city would have been catastrophic. The city's leaders may have seen the arrest of the New Covenant Christians's bishop as a bit of common ground, a measure that would please both Judaeans and Hellenes. With tensions already high because of the massacres and Trajan's campaign against the Parthians, the city of Antioch was during the winter of 115-116 devastated by an earthquake (Trajan himself was in Antioch at the time, and was almost a victim of the quake).¹⁷ One obvious way to regain the favor of the gods would have been to punish "the atheists" of Antioch by punishing their leader. Whatever the charges against Ignatius and the Christians of Antioch may have been, Trajan ordered a detail of soldiers to escort Ignatius to Rome for execution. The letters that Ignatius wrote while *en route* show how ready he was to face the leopard or the lion while witnessing for his Lord. He was exhibited in the Coliseum, and the beasts that killed him ate most of his body. The bones that were left the Christians of Rome sent back to Antioch, for burial by the Christians there.

Christians were martyred in the province of Asia in the third quarter of the second century. The most famous of the victims was Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Altogether, twelve Christians were killed in Smyrna, and three more in Pergamum. The reason for these persecutions is uncertain, but again much depends on the date. According to Eusebius' chronicle Polycarp was martyred in 167-68. That was a terrible time for the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, as a plague in which millions died was then raging. In addition, the first incursions into the empire by Germanic speaking raiders began in 167. The raiders overran Dacia and then crossed the Danube, penetrating into the southern Balkans and as far west as Aquileia (near the spot where Venice now stands). If Eusebius' date is correct, Polycarp and his fellow Christians were probably killed in the *munera* because the inhabitants of Smyrna and Pergamum believed that the plague and the raiders would not be stayed unless "the atheists" were punished. Justin Martyr was executed in Rome at about the same time, and perhaps for the same reason.

As Tertullian expressed it with his usual sarcasm, if the Tiber rose too high or the Nile did not rise high enough, the crowds would demand "Christians to the lions!" But occasionally Christians were martyred even without the prelude of a natural disaster. While governing the

province of Pontus in eastern Anatolia in 112-13 CE, Pliny the Younger was besought by some of the provincials to do something about the local Christians. The reason for the provincials' demand was the declining attendance at temple rituals, and the lack of a market for meat from the sacrificed animals. After interrogation Pliny executed several Christians, cowed the rest, and was pleased to report that as a result the traditional sacrifices were once again being brought to the altars of the gods.

At Carthage in March of 203 another persecution occurred without a disaster to provoke it. The city had earlier that year decided to stage a *munus* in celebration of the birthday of the prince Geta, younger son of Septimius Severus (Septimius was the first North African to rule the empire). As the birthday drew nigh, common criminals were evidently in short supply at Carthage, and the authorities therefore rounded up and interrogated people who were in the process of converting to Christianity (an edict of Septimius had banned conversions to either Judaism or Christianity).¹⁸ Those catechumens and neophytes who refused to curse the Christ or to make an offering to one of the traditional gods were imprisoned until the day of the *munus*, and were then brought out in the amphitheater to be killed by the beasts. Thus the spectators were not cheated of their promised entertainment on Geta's birthday. Two of the catechumens were young women: Perpetua, a young woman of the governing class, and her slave Felicitas. Perpetua's prison memoir and a witness's description of the women's deaths have come down to us in manuscript tradition as the *Passio Perpetuae*.

Toward the end of Marcus Aurelius' reign provincials in several communities in the Latin West seem to have tried to stem the growth of Christianity in their midst. In July of 180 twelve Christians from the little city of Scillium, in North Africa, were sentenced to die. The court record of their interrogation has survived, but we have no information on the circumstances of their arrest and execution. Although Eusebius (*HE* 5.1) says that other provinces were affected in the persecutions under Marcus Aurelius, the details that he gives pertain entirely to Gallia Lugdunensis. A colony of Greek-speaking Christians had come from the provinces of Asia and Phrygia to the Rhone valley in Gaul. They established themselves in the cities of Vienna (Vienne) and Lugdunum (Lyons). In 177 the populace in both cities went on a rampage against these "importers of a foreign cult" and the authorities arrested several dozen Christians, ranging from a youth of fifteen to the group's ninety-year old bishop. When they were tortured in court, to the cheers and jeers of the populace, some renounced their Christianity but later reaffirmed their Christian confession. The slave woman Blandina endured the greatest torture and mangling. A special *munus* was put on for the execution of the Christians. After the beasts were through with them, their remains were left to rot for six days and were then thrown into the Rhone river.

