# THE EARLY CHRISTIANS IN ROME

BY THE VERY REV.

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THE ROMAN CATACOMBS

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TO

EDGAR SUMNER GIBSON, D.D.

LORD BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER

A GREAT SCHOLAR AND A WARM FRIEND

## PREFACE

Of the five Books which make up this work, the *First Book* relates generally the history of the fortunes of the Church in Rome in the first days.

The foundation stories of the Roman congregations were laid largely by the Apostles Peter and Paul—Peter, so with one accord say the earliest contemporary writers,[1] being the first apostle who preached in Rome. Paul, who taught many years later in the Capital, was also reckoned as a founder of the Roman Church; for his teaching, especially his Christology, supplemented and explained in detail the teaching of S. Peter and the early founders.

The First Book relates how, after the great fire of Rome in the days of Nero, the Christians came into prominence, but apparently were looked on for a considerable period as a sect of dissenting Jews.

From A.D. 64 and onwards they were evidently regarded as enemies of the State, and were perpetually harassed and persecuted. No real period of "quietness" was again enjoyed by them until the famous edict of Constantine the Great, A.D. 313, had been issued. Although, through the favour of the reigning Emperor, a temporary suspension of the stern law of the State, sometimes lasting for several years, left the Christian sect for a time, comparatively speaking, at peace.

The Persecutions, which began in the days of Nero, with varying severity continued all through the reigns of the Flavians (Vespasian, Titus, Domitian).

Nerva, who succeeded Domitian, only reigned two years, and was followed by the great Trajan: still the persecution of the sect continued. This we learn from Pliny’s letter to Trajan, *circa* A.D. 111–113. Hadrian, who followed Trajan, virtually pursued the same policy.

In the latter years of Hadrian, from A.D. 134–5, the result of the great Jewish rebellion definitely and for ever separated, in the eyes of the government, the Christian from the Jew. Henceforth the Jew generally pursued his quiet way, and found new ideals, new hopes. The State feared the Jew no longer.

Not so the Christian. Rome saw clearly now that a new and influential sect had arisen in their midst; a sect absolutely opposed to the old Roman sacred traditions and worship, a sect, too, that evidently possessed some mighty secret power which enabled the Christians fearlessly to defy the magistracy of the Empire. This partly accounts for the greater severity of the persecution under the Antonine Emperors.

The policy of the Antonines (Pius and Marcus), which endeavoured to restore and to give fresh life to the old Roman traditions and worship, which they looked upon as indissolubly bound up with the greatness and power of Rome, was absolutely hostile to the spirit of Christian thought and teaching.

The *First Book* brings the history down to A.D. 180, the date of the death of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

The “Inner Life” of the Christian congregations is now dwelt on, and forms the subject-matter of Books II., III., IV.

The subject-matter of the *Second Book* is the *everyday life* of the Christian in the first, second, and third centuries, during which period the religion of Jesus of Nazareth was in the eyes of the Roman government an unlawful cult, and its adherents were ever liable to the severest punishment, such as confiscation of their goods, rigorous imprisonment, torture, and even death.

After dwelling on the question of the numbers of Christians in very early times, their public *assemblies* or meetings together are described with considerable detail in Book II. The importance of these "meetings" in early Christian life is dwelt upon. *What took place at these gatherings* is commented upon at considerable length. The position occupied by the *slave* at these "meetings," and in Christian society generally, is examined briefly.

Some of the various difficulties which Christians in the age of persecution had to face, and the way by which these difficulties were combated, are described.

Instruction as to the way of meeting the difficulty of life for a Christian living in pagan Rome, was given by two different schools of thought. A sketch is given of (1) "Rigourists," and (2) of the "gentler and more practical" schools which strove to accommodate the Christian life with the life of the ordinary Roman citizen.

The important part played by the "Rigourist" or ascetic school in the ultimate conversion of the Roman World to Christianity is examined.

Finally, some of the inducements are indicated which persuaded the Christian of the first three centuries to endure with brave

patience the hard and dangerous life which was ever the earthly lot of the followers of Jesus.

The *Third Book* treats especially of the hard and painful nature of the "life" which, from A.D. 64, was the lot of the Christian in the Roman Empire. For the members of the community ever lived under the dark shadow of persecution. The severity of the persecution varied from time to time, but the dark shadow lay on them, and constantly brooded over all their works and days. We possess no direct detailed history of this state of things, but all the early contemporary writings of Christians, a good many of which, whole or in fragments, have come down to us, are literally honeycombed with notices bearing on this perpetual apprehension; and indeed so real, so constant was the danger, and so grave were the consequences to Christianity of any flinching in the hour of trial, that among the congregations of the first days, numerous schools existed for the purpose of training men and women to endure the sufferings of martyrdom.

The number of martyrs in these early years has been probably understated. Pagan contemporary writers of the highest authority, casually, but still definitely, allude to the great numbers of victims, while the tone of early Christian writings (already referred to) is deeply coloured with the pathetic memories of these blood-stained days.

Besides the references even of eminent pagan authorities and the perpetual allusions in early Christian writings to the great numbers of Martyrs and Confessors, a somewhat novel testimony to the vast number of martyrs is quoted here at some length from the history of the Catacombs, where the numbers of these Confessors are again and again dwelt on in the "handbooks" to the Roman

subterranean cemeteries, compiled in the fifth and following centuries as “guides” for the crowds of pilgrims from foreign lands visiting Rome. These “Pilgrim Guides,” several of which have in later years come to light, have been recently made the subject of careful study.

