

# DARKNESS TO LIGHT

## DEMONIC ACTIVITY (In the World of the Early Christians)

Nero fabricated scapegoats - and punished with every refinement THE NOTORIOUSLY DEPRAVED CHRISTIANS (as they were popularly called). their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital.

First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned - not so much for incendiarism [causing or capable of causing fire] but because THE HUMAN RACE DETESTED THEM.... Dressed in wild animal's skins, THEY WERE TORN TO PIECES BY DOGS, OR CRUCIFIED, OR MADE INTO TORCHES to be lighted after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus... (see John 15:18-20; Heb 11:35-40).



The above quote is from Tacitus' *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived from about 55-117 AD. In this passage, he is describing the aftermath of the burning of Rome in 64 AD. Many believed Nero had started the fire himself in order to have cause to rebuild Rome in his name. In order to divert this suspicion, Nero claimed the gods were avenging Rome for permitting the "atheistic" Christians to live (pp.365,6).

The early Christians were called atheists because they refused to worship the gods of Rome and had no idols in their places of worship (Exod 20:3-5; 1Cor 8:5,6). It was with these charges that the Roman persecutions of the early Christians began (Luke 21:12).

### Persecutions and Martyrdoms

The Neronian persecutions ended in 68 AD upon Nero's death. But throughout the next two and a half centuries, nine more emperors would institute persecutions. The early Christians were under no delusions, though, that their true Enemy was the emperors.

A letter written in 177 AD (possibly by Irenaeus) describes the persecution of Christians in the cities of Lyons and Vienne.

It states in part:

The Greatness of the Tribulation here, and the exceeding wrath of the heathen against the saints, and all that the blessed martyrs suffered, neither are we capable of describing accurately, nor can it be compassed in writing.



For THE ADVERSARY fell upon us with all his strength ...

practicing and training his own against the servants of God.... But the grace of God took field against ... the onset of THE EVIL ONE....

After this, the holy martyrs endured tortures beyond all telling, SATAN being desirous that some blasphemous word should escape their lips....

When the tyrant's cruelties were made of none effect by Christ through the patience of the martyrs, THE DEVIL set about contriving other devices... (Fremantle, p.199; Eph 6:12; 1Peter 5:8).

Mark Felix recorded the contents of a debate that occurred in the later half of the second century between the pagan Caecillus and the Christian Octavius (Dods, p.17).

Octavius explains HOW and WHY Satan and his demons instigated persecutions: So they attack us by possessing the minds of the ignorant and sowing the seeds of hatred against us. BLINDING THE HEARTS OF MEN, the demons cause them to hate us before they even know us. For THEY REALIZE THAT ONCE PEOPLE KNOW THE TRUTH ABOUT US, THEY WILL WANT TO IMITATE US (Dods, p.49; Luke 1:3f; 2Cor 4:3f).

## Other Forms of Demonic Activity

In addition to instigating persecutions, the early Christians knew there are other ways Satan and his demons work.

Athenagoras (second century) was a Grecian philosopher who was converted to Christ after reading the Scriptures. His main work was called, *A Plea for the Christians*.

In his book he writes, "These ANGELS WHO HAVE FALLEN FROM HEAVEN, haunt the air and the earth, and are no longer able to rise to heavenly things.... THEY WHO DRAW MEN TO IDOLS ARE THE AFORESAID DEMONS" (Bush, p.53; Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:13-17; Rev 12:9; 1Cor 10:19f).

Octavius describes several aspects of demonic activity. First, he acknowledges that sometimes pagan diviners "have been close to the truth in their predictions." But he states this is either due to "a matter of chance" or because demons "animate the entrails of animals diviners search through for their prophetic clues" (Dods, pp.47,8; Deut 13:1-3).

He also admits pagan magicians do perform miracles. But he asserts "they perform their miracles by means of demons" (Dods, p.48; Ex 7:12,22; 8:7; 2Thes 2:9; Rev 16:14).

Lastly, he explains an interesting but very deceptive way demons act: They also CREEP SECRETLY INTO HUMAN BODIES as though they were spirits. Then THEY FEIGN DISEASES, DISTURB THE MIND, and wrench the limbs of the possessed person. However, when sacrifices are made to them, they often set the possessed person free. SO IT APPEARS THAT THESE DEMONS HAVE CURED THE ILLNESS, WHEN ACTUALLY THEY CAUSED IT. This is how they attract worshippers (Dods, pp.48,9; Mark 5:1-5; Luke 22:3; 2Cor 11:14; Rev 13:1-4).

Justin Martyr was beheaded in 165 AD for his faith in Christ (hence his surname). He had much to say in his *Apology* about the activity of demons.

He first discusses a method demons used to institute false religion:

But I'm going to tell you the truth about demons. Since ancient times, the evil DEMONS HAVE MADE GHOSTLY APPEARANCES TO HUMANS, defiling woman and corrupting boys. They have made such terrifying appearances to men that those who did not maintain reason were struck with horror. In their fear, NOT REALIZING THAT THESE BEINGS WERE DEMONS, CALLED THEM GODS. They gave to these "gods" whatever names the demons chose for themselves... (Gen 6:1-4; Jude 6).