The effects of the persecutions

The number of Christians who died in persecutions in the second and early third century was apparently not very high. The martyrs of Lugdunum in 177 were the first Christians to be executed in Gaul. Polycarp and his fellows were the first Christians martyred at Smyrna, and by the date of their deaths there had been a Christian *ekklesia* in Smyrna for well over a hundred years. The martyrs were few enough that their names were known and celebrated widely by

Christians. Although we can do no more than guess at the totals, it is likely that in all of the second century the Christians who died as martyrs were numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands. If that is so, then hardly one Christian in a thousand was killed because he or she was a Christian.

There is no doubt, however, that exceptional though they were the persecutions had enormous consequences. Far from stemming the expansion of Christianity, the persecutions added to its appeal. Tertullian succinctly observed that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In the second and early third centuries the urban crowds enjoyed watching condemned criminals being torn apart by wild beasts, but the crowds were not accustomed to and not prepared for what they saw when Christians were brought into the amphitheater. Ignatius of Antioch was an old man when he was set before the beasts in the Coliseum. Polycarp was 86 years old and a person of great dignity when he was burned to death. All of Smyrna knew the old bishop by name, because he had presided over the Christians there for decades. Alongside the very old were the very young. Even more unsettling was the fact that many of the martyrs were female. The victims in an ordinary *munus* were male, but when Christians were brought in for execution the crowds had to watch women young and old being torn apart. Perpetua and Felicitas were young mothers, and when they were thrown before the beasts Felicitas’ breasts were lactating (she had given birth only a few days before). The crowd gasped and shuddered, but the *munus* went on.

The *munera* were “spectacles” (*spectacula*, “little things to watch”) and this form of urban entertainment was instrumental in bringing Christianity to the attention of a wide public. Without the deaths of the martyrs the expansion of Christianity would not have been so rapid as it was. Everyone who had even a casual acquaintance with the Christian martyrs knew that they were guilty of no crime except that of belonging to the Christian church. When at Lugdunum the slave woman Blandina was being mangled so severely that she was already mortally wounded, her repeated response to the authorities who tried to break her was, “I am a Christian, and we do nothing to be ashamed of.” Other martyrs either limited themselves to the simple declaration, “I am a Christian,” or more defiantly expanded that confession: “I worship the One True God, and deny all others.” The martyrs died with such bravery, resolution and dignity that few spectators could have been unmoved. It is likely that Tertullian himself was converted to Christianity because of what he had seen in the *munera* at Carthage.

God's miracles, and the faith of the martyrs

Any modern reader of the ancient *martyria* (“martyrdoms”) must be amazed at the resolution and courage of the early Christian martyrs. How could they have done what they did? They had before them the examples of Stephen, Peter, Paul and the other martyrs who were celebrated and mythicized in Christian churches everywhere. They had in all four of their Gospels the story of Jesus’ own trial, scourging and crucifixion, and of his “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Still earlier were the fictitious martyrdoms in Second Maccabees: old Eleazar, and the heroic Mother and her Seven Sons.¹⁹

Although this tradition of martyrdom was an important factor, still more important was

the cause for which the martyrs died. As they saw it, they were participants in the battle between God - the Lord of the Old Testament - and the gods. Even though the words "monotheism" and "polytheism" were not used in antiquity, those were the religions that were at stake, and monotheism was more credible than polytheism. The struggle here on earth, in turn, was part of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan. In the prison diary that she kept while awaiting execution Perpetua described the "revelations" that came to her in dreams. In these revelations she saw herself triumphing over Satan and arriving safely in Heaven. The Roman proconsul and the other officials with whom Perpetua dealt were merely tools of Satan, as were the demons that inhabited the city's temples. Yet Perpetua and all other Christians felt wonderfully secure in the knowledge that Satan, however frightening and thoroughly evil he was, would in the end be vanquished. The Devil was, almost by definition, a loser, and the Christians therefore had no doubt at all that they were on the winning side. The Christian was absolutely certain that the traditional gods of the Greeks and Romans were not gods at all, and that heaven and earth were ruled by the One True God.

