

# Voices from the Margins: The Early Centuries of Christian Development

## I. Revelation 13, New Revised Standard Version

<sup>1</sup> And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. <sup>2</sup> And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. <sup>3</sup> One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. <sup>4</sup> They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

<sup>5</sup> The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and

blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. <sup>6</sup>It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. <sup>7</sup>Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, <sup>8</sup> and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

<sup>9</sup> Let anyone who has an ear listen:

<sup>10</sup> If you are to be taken captive,  
     into captivity you go;  
 if you kill with the sword,  
     with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. <sup>12</sup> It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. <sup>13</sup> It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; <sup>14</sup> and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; <sup>15</sup> and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. <sup>16</sup> Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, <sup>17</sup> so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or

the number of its name. <sup>18</sup> This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

## II. Rom. 13:1-7, New Revised Standard Version

<sup>1</sup> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; <sup>4</sup> for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

## III. Correspondence between Pliny and the Emperor Trajan (ca. 112 CE)

*Pliny the Younger, during his governorship of the Roman province Bithynia-Pontus, modern-day Turkey, encountered a new religious group, the Christians. Those who could claim Roman citizen status he sent to Rome; the others he punished himself—for their refusal to recant their religious identity, if not for any other infringement. Pliny's letter to Emperor Trajan for guidance is one of the first extra-*

*canonical pieces of evidence concerning Christian practice in this part of the Roman Empire.*

Ep. 10.96: Pliny to Emperor Trajan

It is my custom, my lord, to refer to you everything about which I have any doubt. For who can better guide my hesitating steps or enlighten my ignorance? I have never been present at the trials of Christians. Furthermore, I do not know why they are usually investigated or punished or what the degree of punishment is. I am uncertain as to whether there ought to be consideration for age (are the very young to be treated differently from those who are more mature?); whether pardon is to be granted to those who repent; whether privilege is accorded an individual who was once a Christian but is one no longer; whether the name itself (if it is not blameless) or offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Generally speaking, I have followed this procedure regarding those who are accused before me of being Christian: I have asked them whether they were Christians. If they confess, I question them a second and a third time, adding the threat of punishment. Without any hesitation, I sentence to punishment those who maintain their position. I have no doubt but that, whatever the nature of the crime they may have confessed, their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy ought to be chastised. Others afflicted with a like madness have claimed to be Roman citizens; at my order, they were sent to Rome.

Then, in the course of the procedure, accusations increase and, as a result, several types of cases usually are presented. One anonymous accusation appeared before me, containing

the names of many individuals. Some denied that they were or ever had been Christian. They called upon the gods, using the words I suggested. Some, with wine and incense, worshipped your image, which I had ordered to be brought in with the statues of the gods for this purpose, or they cursed Christ. (It is said that those who are actually Christian cannot be forced to do any of these things.) I thought these individuals ought to be acquitted. Others, named by an informer, said, at first, that they were Christian and then denied it, claiming that they had been so—some three years ago, others many years ago, one even twenty years before—but were no longer. All these persons worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

However, they did maintain that the sum of their fault or error had been this: on an appointed day, before dawn, they were accustomed to meet together and to sing, in alternate choruses, a hymn to Christ as to a god; they bound themselves by oath not to commit any abomination, but to avoid theft, highway robbery, and adultery; not to betray any trust nor, when called on, to refuse to pay a deposit. Afterwards, it was their custom to depart and to reassemble later for a meal of ordinary, innocent food. They claimed that they had stopped this practice after I issued, at your order, an edict forbidding any gatherings. I believed it necessary to use torture in order to know the truth regarding two female servants, who were called deaconesses. I discovered nothing more than perverse and excessive superstition.

Thus, I have suspended my investigation so as to hasten to consult you. This matter, it seems to me, is worthy of consultation, especially because of the number of persons who are in danger. For there are many of all ages, all classes, and even of both sexes who are or will be summoned to justice. The

infection of this superstition has penetrated not only cities, but villages and the countryside, as well. I believe it can be arrested and remedied.

