Persecution of Christians in the New Testament

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The **persecution of Christians in the New Testament** is an important part of the Early Christian narrative which depicts the early Church as being persecuted by the Judean establishment, occasionally through the Roman authorities, for their heterodox beliefs.

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Basic context

This account of persecution is part of a general theme of a polemic against the Jews that starts with the Pharisee rejection of Jesus' ministry and continues on with his trial before the High Priest, his crucifixion, and the Pharisees' refusal to accept him as the Jewish Messiah. This theme plays an important part in a number of Christian doctrines ranging from the release of Christians from obeying many strictures of the Old Testament Law (see Biblical law in Christianity) to the commandment to preach to all nations (meaning to Gentiles as well as Jews; see the Great Commission).


**Status of the Church**

Paul Jones writes:
Addressed primarily to a Gentile community, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles ... seek to negotiate the church's dual status in the world. On the one hand, they emphasize the movement's Israelite roots to certify it as part of an ancient and honorable tradition, and, on the other hand, they disassociate themselves from the politically dangerous Jewish nationalist sentiments.

**Scribes and chief priests**

Although Luke's Gospel places the blame for the death of Jesus on "scribes and chief priests" (20:19) and not the Jewish people as a whole, Acts of the Apostles condemns all Jews:

> You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by the angels, and yet you have not kept it (7:51-53).

This passage (and others like it, such as Acts 2:36; 3:14-15; 4:10) not only expresses anti-Jewish rhetoric but also indicates that for this author "the Jews" continue to persecute the Apostles and Paul, the synagogue remains a place of danger and rejection, and the future of the church is among the Gentiles.

**Jerusalem Temple**

According to Acts, persecution of Jesus' followers began after a trip by Peter and John to the Jerusalem Temple and Peter's speech. Peter is recorded as saying Acts 3:12-26-NRSV):

> You Israelites ... Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate ... you rejected the Holy and Righteous One ... you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead ...

**Imprisonment of Peter and John**

Peter and John were imprisoned by the Jewish leadership who were "much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead" (NRSV), a doctrine opposed by the Sadducees. According to Acts, the Jewish leadership was specifically "the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees ... rulers, elders, and scribes ... Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John (Other ancient authorities read Jonathan), and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family" (NRSV), who however later released them after warning them to never again "speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (4:1-21).

**Role of Sadducees**

Another time, all the apostles were imprisoned by the high priest and other Sadducees, only to be freed by an Angel of the Lord (5:17-21). The apostles, after having escaped, were then taken before the Sanhedrin again, but this time Gamaliel (a Pharisee well known from Rabbinic literature and leader of the Pharisaic Sanhedrin) convinced the Sanhedrin of Acts to free them (5:27-40), which they did, after having them flogged.
Acts 6:8-8:3 is the only source for the stoning of Stephen by members of the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:13-14 NRSV)

“They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.’”

**Martyrdom of Stephen**

Stephen is remembered in Christianity as the first martyr (derived from the Greek word "martyros" which means "witness", see also Martyrology). Stephen's execution was the precursor to widespread persecution of Christians (Acts 8:1-3), resulting in the imprisonment of many of the new religion's adherents, and the scattering of many of them to throughout the Jewish Diaspora. Acts 8:1 claims that "... a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria." -NRSV According to the book of Acts, a young and zealous disciple of the Pharisees named Saul (also called Paul according to Acts 13:9), joined the persecutors, and played an ever increasing roll in this, the first persecution of the Church.¹

**Persecution in Damascus**

Encouraged by his successes in Jerusalem, Paul attempted to carry the persecution into Damascus, to which many Christians had fled, but instead was converted to Christianity after reportedly being struck blind by a bright light and hearing the voice of Jesus on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-31, 22:1-22, 26:9-24). While in Damascus, he joined with the Christians, after being cured and baptised by Ananias of Damascus. Acts 9:23-25 says that "the Jews" in Damascus then "conspired" to kill Paul. They were waiting for him at the town gates, but he evaded them by being lowered over the city wall in a basket, thus escaping to Jerusalem. Another attempt on his life was made, this time by "the Grecians" (KJV), perhaps referring to a group of Hellenistic Jews (9:29), whom he debated while in or around Jerusalem.

**Execution of James**

Acts 12:1-3 records that King Herod (believed to be Agrippa I) had James executed by sword. Acts 12:21-23 claims King Herod was later struck down by an Angel of the Lord.

