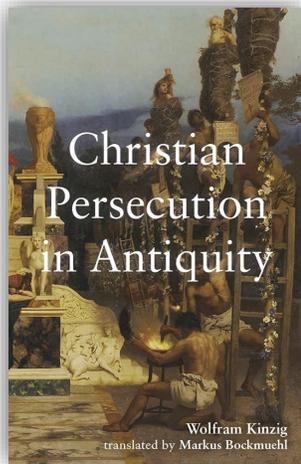


## BOOK REVIEW

# Christian Persecution in Antiquity

*By Wolfram Kinzig*

Reviewed by Jacob Winn



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### Overview

Wolfram Kinzig's book, *Christian Persecution in Antiquity*, translated into English by Markus Bockmuehl, offers the reader much to consider regarding the nature of the persecutions faced by the earliest members of the Christian Church. With a particular focus on the trials and tribulations undergone by Christians in the Roman Empire, Kinzig presents a nuanced picture of this fascinating time in the Church's history. I believe there is much for today's believers to learn about our collective past from the history recounted in this writing.

Kinzig's writing shows that the earliest persecutions faced by Christians came in the context of the infant Church existing as a sect within Second Temple Judaism. The teachings of Jesus separated the followers thereof from the larger Jewish community amid a time in which that community was faced with a very delicate situation regarding their relationship with

the Roman forces occupying their land. It is in this early portion of the book where Kinzig identifies the nature of Jesus as a man executed as a criminal, something which provoked difficulties with the Roman authorities (10). In this case, it served as an added motivation for the community at large to distance themselves from this condemned man and his followers. This led to Christianity further distinguishing itself from Second Temple Judaism. Later, Kinzig points out that Jesus was derided among the Romans as the "criminal founder" of the Christian religion (21).

Indeed, scandalous notions were attached to Christianity seemingly from the outset of the faith. Kinzig points out how Christians were "alleged to be an illegal secret society that subverted public life" (24). By categorizing Christians along such scandalous lines, Roman society of the time effectively painted Christians as dangerous agents in need of removal. This sort of propaganda was clearly effective.

Ultimately, Christians acknowledging the pre-eminence of Christ and Christ's lordship could never place their ultimate faith in loyalty to any worldly empire, including Rome. Their lives were living sacrifices to the Lord, so how could they possibly be expected to make sacrifices to the human emperor of Rome? This avoidance of sacrificing to the emperor had drastic consequences. Kinzig points out that, as the Romans saw it, the Christian "refusal of imperial sacrifice" meant that they "must be regarded as the Roman Empire's enemy" (24).

Kinzig also addresses the Emperor Nero's infamous persecution of Christians following the devastating fire of Rome in 64. The Christians were likely seen by Nero as easy scapegoats in the aftermath of the blaze, since they were "popularly despised for unspecified crimes" and faced charges of "hatred for humanity" (37). Nevertheless, the persecution that Nero brought was still somewhat localized, following the trend of the earliest persecutions of Christians.

During the second century, like the first, there were “no empire-wide persecutions,” merely the occasional “locally confined measures” (45). Sentences meted out to Christians in the Roman Empire varied and were not always that of death. Other possible sentences included exile with the confiscation of property, forced labor in mines or quarries, and (for Christian women) being forced into brothels (36). While not always facing certain death, the early Christians certainly faced a great number of horrific possibilities.

Kinzig also makes note of the difficult plight of Christian soldiers in the Roman army. For Roman soldiers who converted to Christianity, their subsequent refusal to participate in the cultic obligations of service in the army of pagan Rome could have “fatal consequences” (73). Christ’s teaching on nonviolence and compassion no doubt had a ripple effect in the lives of those early Christians who found themselves in the service of the Roman military.

Despite notable instances of persecution in parts of the empire throughout the first couple of centuries of the Church, wide-sweeping persecutions aimed at all Christians in the entire Roman Empire began under Emperor Decius in the middle of the third century (79). At that point, cultic obligations were mandated for all the empire’s inhabitants. The goal for the Romans was to achieve complete religious conformity throughout the empire (80). Christians who resisted these measures were frequently met with brutal treatment. Persecutions came and went under some subsequent emperors, before reaching their zenith in the time of Diocletian. The persecution that Christians faced under Diocletian and his fierce junior-emperor Galerius would be the “last and probably most severe persecution” that Christians faced under Roman rule (93). Galerius was even harsher toward Christians than Diocletian. Galerius saw Christians as “a danger to public welfare and a destabilizing factor to the empire” (96). This expansive persecution, set forth by several edicts, led to a multitude of tortures, book-burnings, and martyrdoms. This wave of persecution would continue on in force until Diocletian was retired and the dying Galerius at last “altered his strategic policy on religion” and issued 311’s “Edict of Toleration” (118). Even then, some persecution continued until the full ascension of Constantine to imperial power.

In his ninth chapter, Kinzig highlights some of the persecutions of Christians that were occurring outside of Roman territory in these first few centuries of the Church. This brief overview does well to showcase how these persecutions that are so widely associated

with the days of pagan Rome were also occurring elsewhere in the areas to which the early Church spread.

The tenth and final chapter of Kinzig’s book addresses the debate that raged after the persecutions has subsided regarding what to do about the Christians who had apostatized and later repented. This was a helpful conclusion to the book, discussing how the Church worked to move forward and make peace with all that they had been through in the prior years.

## Reflection

To look at all the information contained in this writing through both an anthropological lens and the lens that I have as a believer in Christ, I am left with a number of insights.

One thing that stands out to me is just how heavily derided the early Christians were by Roman society at large. Many (though not all) Christians in today’s world have been born into a context that does not deride them as much for their Christian faith. So, for many of us today, reading about these experiences may lend us a new perspective on what life has looked like for many of our brothers and sisters from ages past.

Additionally, I find it interesting to look at how Christianity’s story in the Roman Empire was ultimately one of triumph. Even though it was darkest before the dawn, with some of the most ferocious waves of persecution occurring mere decades before Christianity’s mass acceptance, the Christian Church eventually triumphed in the Roman Empire, with all the last emperors of the Roman Empire and all the emperors of the Byzantine Empire (which carried Rome’s mantle into the Middle-Ages) being Christians. In a general sense, one could say that Christians effectively converted the Roman Empire itself.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not take the time to address the specific sacrifices of the Christian martyrs of Rome. While I have left out the myriad of specific stories of Christians who met their death violently at the hands of Roman persecutors, Kinzig details many of them in the writing. Each individual sacrifice was immensely precious to God and of great value to the spread of Christ’s Church. Without their sacrifices, who could say whether Rome would have ever widely embraced Christianity in the way that it eventually did? There is something to be said for the immeasurable value of martyr’s blood in furthering our faith to the ends of the earth. Jesus and the Apostles knew this quite well, as did the many Christians who

bravely faced death for their faith in antiquity and those who do so still today.

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