We not only deny that THE BEINGS OF MYTHOLOGY are really gods, but WE DECLARE UNEQUIVOCALLY THAT THEY ARE WICKED DEMONS (Dods, pp.95,6); Deut 32:17).

Justin now explains how demons try to prevent people from learning the truth: Yet, I am going to forewarn you to be on your guard so that the demons will not deceive you. THEY WILL TRY TO KEEP YOU FROM READING AND UNDERSTANDING WHAT I'M SAYING. They want to keep you as their slaves and servants. Sometimes they appear in dreams; other times in magical rites. By those means, THEY ENSLAVE ALL THOSE WHO DO NOT SEEK SALVATION BUY ACTIVELY OPPOSING THEM. For that reason, ever since our conversion to serve the Logos, we keep free from demons and follow the only unbegotten God through his Son (Dods, p.78; Prov 5:22f; Matt 13:18-23; James 4:7).

## Assault on Morals

The early Christians also recognized that Satan's hand is at work whenever people are being deceived into living immoral lives and accepting ungodly practices.

The *Epistle of Barnabas* (c.100 AD) demonstrates this attitude: THE WAY OF THE BLACK ONE is crooked and full of a curse. For it is a way of eternal death with punishment wherein are THE THINGS THAT DESTROY MEN'S SOULS - idolatry, hypocrisy, doubleness of heart, adultery, murder, plundering, pride, treachery, witchcraft, magic, covetousness, absence of the fear of God, persecutors of good men, HATING THE TRUTH, LOVING LIES, LOVING VAIN THINGS, MURDERERS OF CHILDREN, turning away from him that is in want, oppressing him that is afflicted (Lightfoot, p.287; Pr 6:16-19; Eccl 2:1-11; John 8:42-47; Rom 1:18-25; 2Tim 3:1-9; James 4:16-5:6).

Octavius describes the state of immorality in the Roman empire in his debate: And I notice that sometimes you Romans abandon Your new-born babies to wild beasts and birds. Others strangle their infants to death. There are some women who, by drinking medical potions, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels and thus COMMIT MURDER BEFORE THEY GIVE BIRTH (Psalm 106:34-39; 139:13-16).

All these practices come from the teachings about your gods. In fact, your gods act worse than you do. Saturn did not merely expose his children; he ATE them....

YOU EVEN WORSHIP INCESTUOUS GODS, who have sexual relations with their mothers, daughters and sisters. NO WONDER INCEST ABOUND AMONG YOU.... Furthermore, MANY MEN SCATTER THEIR LUSTS PROMISCUOUSLY, fathering their children everywhere... (Dods pp.52,3; Lev 17:7; 18:6-30; 1Thes 4:3-8; Heb 13:4).

Octavius also discusses the early Christians' attitude towards Roman entertainments:

We abstain from evil pleasures and from your splendors and public games. WE CONDEMN THESE ENTICEMENTS, KNOWING FROM SACRED THINGS THEIR ORIGIN. We shudder from the madness of the crowds brawling among themselves at the chariot games and from the teaching of murder in the gladiatorial contests. The madness is no less at your dramas. Instead the debauchery is more prolonged. SOMETIMES AN ACTOR EXPOUNDS ON ADULTERY; OTHER TIMES HE ACTS IT OUT. ANOTHER ACTOR MAY ENTICE THE CROWD TO LUST (Dods, p.64; 1Pet 4:1-5; 2Peter 2:12-19; Rev 17:1-5; 18:23; Eccl 1:9f).

## "The Ancient Kingdom was Pulled Down"

Despite the demonic activity all around them, the early Christians were not diverted from proclaiming the Gospel (2Cor 4:7-11). The reason for this fortitude is seen below.

Ignatius, a disciple of the Apostle John, was thrown to the wild beast in 117 AD. On his way to his martyrdom, he wrote seven letters to various churches of the time.

In his letter to the Ephesians, he proclaimed about the birth and death of Christ: From that time forward every sorcery and every spell was dissolved, the ignorance of wickedness vanished away, THE ANCIENT KINGDOM WAS PULLED DOWN WHEN GOD APPEARED IN THE LIKENESS OF MAN UNTO THE NEWNESS OF EVERLASTING LIFE (Lightfoot, p.142; Gen 3:15; John 19:30; 2Cor 10:3-5; Phil 2:5-11; Col 2:8-15; Heb 2:14-18).

Octavius describes how demons were cast out of the possessed by Christians: When they are denounced by the one true God, THE WRETCHED BEINGS SHUDDER in their bodies. They then either leap out at once or vanish by degrees, depending on the assisting faith of the possessed one or the inspiring grace of the healer (Dods, p.49; Mark 1:23-27; 9:14-29; Luke 10:17-20; Acts 8:7; 16:16-18; 1John 4:4).



Another quote from Ignatius' letter to the church at Ephesus will end this article:

Do your diligence therefor to meet together more frequently for thanksgiving to God for His glory. For WHEN YE MEET TOGETHER FREQUENTLY, THE POWERS OF SATAN ARE CAST DOWN; and his mischief cometh to naught in the concord of your faith (Lightfoot, p.140; Acts 2:1-4,36-47; 12:5-7; 13:1-12; Rom 16:20; Heb 10:23-25; Rev 12:11).

**Bibliography:** All Scripture references from: *The New King James Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982, unless otherwise indicated.

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