

# Timeline of Persecutions

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## Explanation

As chart 18-2 shows, persecution of Christians was sporadic and varied. The earliest attacks on Christianity, from the time of its inception, came from the Jews who were angry or concerned that some of their number had embraced the new religion. They and other enemies of individual Christians sometimes brought actions against Christians in the courts of Roman magistrates, who were left with the daunting task of determining guilt or innocence. During the first and second centuries, Roman law and the general religious tolerance of Rome actually served to protect Christians from their attackers.

By the end of the second century, a heretical group of Christians in Asia Minor, known as Montanists, had formulated a doctrine that heavenly salvation would be assured, regardless of the worthiness of an individual's life, if that life were given in testimony or "martyrdom" of the Christian message. Montanist practice spread, and the third and fourth centuries witnessed in some quarters aggressive effort by Christians to effect their own death at the hands of either enemies or the Roman government.

Nevertheless, Christian numbers continued to grow so that by the time of Diocletian (A.D. 285) and Constantine (A.D. 315), the Christians comprised a force to be reckoned with. Christians became an important political factor in the dynastic struggles of Roman emperors, and under some rulers in that era they became the objects of actual government persecution for about thirty years.

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## References

Details and quotes extracted from W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965).

For an extensive synopsis of events, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 912–85.

Robert C. Patch, "Martyrs," *EM*, 2:862–63.

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64	Fire in Rome—Peter, perhaps Paul, and 977 others were reportedly executed during Nero’s reign
70	Jewish War—Christians fled to Pella instead of helping the Jews
70	Suspicion of Jews increased—this fear extended to Christians, who were seen as a Jewish sect
90	The Christian church had been completely severed from Judaism—“Most of the Christian persecutions of this time appear to be the direct result of Jewish hostility”
112	The Emperor Trajan ordered that Christians not be sought out
115	Second Jewish Revolt (Dispersion of Jews) (Christians showed their support of Rome)
117	The Jewish Revolt crushed under Trajan and Hadrian
124 or 125	The emperor Hadrian reinforced Trajan’s ruling that Christians not be sought out. Under Hadrian, a distinction was made between Christians and Jews. Those who prosecuted Christians unsuccessfully received the penalty they sought for the Christians. (Hadrianic Rescript)
132	Third Jewish Revolt (Christians showed their support of Rome)
135	Jewish revolt crushed; Hadrian put a statue of a pig on the Bethlehem gate of Jerusalem. End of Judea, creation of Palestine
135	Mob violence against Christians forbidden through 165; Hadrian’s rescript was later reaffirmed by M. Aurelius
152–65	Denunciations of Christians by private citizens for personal motives
160	Clash begins within the Church between pro-voluntary martyrdom and anti-voluntary martyrdom groups
164–68	Scattered martyrdoms in Asia
165	Great plague in Asia (believed to be due to Christian atheism), M. Aurelius sent new policies to Asia, making it easier to denounce Christians
165–80	Procedures laid down by Trajan and Hadrian whittled away and Christians began to be sought out (mostly in the provinces); rise in numbers of voluntary martyrs
165	Martyrdom of Polycarp by Greeks and Jews
170–80	Christian apologist Tatian promotes contempt of pagan society, already prevalent in Christian apocalyptic thought
172	Montanus began a pro-martyrdom sect of Christianity
177	48 martyrs in Lugdunum (Lyons), most voluntary

180	Period of peace for the Christians
180–92	Commodus's mistress, Marcia, was friendly toward the Christians and helped them
180–92	Reign of Commodus, peace for the Christians
190–240	Growth of Christianity and theological divisions between the East and West
c. 190	Irenaeus wrote <i>Adversus Haereses</i> , in which he claimed that the Roman "secular rule was also divine in character"
198–99	War between Rome and Parthia; Jewish Rebellion
200	"Outbreak of apocalyptic exultation" among Christians in Asia and Syria
202	"Severus' Edict prohibits conversion to Judaism or Christianity in response to the Jewish Rebellion of 198–199"
202–3	Outbreak of pro-martyrdom sentiment in Northern Africa
203	Perpetua and five others martyred in Carthage; "Apart from the years 202–203, and the situation which had developed between the Christians and pagans in Carthage, the reigns of Septimus Severus and his son Caracalla (211–217) were tolerant."
212	The <i>Constitutio Antoniniana</i> gave citizenship to nearly all of the freemen in the Roman Empire, making them responsible for worshiping the Roman gods.
217–18	Reign of Macrinus, no persecution
218–22	Reign of Heliogabalus, no persecution
222	Callistus, Bishop of Rome, and his presbyters were killed by a Roman mob
222–35	Reign of Alexander Severus, no persecution; "golden age of the pre-Constantinian Church"
235	Despite the ceaseless attacks by Jews, Christianity became one of the main religions of the Roman Empire
235	Maximin began his reign by executing Christian members of Alexander Severus's court and ordering the deaths of Christian leaders to restrict the growth of Christianity
235–37	Reign of Maximin, persecution against leaders, but extended to others through mob violence
c. 236	Earthquakes in Cappadocia were seen as a divine sign against Christians, causing local persecutions

248	Pogrom against Christians in Alexandria
249–51	Reign of Decius
249	Higher members of Christian clergy were arrested
250	Edict of Decius required sacrifice from all Christians in the Empire, martyrdoms over the whole empire numbered in the hundreds
251	Decius died; “within a year ... the Christian message was being proclaimed openly once more”
252	Plagues in the Empire for the next 15 years caused lapsed Christians to return and numbers of Christians to boom
257	First Edict of Valerian orders bishops and priests to worship Roman gods
258	Second Edict of Valerian put to death bishops and priests who disobeyed the first edict and confiscated Christian property; approximately 300 martyrs
260–68	Reign of Gallienus, no persecution, confiscated property was returned and Christianity was granted cemeteries and places of worship
260–303	No persecution, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire
275	Aurelian ordered proscriptions of Christians, but they were never carried out
303	Diocletian’s First Edict, beginning the Great Persecution, destroyed churches and scriptures and imprisoned church leaders. Urged by Galerius, the Second and Third Edicts expanded the first one
304	Diocletian’s Fourth Edict ordered general sacrifice and the death of noncompliant Christians
305	Galerius gained control of the Roman Empire and enforced anti-Christian edicts
306–10	Persecutions continued, although many of the martyrdoms were provoked by volunteer martyrs
311	Galerius became fatally ill and rescinded all edicts against Christians; oracles spoke out against this, instigating a three-month long “savage outburst” of martyrdoms
312	Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine gained control of the Roman Empire. No further persecutions
13 June, 313	Constantine issued an edict granting religious freedom to everyone