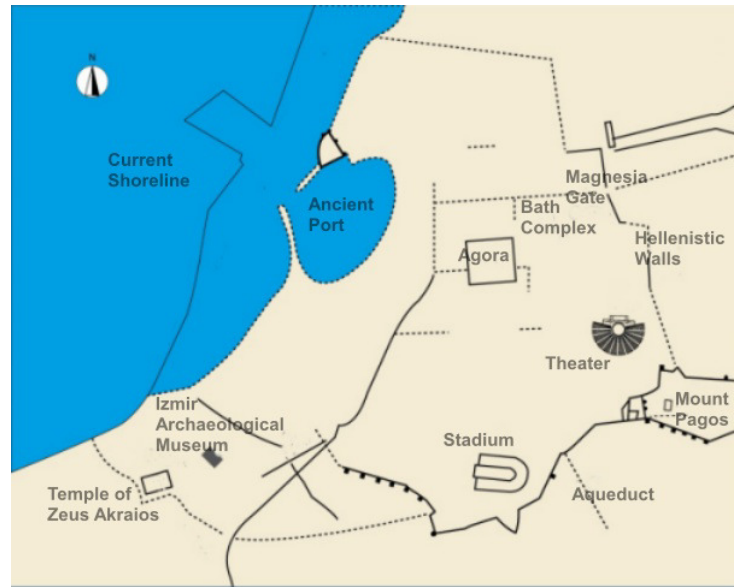


Smyrna

Located some 35-40 miles north of Ephesus, the fortified walled city of Smyrna was located at the inland mouth of the Hermus river on a large bay that served as a natural harbor and base for extensive trade between Anatolia and the Aegean.

The Greek noun “smyrna” is the same term for myrrh, a tree resin used for perfume (Matt 2:11; John 19:39), incense, and medicine, which was a principal export. During the first century A.D., considered as one of the most beautiful of cities, Smyrna was the third largest city after Ephesus and Pergamon. In modern Turkey, Smyrna is named Izmir.

Smyrna is mentioned only once in the New Testament in the apostle John’s Revelation.



And to the angel of the church in **Smyrna** write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the slander by those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.’ (Rev 2:8-11)

Smyrna was one of several cities that was the center of the Imperial Cult, which was a state religion that worshiped an emperor as a god. Beginning with Caesar Augustus (reign 27 B.C. – 14 A.D.), who built one of the earliest imperial temples in Pergamon in honor of his father Julius (29 B.C.), the imperial cult was established in Smyrna in 26 A.D. in honor of Tiberius (Tacitus, Ann. 4.55– 56). Possessing an imperial temple required approval from the emperor, which elevated the prestige of a city, and these cities were called “neokoros,” meaning “wardens of the temple.” While cities sought to be “neokoros” for wealth and prestige, the primary function of the imperial cult was to validate and support the Roman government.



The imperial cult largely defined what it meant to be Roman, and the religion existed before Christianity. In Asia Minor, Christians faced a dilemma, because there was only one true God.

The imperial cult had celebrations and feast days throughout the year, which Christians avoided and were perceived as sectarian and anti-Roman.

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Christians often met at night in people's homes, with rumors of suspicious rituals, contributing to the perception of a secret unauthorized religion.

In rejecting the worship of pagan idols, Christians were perceived as the cause of all things bad. Christian apologist Tertullian (155 – 220 A.D.) wrote:

They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, "Away with the Christians to the lions!"

Jesus Christ's agape love did not respect socio-economic class and norms. Christians posed a threat to the social order of Roman society.

While initially considered a part of Judaism, Christianity gradually became distinct and seen as a contemptuous superstition. After the first Jewish revolt in Judea (66 - 73 A.D.), a Jewish tax was imposed which allowed Jews to practice their religion, and was later modified so that Christians did not pay this tax.

Against this background, Christians were easy scapegoats which Nero used in Rome and became a precedent elsewhere in the Roman empire.

Yet no human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear that Nero had somehow ordered the fire. Therefore, in order to abolish that rumor, Nero falsely accused and executed with the most exquisite punishments those people called **Christians**, who were infamous for their abominations. The originator of the name, **Christ**, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated. Therefore, first those were seized who admitted their faith, and then, using the information they provided, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city, but for hatred of the human race. And perishing they were additionally made into sports: they were killed by dogs by having the hides of beasts attached to them, or they were nailed to crosses or set aflame, and, when the daylight passed away, they were used as nighttime lamps. Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man. (Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15, 44.2-8, 116 A.D.)

The sporadic persecution of Christians took place between 64 – 203 A.D.) for the crime of participating in a new religion / superstition not approved by the Roman government or disregarding the Roman religion / disobeying Roman government authority. Pliny the Younger, governor of the Bithynia – Pontus provinces (reign 111-113 A.D.) northeast of Smyrna writes to the emperor Trajan about the Christians (*Pliny Letters* 10.96-97).

Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of **Christians**. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a **Christian**, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as **Christians**, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were **Christians**; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been **Christians**, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed **Christ**--none of which those who are really **Christians**, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged.