Although most people today can readily understand why the early Christians despised the gods of the Greeks and Romans, we may wonder why it was that these Christians had so firm a belief in the Lord. For the last three hundred years most Christians have been less outspoken in their belief than were their ancient and medieval predecessors. Here it is important to recall that the Lord had inspired unquestioning belief long before New Covenant Christianity began. In the Maccabean revolt many Judaeans had died on his behalf. The same was true of the Zealots and probably of the authors of the *War Scroll* found at Qumran. No other ancient god inspired such devotion to the death as did Adonai. One important reason for this devotion is that no other god had a history comparable to that of Adonai. The priests at Jerusalem had compiled their record of the Lord's mighty acts, telling how time and again he had miraculously intervened to protect his people. Since the critical study of history began in the eighteenth century, historians have concluded that none of the miracles actually happened. But in Greco-Roman antiquity and in the Middle Ages all worshipers of God took his sacred history at face value.

The Septuagint, published in the third century BC, provided the Lord's worshipers with the story of all that he had done, from the creation of the world to the very recent past. The acts of this god were not the stuff of poetry but of prose. They were set not in some mythical period, as was Marduk's slaying of the dragon Tiamat or Apollo's slaying of the Python, but in a believable past, with a high degree of verisimilitude. The stories featured personal names, identifiable places, and even dates. In the days of Moses, and when the cities of Pithom and Pi-Ramesses were being built in the eastern Delta, Adonai turned the Nile to blood, killed all of Egypt's firstborn, and parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could walk through on dry land. Moses' very own account of all this was there to be read in the Book of Exodus. On Mt. Carmel, during the reign of Ahab, Elijah proved to the prophets of Baal that Adonai was real and that their god was not. First the prophets of Baal prayed in vain to their god to ignite the dry tinder on his altar. Next, after drenching Adonai's altar with twelve barrels of water, Elijah prayed to Adonai to ignite the wood beneath the offerings. In response, Adonai sent down from heaven a tremendous fire that consumed not only the wood and the offerings but the stone altar itself. The account can be read in I Kings 18 (some years later, Elijah was taken to Heaven on a chariot of fire). Shortly before Nineveh fell to the Medes (612 BC), the prophet Jonah, a passenger on a

boat that had sailed westward from Joppa, was thrown into the Mediterranean by frightened sailors. But the Lord sent a whale to swallow Jonah, to carry him in its belly for three days, and to regurgitate him safely on dry land. Books added to the Septuagint in the second century BC lengthened the list of miracles. At Babylon in the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, Adonai preserved the three young men when they were thrown into the fiery furnace, and Daniel when he was thrust into the lions' den. In Jerusalem itself, during the reign of Antiochos Epiphanes, the Lord sent a troop of Heavenly Horsemen who struck to the ground Heliodorus, minion of Epiphanes, as Heliodorus tried to raid the temple.

In the second and third centuries Christians heard repeatedly these and many other miracle stories that were contained in sacred writings - the Septuagint - and so were beyond question. In addition, the Christians had their own accounts of God's most recent miracles, accounts supposed to have been written by or on the say-so of eye-witnesses. The Gospels told how God had sent his only-begotten son, born of a virgin, into the world during the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. This Jesus the Christ, the Gospels showed, had worked mighty miracles. When he was crucified in the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign, the entire world was darkened for three hours in mid-afternoon. On the third day after his body was placed in the tomb Jesus arose from the dead and forty days later he ascended into heaven. With so much evidence plainly set forth in their Scriptures, the Christian martyrs had no doubt whatever about God and his power.

