

Note: The theme of *Conflict and Victory* is also a leading doctrine in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The best single work on The Scroll of Wars is Yigael Yadin, *The Scroll of The Wars of Sons of Light Against The Sons of Darkness*, edited, plus introduction and commentary by Yadin, Oxford University Press, 1962. This theme follows from the Old Testament and Intertestamental Literature.

Special Study - Persecution

How is The Church to Relate to the State?

The Revelation was written to a generation of Christians who were facing the hideous realities of persecution. Because of the great persecutions many Christians felt that evil dominated the human situation, and that the God of righteousness and peace had abdicated His heavenly throne. Many things in *The Revelation* are still inigmatic to the finest of dedicated scholarship, but one thing is crystal clear, that God chose the medium of apocalyptic symbolism to announce to the redeemed that He was still sovereign over heaven and earth. Victory had been gained; hold out to the end and every faithful follower will participate in His victory!

Why did the cultural environment of biblical Christianity persecute the Christians? What had they done, either individually or collectively, to merit the animosity of the world?

This particular problem raises the fundamental issue of how The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ shall relate to the world - either in the first or twentieth centuries.

Christ has said - "My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). This same Lord also said - "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21). Peter continues this same line of thought as he declares - "Be ye subject therefore to every human creature for God's sake: whether it be to the king as excelling or to governors as sent by him—Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (I Peter 2:13f.) Paul desires the same attitude toward kings. He declares, "pray for kings, and for all that are in high station—" - (I Timothy 2:2; see also Romans 13:3f). If the early Church carried out these biblical stipulations, then why persecutions? I believe that the problem of being the body of Christ, and at the same time encountering the world in order to "witness" is the largest single issue facing The Restoration Movement in our time.

How many ways can biblical Christians possibly relate to the world? I believe that they ultimately reduce to four possibilities. (1) *Ghetto-Christianity* or a monastic withdrawal of the Church - is an option which is actually chosen by many. (2) *Pious Parallelism* is a possibility, which finds its modern historical roots in the Lutheran-Pietistic controversies. (3) *Immersion in the World* generates the problem of being unable to distinguish between the Church and the World. (4) *Critical Inter-action* seems to this author to be the only serious attempt to fulfill our Lord's request to be "in but not of the world." This position is the most difficult one because it requires informed, committed Christians, and that they also know the intellectual and cultural grounds given by others for their rejecting Jesus Christ as Lord. (Note the New Testament metaphors for the Christians relationship to the world - pilgrim, alien, sojourner, etc.) What is the relationship of human efforts to the purpose of The coming of The Kingdom? Contrary to the attitude of the Liberals - man cannot create The Kingdom of God, but what is the function of human efforts to witness to Christ's redemption in the purpose of God on earth?

None of the above considerations could or would have prevented persecutions; but this does not preclude that our generation of the Church grapple seriously with the above mentioned issues. Because redeemed man is a citizen of *The City of God* and *The City of This World!*

In the *Book of Acts* we read of the first persecution of The Church - by the Jews. Stephen had been stoned by the Jews (Acts 7); and immediately following this event we read—"there arose on that day a great persecution against the Church which was in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles.---- They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the Word (Acts 8:1,4). Saul of Tarsus was persecuting "the disciples of the Lord." (Acts 9:). The Herodian persecution took the life of James by the sword (Acts 12:1-5). The tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians would require attention, if we were giving comprehensive analysis of our subject. There were many oppositions and stumbling blocks before the young church, but none of these reached the white hot animosity of the great persecutions. The Epistle of James speaks of the dispersion (*diaspora*) of the twelve tribes (See James H. Ropes, *The Epistle of James*, International Critical Commentary, for a discussion of the scattering of the Jewish Christians).

Christians were severely persecuted until the Roman Empire was (forcefully) baptized, then for all practical purposes, persecutions ceased. We would be mistaken if we took the relative date of *The Edict of Milan* as the end of persecution. Its publication merely brought an *official* end, but certainly not an *actual* end to persecution. The Edict was only the beginning of the end of the Empires' hostility to the body of Christ.

The first major persecution was during the reign of Nero. In this brief statement we shall deal with only two persecutions - Nero and Domition, because these cover the possible range for *The Revelation* background. Much of the New Testament literature comes during and after this general conflagration. The persecution during the month of July 64 A.D. resulted in the destruction of the entire quarter lying between Palestine and the Aventine. (See the descriptions given by Tacitus, *Annals* 15, sections 38-44; Suetonius, Nero; 31, 38, 39; Dion Cassius, 62, sections 16-18). Seneca, Nero's teacher, praised the martyred Christians when he mentions these men who died with joy, with serenity, amid such sufferings and torment. (See Seneca, *History* 5, section 55). Roman Catholic "tradition" places the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in the period of Nero's persecution. This assertion cannot possibly be sustained except by the most far-fetched inferences from early Patristic literature.

Soon the populace demanded lighter sentences for the "crime" of being a Christian. It was during Nero's reign that many great public works were started and Christians served as laborers. The Neronian persecution ended in 69 A.D. and for over twenty years afterwards the Christians lived in comparative peace throughout the Roman Empire. During this "period of peace" Balba, Otho Vitellius, Vespasian and Titus were on the Roman throne - successively. From Nero's persecution onward there was a complete distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Up to this period the distinction was not always apparent to the non-Christians. (See The Book of Acts, chp. 1-12 - Peter and Jewish emphasis, chp. 13-28 - Paul and Gentile emphasis).

The period of tranquility was broken when Domitian (81-95 A.D.) renewed what Tertullian called the "*institutum Neronianum*" (see Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* - to The Heathens I,7). *The Revelation* was written against this background.

After much persecution and anonymous accusations of Christians, Domitian became convinced that Christianity could not seriously harm his reign, and he suspended further persecutions.

There were other great persecutions of the Church in the second and third centuries. The persecutions of Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus, Aurelius, Septimius Severus, Maximinus, Decius, Valerian, Claudius and Aurelius, Diocletian, and the last extensive persecution by Julian the Apostate, all contributed to the flow of martyrs blood, but Christianity finally triumphed because the power of God shall prevail over all forms of evil. Jesus Christ said "I will build my Church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it." No human effort, not even persecutions for the "crime" of being a Christian, will ever prevail against it. The Lord has spoken and His Word shall not return unto Him void!

Bibliography for Further Study

- Allard, *Histoire des persecution*, Paris, 1885-1890; the indispensable, technical work. See also any of the first rate Bible Dictionaries - *Jewish Encyclopedia*, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, *Hastings*, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, *New Interpreters Bible Encyclopedia* (by Mediating and Neo-Orthodox scholarship).
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- Tacitus, *Annals*, 15-44, pp. 380, Modern Library edition, New York, 1942, Random House.
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- Workman, Herbert B., *Persecution in The Early Church*, London, 1906. Best in English! There is an excellent new edition of this great work for Church School teachers and Church Libraries. The Epworth Press, London, 1960 (new shortened, simplified edition for less than one dollar. For bibliography and references the 1906 edition is imperative.