Others named by the informer declared that they were **Christians**, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed **Christ**. They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to **Christ** as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Trajan to Pliny:

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as **Christians**. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a **Christian** and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

While Roman emperor Domitian (reign 81-96 A.D.) has been accused of persecuting Christians, no extra-biblical writer recorded Domitian as persecuting Christians in the manner like Nero. Domitian's persecution is notable for the apostle John's exile to Patmos (as well as others) in 95 A.D.

It is said that in this persecution the apostle and evangelist John, who was still alive, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos in consequence of his testimony to the divine word. Irenæus, in the fifth book of his work *Against Heresies*, where he discusses the number of the name of Antichrist which is given in the so-called Apocalypse of John, speaks as follows concerning him:

If it were necessary for his name to be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been declared by him who saw the revelation. For it was seen not long ago, but almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian. To such a degree, indeed, did the teaching of our faith flourish at that time that even those writers who were far from our religion did not hesitate to mention in their histories the persecution and the martyrdoms which took place during it.

And they, indeed, accurately indicated the time. For they recorded that in the fifteenth year of Domitian Flavia Domitilla, daughter of a sister of Flavius Clement, who at that time was one of the consuls of Rome, was exiled with many others to the island of Pontia in consequence of testimony borne to Christ. (Eusebius, *Church History III*, 18:1-5, approximately 313 A.D.)

But when this same Domitian had commanded that the descendants of David should be slain, an ancient tradition says that some of the heretics brought accusation against the descendants of Jude (said to have been a brother of the Saviour according to the flesh), on the ground that they were of the lineage of David and were related to Christ himself. Hegesippus relates these facts in the following words. (Eusebius, *Church History III*, 19:1, approximately 313 A.D.)

Of the family of the Lord there were still living the grandchildren of Jude, who is said to have been the Lord's brother according to the flesh. Information was given that they belonged to the family of David, and they were brought to the Emperor Domitian by the Evocatus. For Domitian feared the coming of **Christ** as Herod also had feared it. And he asked them if they were descendants of David, and they confessed that they were. Then he asked them how much property they had, or how much money they owned. And both of them answered that they had only nine thousand denarii, half of which belonged to each of them. And this property did not consist of silver, but of a piece of land which contained only thirty-nine acres, and from which they raised their taxes and supported themselves by their own labor.

Then they showed their hands, exhibiting the hardness of their bodies and the callousness produced upon their hands by continuous toil as evidence of their own labor. And when they were asked concerning **Christ** and his kingdom, of what sort it was and where and when it was to appear, they answered that it was not a temporal nor an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly and angelic one, which would appear at the end of the world, when he should come in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and to give unto every one according to his works.

Upon hearing this, Domitian did not pass judgment against them, but, despising them as of no account, he let them go, and by a decree put a stop to the persecution of the Church. But when they were released they ruled the churches because they were witnesses and were also relatives of the Lord. And peace being established, they lived until the time of Trajan. These things are related by Hegesippus.

Tertullian also has mentioned Domitian in the following words: Domitian also, who possessed a share of Nero's cruelty, attempted once to do the same thing that the latter did. But because he had, I suppose, some intelligence, he very soon ceased, and even recalled those whom he had banished.

But after Domitian had reigned fifteen years, and Nerva had succeeded to the empire, the Roman Senate, according to the writers that record the history of those days, voted that Domitian's honors should be cancelled, and that those who had been unjustly banished should return to their homes and have their property restored to them. It was at this time that the apostle John returned from his banishment in the island and took up his abode at Ephesus, according to an ancient Christian tradition. (Eusebius, *Church History III*, 20:1-11, approximately 313 A.D.)

Sometime later after Domitian's reign, by the time of Roman emperor Decius (reign 249-251 A.D.), by public edict, all citizens were required to prove that they sacrifice to pagan gods, which was called a Certificate of Having Sacrificed to the Gods (Oxyrhyncus Papyri).

To the Commissioners of Sacrifice of the Village of Alexander's Island:

From Aurelius Diogenes, the son of Satabus, of the Village of Alexander's Island, aged 72 years: ---scar on his right eyebrow.

I have always sacrificed regularly to the gods, and now, in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have done sacrifice, and poured the drink offering, and tasted of the sacrifices, and I request you to certify the same. Farewell.

-----Handed in by me, Aurelius Diogenes.

-----I certify that I saw him sacrificing [signature obliterated].

Done in the first year of the Emperor, Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajanus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, second of the month Epith. [June 26, 250 A.D.]

Although various levels of tribulation, Christian persecution for their faith, by state and Jews were experienced by the seven churches Jesus Christ addresses in Revelation, He mentions His awareness of only Smyrna's tribulation (Rev 2:9).

Before his exile to Patmos, the apostle John ordained Polycarp as the bishop of Smyrna. Recognized as one of the three Apostolic Fathers after Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp was martyred for refusing to submit Roman religion and the Imperial Cult.