Nor had that power stopped with Jesus' ascension into heaven. The Acts of the Apostles described the miracles that the apostles had wrought, and oral traditions recalled wondrous deeds done not very long ago. Various miracles were said to have attended Christian martyrdoms, healings were reported from many churches, and all Christians knew how God punished those emperors who had persecuted the Christians. Even a few saints who had lived very recently were known for their miraculous powers. A number of miracles, for example, clustered around Narcissus, who was bishop of the church at Jerusalem during the Severan dynasty. Eusebius records how Narcissus miraculously changed water into oil when the supply of oil ran low during the all-night vigil before Easter. And how the three slanderers against Narcissus died each the horrific death to which their false oaths had bound them.²⁰

The history of God

A related factor in strengthening Christian faith, and in turning the ancient world from the gods to God, was the semblance of "history" provided by the Septuagint. This was not history as it has been understood in modern times, or as it was understood by Polybius and Tacitus. It was, however, a continuous story - a narrative - that began In the Beginning and stretched over thousands of years. Its subject was the Lord and his acts. A few chapters in Genesis sketched the history of the world from God's creation of heaven and earth until his dispersal of nations at the Tower of Babel. All the rest pertained to his dealings with Israel (including Judaea), from his calling of Abraham to the accession of John Hyrcanus. For almost two thousand years the Lord alternated between saving and punishing Israel and Judaea. His anger was demonstrated in the many disasters that Israel had suffered through the centuries, each disaster being explained as his punishment for some failure of his worshipers to live up to the covenant he had made with them.

The Lord's mercy was manifested in the many miracles that he performed for his favorites. That most of this "history" either was priestly opinion (God's wrath as the reason for disasters) or was myth (the miracles) was not apparent: it had all been translated from Hebrew texts, which were assumed to be absolutely true.

Hellenes and Romans had nothing to match such a long and coherent narrative. As indicated in Chapter Six, all that the Hellenes knew about the remote past were their myths, obviously not to be taken seriously, and they were therefore vulnerable to charlatans such as Euhemerus or to barbarians who claimed to possess accurate and truthful records going back to the very beginning, when the gods themselves established kingship. In Chapter Fifteen we saw that by the Second Sophistic the Hellenes' understanding of even their non-mythical past was woefully defective, limited as it was to edifying stories about the classical (pre-Alexander) period. History, for the ancient Hellenes and Romans, was the history of states, and by the second century all the Greek states had long since disappeared. The war monograph, and usually a monograph about wars that the historian himself had experienced, was the Hellenes' favorite form of historical writing. Among the Romans a longer view was encouraged, usually beginning with the founding of Rome and continuing to the author's own time. Here too, however, history was confined to political and military events, a narrative of the famous *res gestae* of the past. Neither Greek nor Roman historical writing dealt with the history of civilization, or with the history of any single civilization. We may go further and say that nothing like the history of civilization had yet been conceptualized (it did not become an object of serious study until early in the nineteenth century).²¹ While the Hellenes prided themselves on knowing stories about classical Greece, the Christians claimed to know - or claimed that their bishops knew - the entire history of the world: everything, that is, that God had done in the past, beginning with Creation and ending with the latest manifestation of his power.

Moses, Homer and chronography

One of the most important arguments deployed by both Judaeans and Christians in their attack on Hellenism was that as an authority on history and divinity the Septuagint, or the Christians' Old Testament, was older and therefore more trustworthy than any of the Hellenes' books. Most importantly, it was supposed that Moses had written the Pentateuch many centuries before Homer wrote his epics. Later still were Plato and Aristotle, whose theology was not altogether wrong. The inference was that what Plato and Aristotle got right, they got from Moses and the Prophets.

This argument had long been important for Judaeans - Josephus, for example, makes much of it in his *Contra Apionem* - and was used by Christian apologists from the very beginning. As a late example of its role in Christian polemics we may refer to Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*. Having devoted all of Book 10 to a demonstration that Moses was far earlier than any of the Hellenes' writers, Eusebius opened Book 11 with the indictment that Greek philosophy - insofar as it endorsed monotheism - was stolen from the Judaeans:

The preceding Book, which is the tenth of the *Evangelical Preparation*, was intended to prove by no statements of my own, but by external testimonies, that as the Greeks had

contributed no additional wisdom from their own resources, but only their force and elegance of language, and had borrowed all their philosophy from Barbarians, it was not improbable that they were also not unacquainted with the Hebrew Oracles, but had in part seized upon them also; seeing that they did not keep their hands clean from theft even of the literary efforts of their own countrymen. For, as I said, it was not my statement but their own that proved them to be thieves.²²

