



BSFL: 1 Peter 2:4-10

CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS

A FIRST-CENTURY UNDERSTANDING



BY GREGORY T. POUNCEY

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO PETER'S FIRST epistle, he identified his target audience as those "living as exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1).¹ The hallmark of these Jewish believers scattered from Jerusalem was that they were enduring intense suffering because of their faith in Christ.² He wrote to encourage them and help them see themselves as God's people. In 1 Peter 2:4-10, the apostle gave hints of how the world viewed early Christians. He spoke of Christ as being "rejected by people," yet as "chosen and honored to God" (2:4). The implication was that by extension, believers bore these designations as well. Peter viewed them as the living temple of God and as the royal priesthood of the new covenant. Like Jesus, early Christians faced rejection, but He became the "cornerstone" (vv. 6-8). Peter continued encouraging this rejected group, calling them "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession" (vv. 9-10). These verses give insight into two windows—the way that people outside the faith viewed Christ's followers and the way people of the faith viewed themselves.

Outside the Faith

How did those who were outside the faith view early Christians? Biblical accounts offer some details. For example, in Acts 28:22, Paul finally reached Rome after having been imprisoned in Caesarea for over two years. The Jews in Jerusalem had accused him of having taken uncircumcised Greeks into the Temple (21:26-36). As he arrived at Rome, Jews there heard his charges and seemed a bit confused. They admitted that they had received no letters from Judea about his charges (28:21) and wanted to hear more about the "sect" of followers "that people everywhere are speaking against" (v. 22). Their response to Paul revealed that in the first century, even in a cosmopolitan place like Rome, people had heard only rumors and rumblings about the Christian faith. They still viewed Christianity as a "sect" within Judaism, not a religion unto itself, and they also looked at this faith with disdain.

The Bible also indicates Jews did not embrace Christianity enthusiastically and tried to divorce themselves quickly from Jesus' messianic claims. Paul himself had been a part of this persecution, holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen (7:58) and taking an active part in persecuting Christians in



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/0167)



Yeshua" was added later and if so, when. Shown on the back are two circular rosettes, faintly visible.

Top: An early tradition claimed this to be the tomb of James, in the Kidron Valley. Later excavation revealed it to be the tomb of the sons of Hezir—a family of priests who served in the Jerusalem Temple.

Above: The so-called James Ossuary came to light in 2002. An inscription that reads, "(James) son of Joseph,

brother of Yeshua (Jesus)." The first part of the inscription is authentic; people have debated whether the "brother of

Judea (8:1; 9:1-2). Soon thereafter, Herod Agrippa I attacked the church and killed the apostle James. Roman rulers had to gain the favor of the Jews to keep peace in the region, and putting down the "sect" of Christianity elevated Herod's status among the Jews. Thus seeing that his actions had pleased the Jews, Herod arrested Simon Peter (12:1-5). Persecution later came in Asia Minor as a result of Jews from the synagogue opposing Paul and his companions and stirring up Gentile opposition to them as well (14:1-5). As the missionaries later preached the gospel, it hurt the business of the idol-makers, resulting in more opposition (19:23-27). Empire-wide persecution, however, awaited a later date.

The tide began to turn for the relationship between Christians and Roman culture during the reign of Nero (ruled AD 54-68). Cornelius Tacitus was a respected historian who served as a senator under Emperor Vespasian (AD 69-79). In his *Annals*, written AD 116, he described Nero's hatred of Christians that resulted in him blaming them for a fire in Rome:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.³

Because Nero hated Christians, he tortured them in terrible ways, even causing sympathy to arise among some for the persecuted Christians.⁴ The tide had turned. No longer were Romans persecuting Christians because of the Jews or because of economic liabilities. They now simply despised this new faith spreading across the empire.

In a letter written by Pliny the Younger, the governor of Pontus-Bithynia (ca. AD 110-113), the struggle to respond to the Christian movement was evident. He wrote Emperor

Trajan (AD 98-117), asking how to respond to those who had converted to Christianity. Pliny described them, saying:

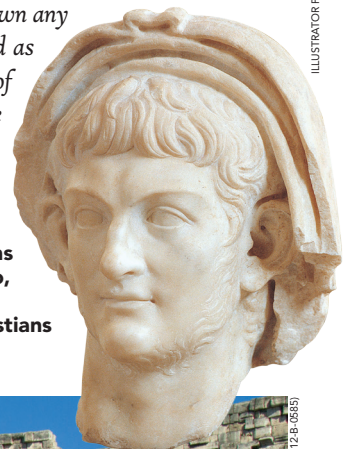
They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.⁵

Because of the large number of people coming to Christ, Pliny (lived AD 61-113) sought counsel for how to respond. Trajan issued a measured response:

The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the

Right: Rome's Emperor Nero (AD 54-68). Fire destroyed much of Rome in AD 64.

Many Romans blamed Nero, who in turn, blamed Christians for the fire.

