

Worthy Is the Lamb

by

Ray Summers

CHAIRMAN, RELIGION DEPARTMENT
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY
WACO, TEXAS

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AN INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF REVELATION

When it became known that Christianity was not just a new patch on the old garment of Judaism, the Christians found themselves in difficulty with the government as well as with their fellow men. There are several reasons⁴⁹ for the antagonism directed against the Christians.

(1) Christianity was an illegal religion—*religio illicita*. The Roman Government tolerated the religions of conquered provinces. They gave to the conquered people the right to place an image of their deity in the Hall of the Gods if they so desired. So long as the religion did not try to proselyte, it was thus legal. But the Christian religion could not thus be bound down. Its very purpose is that of making Christians of other people. For this reason it was outlawed.

(2) Christianity aspired to universality. With the Romans the State was the main thing; with the Christians the kingdom of God throughout the whole earth was the main thing. Christians had no sympathy with the idea that religion was to be promoted only as an aid to the State. Their position set them up as dangerous rivals of the best interest of the State.

(3) Christianity was an exclusive religion. Its adherents refused to mingle freely with heathen social life and customs. It was necessary for them to refuse intercourse with the pagan world because of the idolatrous practices in which the Romans engaged. Their refusal to go to idol temples and their refusal to have idols in their homes caused them to be looked upon as enemies to the gods. Nothing was too bad to be believed of such people.

(4) They were accused of all manner of evils. They were known to hold secret services at night, and they were observed to be very fond of one another. The Romans put these facts together and decided that these meetings were for the gratification of lust on a large scale. When they heard Christians speak of "eating flesh and drinking blood" (references to the Lord's

⁴⁹These reasons are condensed from Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-63, and A. H. Newman, *A Manual of Church History* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1899), I, 148-150.

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Supper), they accused them of cannibalism—eating the bodies and drinking the blood of the offspring of their orgies. Most of the persecution which the Christians received grew out of this popular hatred and misunderstanding.

(5) The Christians refused to go to war.⁵⁰ There were two reasons for this according to Tertullian. First, a part of the oath and initiation of the soldiers included service to the idols of the State and the wearing of idolatrous insignia on their uniforms. Second, Christ had taken their sword from them and had given them the ways of peace. But whatever their reason, the populace hated them and accused them of being traitors.

(6) Christians were recruited chiefly from the poor and the outcast. This caused Christianity to be looked down upon by those who regarded themselves as the "respectable."

(7) Christians shared with the Jews the contempt which the Romans held for this people; because of their refusal to compromise, they were regarded as worse than the Jews.

(8) Christians were looked upon as wild fanatics because of their enthusiasm. They shocked the sensibilities of the passive philosophers of the day.

(9) Christianity came in conflict with the temporal interest of many of the Romans—priests, makers, and venders of sacrificial animals.

(10) Christians refused to worship the emperor. If they had been content to worship the emperor as the chief deity of the empire, they would have been tolerated. But they could not say that the Kurios Caesar was superior to their Kurios Christ. Therefore, persecution and martyrdom became their lot. Domitian tried to annihilate altogether this recalcitrant and traitorous faith. Because of their attitude toward the Roman gods, the Christians were blamed with all the calamities which befell the empire. If there was no rain, the Christians were blamed for offending the deities. If there was a flood on the Tiber, the Christians were blamed. A famine, an earthquake, military reversals—all were blamed on the Christians.

⁵⁰*Ante-Nicene Church Fathers*, III, pp. 98 f.