**Violence against Paul**

Several passages in Acts describe St. Paul's missions to Asia Minor and the encounters he had with Diaspora Jews and with local gentile populations. In Acts chapters 13 through 15, the Jews from Antioch and Iconium go so far as to follow Paul to other cities and to incite the crowds there to violence against him. Paul had already been stoned and left for dead once (Acts 14:19). In Philippi, a Roman colony, Roman magistrates beat and jailed Paul and his companions on behalf of the gentiles (Acts 16:19-40). Clearly at this point, Paul and his companions were still considered to be Jews by those in Philippi who raised protests against them, despite Paul's attempts to tailor his teachings to his audience (1 Cor 9:20-23). Later, in Thessalonica, the Jews again incited the crowds and pitted the Christians against the Roman authority (Acts 17:6-8).

**Crowds in Corinth**
In Corinth, Paul encountered a hostile Jewish crowd who "united" and took him before the Roman tribunal (18:12-17). Verse 13 records the charge: "They said, 'This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.'" Verse 17 records the final result: "Then all of them (Other ancient authorities read all the Greeks) seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things." -NRSV

In Acts 21, a trip by Paul to Jerusalem, James the Just confronts Paul with the rumor about his practices (Acts 21:21 NRSV):

"They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs."

**Threats against Paul's life**

A few verses later, the Jews from Asia Minor (modern Turkey) seized Paul, shouting (Acts 21:28 NRSV):

"Fellow-Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."

They tried to kill him but he was rescued by the Romans (Acts 21:31-35 NRSV):

"While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort [see also Antonia Fortress] that all Jerusalem was in an uproar ... When Paul came to the steps, the violence of the mob was so great that he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, 'Away with him!'"

Paul addressed the crowd in their language, probably Aramaic, (22:1-21), but the crowd again became hostile: "Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’" (Acts 22:22 NRSV)

**Paul before a Sanhedrin**

Acts 23 continues with a trial by Paul before a Sanhedrin at which he is accused of teaching "resurrection of the dead", but this divides the Jews because the Sadducees oppose the doctrine whereas the Pharisees support it. The division became violent, so the Roman tribune ordered Paul to be thrown in the barracks, but the next morning a "Jewish conspiracy", see also cabal, was formed to attempt to murder him (23:12-15). Previously, in 14:5, 20:3 and 20:19, Paul complained about "plots of the Jews". But the Romans learn of the plot and safely escort Paul, under heavy guard, to Caesarea, the capital of Iudaea Province: (Acts 23:23-4 NRSV)

"...‘Get ready to leave by nine o’clock tonight for Caesarea with two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and take him safely to Felix the governor.’"
Elsewhere in the New Testament

Galatians

In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul offers indicates several times that the Jews have persecuted Christians by the Jews beginning with his admission of his own persecution of the Christians prior to his conversion. (Gal 4:29) and ending with his suggestion that he is presently being persecuted because he no longer preaches circumcision (Gal 5:11).

2nd Corinthians

In Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians, he asserts that he had been persecuted by the Jews on numerous occasions (2 Cor 11:23-26 NIV):

“...I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

Historical accuracy

Although Christian doctrine to this day attests to the veracity of these accounts of persecution as documented in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers, modern scholars have questioned the historical accuracy of these accounts.

Basis in sectarian conflict

One perspective holds that the earliest examples of "Jewish persecution of Christians" are examples of "Jewish persecution of other Jews," that is, sectarian conflict. Prior to the destruction of the Temple, Judaism was extremely heterodox; after the destruction of the Temple in 70, early Christians and Pharisees (the Second Temple group that would become Rabbinic Judaism) vied for influence among Jews.

According to Douglas R. A. Hare, "it has long been recognized that in the Gospel according to St. Matthew the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees has been intensified and it has often been suggested that this intensification reflects the continued struggle between the Church and the synagogue." Hare asserts that prior to the first revolt, Jewish persecution of Christians was more frequently directed at Christian missionaries to synagogues in the Diaspora than against the church in Jerusalem. Organized opposition to Christianity appeared during the first revolt (when nationalist sentiment was high) and after it (when Parisaic dominance of the Synagogue was established). Few Christians were martyred prior to the Bar Kokhba revolt. Most of those who were killed were victims of mob violence rather than official action. None were executed for purely religious reasons although individual missionaries were banned, detained and flogged for breach of the peace. According to Hare, the numerous New Testament references to persecution reflect early Christian expectations of persecution based perhaps on the pre-Christian "conviction that the Jews had always persecuted the messengers of God". ..[[2]
Some scholars assert that Jewish persecution of the followers of Jesus started *only* when Christianity started spreading among Gentiles and when the Jews realized the separation between themselves and Christians.\(^{[3][4]}\) Paul E. Davies states that the violent persecuting zeal displayed by some Jews sharpened the criticisms of the Jews in the Gospels as they were written.\(^{[4]}\)