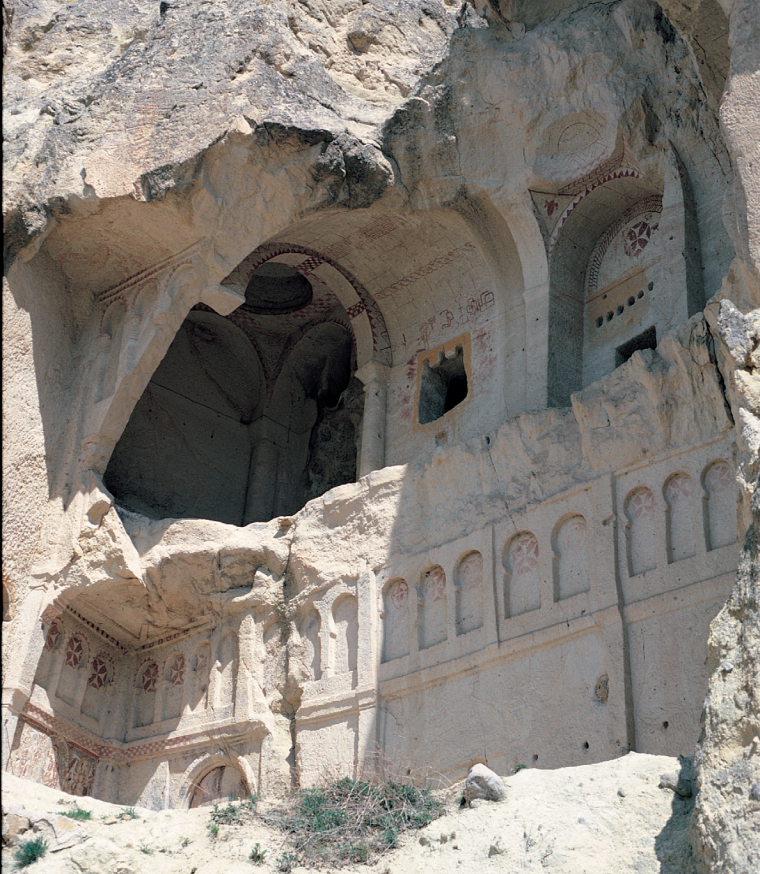


ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/THE ANCIENT CORINTH MUSEUM (11/8/9)

Looking across the floor and into the stands of the Roman Colosseum (also known as the Flavian Amphitheater).



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRICE (112-B-0585)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ LOUISE KOHL SMITH (32/21/6)



Left: Carved into the rock at Cappadocia, the Karamlik Church. Digging in the sandstone, people living in Cappadocia established houses, churches, cata-



Upper right: Portrait of Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117). Upper left: Bust of

combs, and even entire underground cities. Peter wrote to people who had dispersed, some of whom fled to Cappadocia.

Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96), who was one of the early persecutors of Christians.

restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our Gods) he shall be pardon on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Information without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age.⁶

The emperor's response shows clearly that the government disdained Christians, but early on they did not actively seek out believers for persecution. The government only responded to them as problems arose in their society.

The Roman historian Suetonius referred to Emperor Claudius's expulsion of Jews from Rome—an edict that would have included many Christians:

*Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.*⁷

By the time of Nero, Suetonius remarked that Christians were considered a sect of Judaism that had an evil intent:

*Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition. He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people.*⁸

He associated Christians with those who cheated and robbed people. Clearly the secular world had a bad view of the early Christians, both in the Jewish and Gentile world.

Within the Faith

Though both Jews and Gentiles outside the faith viewed Christians as deceived and possibly even dangerous,

Christians saw themselves as the people of God following their Messiah, Jesus Christ. In spite of persecution from all areas of society, they continued to worship, serve, and share the message of Jesus. This is the context of 1 Peter 2, where the apostle sought to ease the suffering of the early church and reassure them that they were persecuted not because of worldly reasons but because they were followers of the truth. He encouraged them to live holy lives so that no person outside the faith could use their immorality as a reason for persecution (1 Pet. 2:11-12). He challenged them to grow stronger in their faith (vv. 2-3) and to realize God had called them “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9). They were the structure being built upon the cornerstone of Jesus. Though the first-century world around them despised Christians for their faith in Jesus, that same faith was what energized believers to keep proclaiming the gospel to both Jew and Gentile alike. 📖

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. First Peter 1:6-7; 2:18-20; 3:13-17; 4:1-4, 12-19; 5:10.

3. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44 in *The Annals and the Histories*, ed. Moses Hadas, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Random House, 2003), 327.

4. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, states, “Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed” in *ibid.*

5. “To the Emperor Trajan,” *Letters* 10.96 in Pliny, *Letters II*, vol. 59 in *The Loeb Classical Library*, trans. William Melmoth (New York: MacMillan, 1915), 403-405.

6. “Trajan to Pliny,” *Letters* 10.97 in *ibid.*, 407.

7. Suetonius, *The Deified Claudius* 25.4 in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Books 5-8, vol. 38 in *The Loeb Classical Library*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914), 53.

8. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2 in *ibid.*, 111.

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