In fact, the temples, which were almost completely abandoned, are once again being frequented; sacred festivals, long neglected, are being revived and fodder for sacrificial victims—for which, until recently, there were very few buyers—is again being sold. As a result, it is easy to imagine what a great number of people could be persuaded to amend their ways, if provision were made for their repentance.

*Pliny's letter received a reply from the Emperor. Trajan's letter reflects the first reported policy for imperial engagement with Christians.*

### Trajan to His Friend Pliny

In examining the cases of those who were brought before you accused as Christians, you have followed the procedure that you ought to have pursued, my friend Pliny. For, in such cases, it is impossible to establish a general rule which can be applied to each specific instance.

The Christians are not to be sought out. If they are accused and found guilty, they must be punished. However, if anyone of them denies being a Christian and clearly demonstrates this by offering prayers to our gods, that one is to be pardoned for the sake of repentance, whatever suspicion might have weighed on him in the past.

Furthermore, anonymous accusations are not to be taken into account, in any accusation at all. This is atrocious conduct and is unworthy of the age in which we live.

#### IV. Acts of the Martyrs of Scili

*This martyr act describes the trial and sentence to death of a group of martyrs from Scili, a part of the African province of Numidia. The precise date of the text is unknown and may have been as late as the beginning of the third century; the events themselves, however, are depicted as having taken place at Carthage on July 17, 180 CE. The text depicts an interrogation of the Christians by the proconsul and bears many of the hallmarks of the trial procedure already described in the Pliny/Trajan correspondence.*

When Praesens, for the second time, and Claudianus were the consuls, on the seventeenth day of July, at Carthage, there were placed in the judgment chamber Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vestia.

Saturninus the proconsul said: "You can win the indulgence of our lord the Emperor, if you return to a sound mind."

Speratus said: "We have never done ill, we have not lent ourselves to any wrong, we have never spoken ill, but when ill-treated we have given thanks, because we pay heed to our Emperor." Saturninus the proconsul said: "We too are religious, and our religion is simple, and we swear by the genius of our lord the Emperor, and pray for his welfare, as you too ought to do."

Speratus said: "If you peaceably lend me your ears, I can tell you the mystery of simplicity."

Saturninus said: "I will not lend you my ears, when you begin to speak evil things of our sacred rites; but rather you swear by the genius of our lord the Emperor."

Speratus said: "I do not recognize the empire of this world; rather I serve that God whom no one has seen, nor can see with these eyes. I have committed no theft; but if I have bought

anything I pay the tax; because I know my Lord, the King of kings and Emperor of all nations.”

Saturninus the proconsul said to the others: “Cease to be of this persuasion.”

Speratus said: “It is an evil persuasion to commit murder, to give false testimony.”

Saturninus the proconsul said: “Do not be participants of this madness.”

Cittinus said: “We do not have anyone else to fear, except only our Lord God, who is in heaven.”

Donata said: “Honor to Caesar as Caesar—but fear to God.”

Vestia said: “I am a Christian.”

Secunda said: “I wish to be that which I am.”

Saturninus the proconsul said to Speratus: “Do you persist in being a Christian?”

Speratus said: “I am a Christian.” And with him they all agreed.

Saturninus the proconsul said: “Will you not have space to consider?”

Speratus said: “In such a reasonable matter there is no considering.”

Saturninus the proconsul said: “What are the things in your box?”

Speratus said: “Books and epistles of Paul, a just man.”

Saturninus the proconsul said: “Have a delay of thirty days and reconsider.”

Speratus said a second time: “I am a Christian.” And with him they all agreed.

Saturninus the proconsul read out the decree from the tablet: “Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the rest having confessed that they live according to the Christian rite, because after opportunity offered to them to



return to the custom of the Romans they have obstinately persisted, it is determined that they be put to the sword.”

