EARLY JEWISH PERSECUTIONS OF CHRISTIANS

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

Jewish condemnation of Jesus

Jewish leaders (“the chief priests and the whole council,” Mark 14:55) condemned Jesus on the ground of blasphemy.

Mark 14:61b-64 (// Matt 26:63-66; Luke 22:70-71), “the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” 62 Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’” 63 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? 64 You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death.”

Jewish persecution of Christians in Matthew

A publisher’s blurb of Douglas R.A. Hare’s *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St*. *Matthew* (Society for New Testament Studies. Cambridge: CUP, 1967) summarizes the book’s contents.

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. The theme of Jewish persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St Matthew is examined in this book with two questions in mind: 1. Has Matthew exaggerated the severity of the persecution? 2. How has the persecution influenced Matthew's theology? Professor Hare examines the historical data relating to the suffering imposed upon the Christians and refers to Rabbinic literature and Christian sources other than Matthew in order to evaluate Matthew's portrayal of the persecutions. He concludes that persecution was directed primarily against Christian missionaries, not against rank-and-file Christians.

Jewish persecution of Christians in Acts and Paul’s letters

After the crucifixion, at first Jews persecuted the apostles by beating them and forbidding them to preach. Acts 5:40, “when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

In Acts 6:8-15, 7:51-60, Jews stone Stephen (for blasphemy, 6:11).

Saul the Pharisee was a Jew persecuting Christians.

Acts 7:58, 8:1, 9:1-2, “Then they dragged him [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. . . . 8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. . . . 9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Acts 22:3-4, (Paul to a Jewish mob at the temple) “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. 4 I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison . . .”

Acts 26:9-11, (Paul to Herod Agrippa II) “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. 11 By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.”

1 Cor 15:9, “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

Gal 1:13-14, “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”

Gal 1:22-23, “and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; 23 they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.””

Phil 3:4-6, “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 . . . as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church . . .”

1 Tim 1:13, “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief . . .”

When Herod Agrippa (r. 41-44 CE) killed James, one of the twelve apostles, it pleased the Jews.

Act 12:1-3, “About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. 2 He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. 3 After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.”

Jews persecuted Paul after his conversion to Christianity.

Acts 9:23-24, “After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him [Saul], 24 but their plot became known to Saul.”

1 Cor 11:24-25, “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.”

Jewish persecution of Christians after Acts

Under the high priest Hanan ben Hanan (Ananus ben Ananus), the Sanhedrin condemned to death James, “the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19). This James, called “James the Just” (also “James the Lesser,” meaning younger or shorter, to distinguish him from James the Greater, who was one of the twelve), is mentioned in Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12; James 1:1; Jude 1:1. He was head of the Jerusalem church (e.g., Acts 15). James the Lesser’s martyrdom was in 62 CE (according to Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1) or in 69 (according to Hegesippus as quoted in Eusebius’ *Historia Ecclesiae* 2.23).

In the early 200s, Tertullian, a Church Father, described “the synagogues of the Jews as the sources of persecution [4] . . . Yet there is very little evidence either that Jewish communities practised their own persecution of Christians or that they instigated the Romans to do so.” (Lieu, Judith. “The Synagogue and the Separation of the Christians.” *JCRelations*.*net* (Jewish-Christian Relations). 31 May 2004. 4-5.)