

Postscript to 1 Peter: Persecution in Bithynia-Pontus

What became of the Christians to whom 1 Peter was addressed? Around 112, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor, wrote to the emperor Trajan concerning the status of Christianity in Bithynia-Pontus, two of the areas named in 1:1. Pliny's letter provides information about the churches addressed by 1 Peter a few decades later.

On the one hand, we learn that the church in this region has continued to grow and prosper. Pliny notes that "many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes" were associated with the faith, and he complains that "the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms."

On the other hand, it is clear that the suffering of the believers has also increased, for now they are experiencing deliberate persecution at the instigation of the Roman state. Pliny reports,

The method I have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked them whether they were Christians; if they admitted it . . . I ordered them to be at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved correction. . . . An anonymous information was laid before me containing a charge against several persons, who upon examination denied they were Christians, or had ever been so. They repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered religious rites with wine and incense before your statue . . . and even reviled the name of Christ: whereas there is no forcing, it is said, those who are really Christians into any of these compliances: I thought it proper, therefore, to discharge them. Some among those who were accused . . . at first confessed themselves Christians, but immediately after denied it; the rest owned indeed that they had been of that number formerly, but had now . . . renounced that error. . . . After receiving this account, I judged it so much the more necessary to endeavor to extort the real truth, by putting two female slaves to the torture, who were said to officiate in their religious rites: but all I could discover was evidence of an absurd and extravagant superstition. (Translation by William Melmoth; revised by F. C. T. Bosanquet [Project Gutenberg, 2001])