Speratus said: “We give thanks to God.”

Nartzalus said: “Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God.”

Saturninus the proconsul ordered it to be declared by the herald: “I have ordered Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, and Secunda to be executed.”

They all said: “Thanks be to God.”

And so they all together were crowned with martyrdom; and they reign with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost for ever and ever. Amen.

## **V. Justin Martyr, The First Apology (ca. 147–161 CE)**

*Justin, a self-styled Christian philosopher, here professes to address the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, his sons, and the entire senate on behalf of the Christians. The latter, Justin argues, have been unjustly persecuted; Justin does not deny that some who call themselves Christians might deserve punishment, but each case must be tried on its own merits if the leaders of the Roman Empire wish to show themselves just. In much of the Apology, Justin expounds Christian doctrine and practice, highlighting the superior morality and civic-spiritedness of Christians; seeks to demonstrate Christ’s provenance and identity from prophecy; and emphasizes the connections between Moses and the Greek philosopher Plato, even arguing that the latter’s wisdom was dependent upon the former. The selections reproduced here deal with Justin’s depiction of Christian morality and its compatibility with Roman laws and the needs of the empire.*

## Chapter 1: Justin's Address

To Emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar; to his son Verissimus, the philosopher; to Lucius the philosopher, by birth son of Caesar and by adoption son of Pius, an admirer of learning; to the sacred Senate and to the whole Roman people; in behalf of those men of every race who are unjustly hated and mistreated: I, one of them, Justin, the son of Priscus and grandson of Bacchius, of the city of Flavia Neapolis in Syria-Palestine: do present this address and petition.

## Chapter 2: Justin States His objective: Fair Treatment of Christians

Common sense dictates that they who are truly pious men and philosophers should honor and cherish only what is true, and refuse to follow the beliefs of their forefathers, if these beliefs be worthless. For sound reason not only demands that we do not heed those who did or taught anything wrong, but it requires that the lover of truth must choose, in every way possible, to do and say what is right, even when threatened with death, rather than save his own life. You hear yourselves everywhere called pious men and philosophers, guardians of justice and lovers of learning; whether you really deserve this reputation will now become evident. Indeed, we have come not to flatter you with our writings or to curry your favor with this discourse, but to ask that, after an accurate and thorough examination, you hand down a decision that will not be influenced by prejudice or by the desire to please superstitious men; a decision that will not be the result of an irrational impulse or of an evil rumor long persistent, lest it become a judgment against yourselves. As far as we [Christians] are concerned, we believe that no evil can befall us unless we be

convicted as criminals or be proved to be sinful persons. You, indeed, may be able to kill us, but you cannot harm us.

### Chapter 10: Justin Explains the Superior Restraint of Divine vs. Human Laws

But we have learned from tradition that God has no need of the material gifts of men, since we see that He is the Giver of all things. We have been taught, are convinced, and do believe that He approves of only those who imitate His inherent virtues, namely, temperance, justice, love of man, and any other virtue proper to God who is called by no given name. We have also been instructed that God, in the beginning, created in His goodness everything out of shapeless matter for the sake of men. And if men by their actions prove themselves worthy of His plan, they shall, we are told, be found worthy to make their abode with Him and to reign with Him, free from all corruption and pain. Just as in the beginning He created us when we were not, so also, we believe, He will consider all those who choose to please Him, because of their choice, to be worthy of eternal life in His presence. Our creation was not in our own power. But this: to engage in those things that please Him and which we choose by means of the intellectual faculties He has bestowed on us—this makes our conviction and leads us to faith. Indeed, we think it is for the good of all men that they are not prevented from learning these things, but are even urged to consider them. For what human laws were unable to effect, the Divine Word would have accomplished, had not the evil demons enlisted the aid of the various utterly evil inclinations, which are in every man by nature, and scattered many false and ungodly accusations—none of which, however, applies to us.