G. George Fox argues that the hostile utterances of rabbis were towards those Christians who did not support Bar Kokhba and was due to anti-Jewish feelings which were caused by Gentile converts to Christianity. This however is controversial as only certain segments of the community ever accepted Bar Kokhba as the Messiah, while many Rabbis scorned such a proposition. Fox also argues that the persecution accusations and stories of early Christians martyrdom are exaggerated by the Church.\(^{[5]}\) He asserts that it is unhistorical to assume that the martyrdom of Stephan was representative of a widespread persecution of Christians because events of this nature weren’t uncommon in that time. In support of this assertion, Fox argues that thousands of Jews were killed by Romans and it wasn’t something new or novel.\(^{[5]}\) Thus the persecution hardly started before 70 A.D. and when it was started by Bar Kochba, it wasn’t not on purely theological grounds but also because of the disloyalty of Christians in the rebellion against the Romans.\(^{[5]}\)

Claudia Setzer draws a distinction between Jews and Christians (both Jewish and Gentile) as to when the perception of Christianity as a Jewish sect was replaced by an understanding of Christianity as a new and separate religion. Setzer asserts that, “Jews did not see Christians as clearly separate from their own community until at least the middle of the second century.” By contrast, “almost from the outset Christians have a consciousness of themselves as distinct from other Jews.” Thus, acts of Jewish persecution of Christians fall within the boundaries of synagogue discipline and were so perceived by Jews acting and thinking as the established community. The Christians, on the other hand, being a new movement, worked out their identity in contrast and opposition to the Jewish community and saw themselves as persecuted rather than “disciplined.”\(^{[6]}\)

According to Paula Fredriksen, in *From Jesus to Christ*, the reason was that Jewish Christians were preaching the imminent return of the King of the Jews and the establishment of his kingdom. To Roman ears, such talk was seditious. Romans gave Jews at that time limited self-rule (see Judaea Province); the main obligations of Jewish leaders were to collect taxes for Rome, and to maintain civil order. Thus, Jewish leaders would have to suppress any seditious talk. In cases where Jewish leaders did not suppress seditious talk, they were often sent to Rome for trial and execution, or in the cases of Herod Archelaus and Herod Antipas merely deposed and exiled to Gaul.\(^{[7]}\)

Some scholars suggest that early Christians were involved in a rivalry with Pharisees for leadership of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple. Since the latter Pharisees became the founders of Rabbinic Judaism, some have suggested that later Christian authors recast Jesus’ antagonists as Pharisees.

### References

3. ↑ G. George Fox, p.83
4. ↑ a b Davies, p.74
5. ↑ a b c G. George Fox, p.84

7. ^ Catholic Encyclopedia: Herod: "He [Archelaus] soon aroused opposition by marrying his brother's wife -- a crime like that of Antipas later -- and having been accused of cruelty by his subjects, "not able to bear his barbarous and tyrannical usage of them", he was banished to Vienne, Gaul, A. D. 7 in the tenth year of his government (Jos., "Ant.", XVII, ix, xiii, 1, 2)."; "Contrary to his better judgment he [Antipas] went, and soon learned that Agrippa by messengers had accused him before Caligula of conspiracy against the Romans. The emperor banished him to Lyons, Gaul (France), A. D. 39, and Herodias accompanied him (Jos., "Ant.", XVIII, vii, 2). Josephus (Bel. Jud., II, ix, 6) says: "So Herod died in Spain whither his wife had followed him". The year of his death is not known. To reconcile the two statements of Josephus about the place of exile and death, see Smith, "Dict. of the Bible", s. v. "Herodias" (note)."

**Sources**

- James Everett Seaver. The Persecution of the Jews in the Roman Empire (300-428)]. UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS PUBLICATIONS, 1952. Humanistic Studies, No. 30