Because chronology was essential to their argument with the Hellenes, the Christians were pioneers in the discipline of chronography. The first of the Christian chronographers was Julius Africanus, who wrote in eastern Syria ca. 220 CE. Works called *Chronika* had been written by Eratosthenes in the third and by Apollodoros in the second century BC, but these were of a very different kind from the Christian productions. Apollodoros' *Chronike syntaxis* was elegant poetry, written in iambic trimeters, and began with the Trojan War. His project was to tell his readers how long ago had happened each of the events famous in Greek tradition, and his sources were the canonical Greek works. In contrast, the Christians made chronography more of a science. They took their material from a variety of sources: although they relied especially on the Septuagint, they also made much use of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian king-lists provided by Manetho and Berossos, and of course they knew the traditional Greek and Roman writers. Interested especially in very early times, Christian chronographers began their charts either with Abraham or with the creation of heaven and earth, and brought their time-line all the way down to their own day. They were thus able to show that the Hebrew patriarchs antedated all the famous heroes of Greek myth, and that Moses wrote his five books well before the Trojan War. The Hellenes had nothing with which to refute the presentations of the Christian chronographers, and lost the argument.

Christianity at the end of the Severan dynasty

By 235 CE Christians were still not so numerous as Judaeans, but the churches were growing faster than the synagogues. Perhaps three per cent of the population in the Roman empire was by that time Christian. Although outlawed by the *institutum Neronianum*, and for a short time repressed by Septimius Severus, Christianity was generally tolerated in both the Latin west and the Greek east. The Christianity of the martyrs and the apologists was monotheistic rather than trinitarian: God was the god of the Old Testament, and Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God. Beliefs and practices in the Christian churches varied to a considerable extent. Even on so important a subject as the Afterlife there was no uniformity of belief. Origen believed in the immortality of the soul but not the resurrection of the body, while Tertullian was at the same time insisting on the latter: everyone, according to Tertullian, believes in the immortality of the soul, but what is distinctively Christian is the belief in physical resurrection. There was a catholic church, the *ekklesia katholicē*, but it was mostly an abstraction and an ideal, since its coherence depended entirely on the desire of Christians to belong to an ecumenical community. This catholic church did not yet have a mechanism or a method by which it could enforce doctrinal conformity or express itself as a corporate body.

In retrospect, we can see that the growth of Christianity during the second and early third century was one of the most important developments of the time. This was not, of course,

recognized by Greeks and Romans living in the early third century. Early in the 230s Dio Cassius, a native of Nicaea in western Anatolia, completed writing (in Greek) his history of Rome from its origins to his own day. Although Dio's history ran to no less than eighty books, it seems never to have mentioned the Christians. But such indifference was about to change.

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1. In Latin, he was simply *deus*. Augustine regularly invoked him as *deus* or *deus meus* (eventually Latin manuscripts capitalized the word-name, *Deus*, but in antiquity the capitalizing of proper names was not yet conventional).
 2. On this see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.29.
 3. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.38-40. Josephus here credits five books to Moses and thirteen to "the prophets after Moses," and describes the other four books as containing hymns and precepts. The author of 4th Ezra 14:45 counted 24 books.
 4. See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.38 for the quotation from Celsus: "Silly as they are, one finds them standing next to a statue of Zeus or Apollo or some other god, and shouting, 'See here: I blaspheme it and strike it, but it is powerless against me for I am a Christian!' Does this good Christian fellow not see that I might do the same without fear of reprisal to an image of his god?" (Hoffmann translation). Origen objects that he has never seen a Christian strike a statue. Celsus wrote his attack on the Christians toward the end of Marcus Aurelius' reign. See also the complaints of Caecilius' in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.4 (Rendall): "they despise temples as if they were tombs; they spit upon the gods; they jeer at our sacred rites."
 5. The Noachide commandments: at Genesis 9:1-7 God makes his first covenant, this one with all humankind, and seals it by creating the rainbow. Humans are enjoined to be fruitful and multiply, and are told not to commit murder and not to eat meat in which the blood is still present.
 6. The scandal-ridden Callistus (bishop of Rome from 218 to 223) apparently died a violent death. The story that he was killed by being thrown into a well suggests that it was not the political authorities who killed him but a mob.
 7. Justin, *First Apology* 6 reports that "we are called *atheoi*."
 8. Eusebius, *HE* 4.3.
 9. Demetrius is supposed to have been bishop of Alexandria from 189 until 232. Little is known of Demetrius and less of his predecessors.