## Chapter 11: Justin Explains the Kingdom Christians Desire

When you hear that we look forward to a kingdom, you rashly assume that we speak of a human kingdom, whereas we mean a kingdom which is with God. This becomes evident when, being questioned, we openly profess to be Christians, although we know well that for such a profession of faith the punishment is death. If we expected a human kingdom, we would deny that we are Christians, that we might not be put to death, and we would try to hide from you, that we might attain what we expect. But because we do not place our hope in the present, we do not mind when men murder us, since death is inevitable anyhow.

## Chapter 12: Justin Explains the Superior Watchfulness of God

We, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace, since we believe that it is impossible for the wicked, or the avaricious, or the treacherous, or the virtuous alike to hide from the sight of God, and that each man receives eternal punishment or salvation according to the merits of his actions. If everyone realized this, no one would prefer to be in sin even for a little while, knowing that he would incur the pains of eternal fire, but he would by all means control himself and adorn himself with virtue, in order to gain the favor of God and escape His punishments. It is not because of the laws and penalties you fix that men try to hide from you when they break the law, but they disobey the law knowing that it is possible to elude you, since you are mere men. If, however, they learned and were convinced that nothing, whether in their actions or in their thoughts, can be hidden from the knowledge of God, they would live a completely orderly life, if

only because of the threatened punishments, as you yourselves will admit. But you seem to dread lest all men become just and you no longer have any left to punish. Such might be the worry of public executioners, but it should not be the concern of righteous rulers. As we said before, we believe that these things have been instigated by the evil demons who claim sacrifices and veneration even from those who do not live according to reason. But we do not presume that you who strive for piety and philosophy will act against reason. Still, if you, too, like thoughtless men, respect custom rather than truth, then do what is in your power. Rulers who prefer popular opinion to truth have as much power as robbers in the desert. That you will not succeed is testified to by the Word, and we know no ruler more kingly or just than He except God [the Father] who begot Him. For just as all men try to avoid inheriting the poverty, misery, and dishonor of their fathers, so will the man of reason refuse to choose whatever the Word forbids him to choose. That all these things should happen was foretold, I say, by our Teacher Jesus Christ, who is the Son and Apostle of God the Father and Ruler of all, and from whom we have received our name of Christians. Hence, we are convinced of the truth of all the things He taught us, because whatever He foretold would happen is actually happening; this, indeed, is the practice of God, to speak of something before it takes place and then to show it taking place just as He predicted. We might stop here and add nothing more, since we plead for what is just and true. But since we know how difficult it is to change over a mind trained in ignorance, we have decided to add a few observations to convince all lovers of truth, for we know that it is not impossible to dispel ignorance by setting truth against it.

## Chapter 17: Justin Argues that Christ Himself Demands Civil Obedience from His Followers

As we have been instructed by Him, we, before all others, try everywhere to pay your appointed officials the ordinary and special taxes. For in His time some people came to Him and asked if it were necessary to pay tribute to Caesar, and He replied, "Tell Me, whose likeness does this coin bear?" They said, "Caesar's." And He again replied, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's." Wherefore only God do we worship, but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men, and praying that you may be found to have, besides royal power, sound judgment. If you do not heed us, though we beseech you and clearly explain our position, it will by no means harm us, for we believe (rather, we are absolutely sure) that every man will pay the penalty of his misdeeds in the everlasting fire, and that everyone will give an account in proportion to the powers he received from God, as Christ made known to us when He said, "To whom God has given more, of him more shall be required."

## Chapter 68: Justin Concludes His Remarks and Reiterates His Plea for Toleration

If you think our statements are in accordance with reason and truth, respect them; if they seem silly, despise them as such. But do not impose the death penalty against those who have done no wrong, as you would against your enemies. For we forewarn you that you shall not elude the future judgment of God, if you continue to be unjust; and we will exclaim, "Let God's will be done."