10. It is possible that Minucius Felix wrote his *Octavius* before Tertullian's time, but I prefer a third-century date for Felix. In any case, his *Octavius* seems to have made little impression on Latin Christianity. It survives only as a stowaway in the opus of Arnobius, as Book 8 of the latter's *Adversus nationes*.

11. *Apologeticus* 18.4: De vestris sumus. Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani ("I was once one of you. People aren't born Christians, they become Christians").

12. *Apologeticus* 15.5 (Glover, Loeb).

13. *Apologeticus* 10.5 and 17.1 (Glover, Loeb).

14. *Octavius* 25.8 (Rendall, Loeb).

15. On Christian martyrdom see Bowersock 1995, Boyarin 1999 and, most recently, Salisbury 2004. Bowersock's book is especially helpful on the function of the persecutions as spectacle, or entertainment, for the pagan populations of cities in the Roman empire. Less persuasively, Bowersock minimizes Judaeo-antecedents of Christian martyrdom (and does not discuss the Neronian persecution).

16. The tendentious *Martyrion* that comes down in mss with the seven genuine letters of Ignatius says that in Trajan's 9th year the emperor decided to have all Christians join pagans in sacrifice, and that because of Ignatius' refusal he was hailed before the emperor in Antioch. But the *Martyrion* also says (chapter 2) that Trajan "was at that time staying in Antioch, but was in haste [to set forth] against Armenia and the Parthians." (Roberts and Donaldson, trs.). The campaign against the Parthians began in 115. The *Martyrion* 7 says Ignatius died in the amphitheater at Rome on the 13th day before the Kalends of January, Sura and Senecio being consuls for second time. The *Chronikon* of Eusebius puts Ignatius' martyrdom in Trajan's 10th year, 108 CE. In the *HE* 3.36 Eusebius gives the story of Ignatius' death, but does not give a date or context.

Pliny and Trajan exchanged letters on the execution of Christians in 112/113. Would Pliny have been ignorant of the Christian problem had the execution of Ignatius already taken place? And would Trajan in his reply have said nothing about the execution had it already happened? I think that it is more likely that Ignatius was martyred after the exchange of letters. Ignatius' letter to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, is generally accepted as genuine. We have two Greek versions, one shorter than the other, and a Syriac version that is still shorter. Polycarp was executed at age 86, possibly ca. 155 CE, although Eusebius *HE* 4.15 dates the martyrdom to the reign of Marcus Aurelius and in his chronicle dates it to 167-68. There is nothing in the letter from Ignatius to suggest that Polycarp was at the time of writing a very young man, although the tone of the letter does suggest that Polycarp was the younger of the two. Martyred at 86, Polycarp was born no earlier than 69 and possibly (if martyred in 167) as late as 81. That Polycarp could have become bishop of Smyrna by 107 CE is possible but unlikely.

17. Dio Cassius 68.25.5.

18. *SHA, Septimius Severus* 17.1. The *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* is an exasperating collection of imperial biographies. Although its author invented some of his material, he gathered other material from reputable sources. In this case his statement is corroborated by other texts. On the Severan persecution see Keresztes 1970.

19. On the Judaeian origin of religious martyrdom see Boyarin 1999.

20. Eusebius, *HE* 6.9.1-8.

21. The first historian to attempt a history of civilization was Ibn Khaldun, in the fourteenth century, but his pioneering work was not followed up. Early in the eighteenth century Giambattista Vico attempted something similar: Vico's *Scienza nuova* analyzed the origins, decline and disappearance of nations and their civilizations. For the first hundred years, however, Vico's work received little attention. Not until the early nineteenth century did the history of civilization become a serious project, as Hegel and other philosophers turned their attention to it (the new interest prompted the translation of Vico's writings into French, German and English). Belief in "progress," and optimism about the future, was the mirror image of this new interest in the past. By the middle of the nineteenth century *Kulturgeschichte* was well established. The dialectical materialism of Marx and Engel was a consequence of this new kind of history. Even Darwin's explanation of the origins of the species owed something to the new perspective on the past.

22. Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 11.1 (Gifford trans.).