The *Fourth Book* is devoted exclusively to the story of the Roman Catacombs. In the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, the vast subterranean City of the Dead, known as the Roman Catacombs, has been in parts patiently excavated, and carefully studied by eminent scholars. This study, which is still being actively pursued, has thrown much light upon the “life” lived among the early generations of Christians. The inscriptions and epitaphs graved and painted, the various symbols carved upon the countless tombs in the Catacombs, have told us very much of the relations between the rich and the poor. They have disclosed to us something of the secret of the intense faith of these early believers on the “Name,” and have shown us what was the sure and certain hope which inspired their wonderful endurance of pain and agony, and their marvellous courage in the hour of trial.

All this and much more the inscriptions on the thousand thousand graves, the dim fading pictures, the rough carvings, speak of in a language none can mistake. It is, indeed, a voice from the dead, bearing its strange, weird testimony which none can gainsay or doubt.

The work of excavation and the patient study of these Catacombs are yet slowly proceeding, but from what has been already discovered we have learned much of the “Inner Life” of this early Christian folk.

The history of these wonderful Catacombs, this subterranean city of the dead beneath the suburbs of ancient Rome, is told at some length and with considerable detail in the Fourth Book.

The *Fifth Book* may be considered as a supplement to the work, which in the first four Books has dwelt on (1) the very early history, and (2) on the "Inner Life" of the Christian Church in the first three centuries, especially in Rome.

Christianity sprang from the heart of the Chosen People, the Jews. The Divine Founder in His earthly life was pleased to be a Son of the Chosen People, and His disciples, who laid the early stories of the Faith, were all Jews, as were the earliest converts to the religion of Jesus.

The history of the Jews—their past and present condition—is indissolubly bound up with the records of Christianity. It constitutes the most important confirmation which we possess of the truth of early Christian history. It is the weightiest of all evidential arguments here, and it cannot be refuted or disproved.

The general account of the Chosen People before the coming of Messiah is well known, and the historical accuracy of the Old Testament records is generally admitted. But the memories of the fortunes of the Jewish race after A.D. 70, when the Temple and City were destroyed, and when the heart of Judaism, as it were, ceased to beat, are comparatively little known.

The Fifth Book tells something of that eventful history. It sketches first, very briefly, the last fatal wars of the Jews. Then it tells how directly after the Temple was burnt a remarkable group of Rabbis arose, who, undismayed by what seemed the hopeless ruin of their

race, at once proceeded to the reconstruction of Judaism upon totally new foundation stories.

These strange and wonderful scholars gathered together a mass of memories, traditions, and precepts which from the days of Moses had gradually been grouped round the sacred Torah,—the Law of the Lord,—and which had formed the subject-matter of the teaching of the Rabbinic schools of the Holy Law during the five centuries which had elapsed since the Return from the Captivity.

All these memories—traditions—comments, the great scholar Rabbis and their disciples arranged, codified, amplified. This work went on for some three hundred years or more; their labours resulted in the production of the Talmud.

The great object of this marvellous book, or rather collection of books, the Talmud, was the glorification of Israel; but no longer as a separate, a distinct nation, but what was far greater, as a separate People, a People specially beloved of God, for whom a glorious destiny was reserved in a remote future, a destiny which only belonged to the Jews.

In the several sections of this Fifth Book the Talmud is described:—the materials out of which it was composed, the method of the composition, the marvellous power which it exercised upon the sad Remnant of the Jewish people, how it bound them, exiles though they were in many lands, and kept them together,—all this is told at some length.

The ten or twelve millions of Jews, scattered through many hostile nations, living in the world of to-day, more powerful, more influential by far than they were in the golden age of David and Solomon, linked together by a bond which has never snapped, are

indeed an ever-present evidence of the truth of the story of the early Christians dwelt on in the first four Books of this work.

“Assured the trial, fiery, fierce, but fleet,
Would, from his little heap of ashes, lend
Wings to that conflagration of the world
Which Christ awaits ere He makes all things new:
So should the frail become the perfect, rapt
From glory of pain to glory of joy.”

*BROWNING, The Ring and the Book, x. 1797*

## BOOK I

# THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY IN ROME

## PART I

### INTRODUCTORY

#### THE JEWISH COLONY IN ROME

At the beginning of the first century of the Christian era the Jewish colony in Rome had attained large dimensions. As early as B.C. 162 we hear of agreements—we can scarcely call them treaties—concluded between the Jews under the Maccabean dynasty and the Republic. After the capture of Jerusalem by Pompey, B.C. 63, a number more of Jewish exiles swelled the number of the chosen people who had settled in the capital. Cicero when pleading for Flaccus, who was their enemy, publicly alludes to their numbers and influence. Their ranks were still further recruited in B.C. 51, when a lieutenant of Crassus brought some thousands of Jewish prisoners to Rome. During the civil wars, Julius Cæsar showed marked favour to the chosen people. After his murder they were prominent among those who mourned him.

Augustus continued the policy of Julius Cæsar, and showed them much favour; their influence in Roman society during the earlier years of the Empire seems to have been considerable. They are mentioned by the great poets who flourished in the Augustan age.

The Jewish Sabbath is especially alluded to by Roman writers as positively becoming a fashionable observance in the capital.

A few distinguished families, who really possessed little of the Hebrew character and nationality beyond the name, such as the Herods, adopted the manners and ways of life of the Roman patrician families; but as a rule the Jews in foreign lands preferred the obscurity to which the reputation of poverty condemned them. Some of them were doubtless possessors of wealth, but they carefully concealed it; the majority, however, were poor, and they even gloried in their poverty; they haunted the lowest and poorest quarters of the great city. Restlessly industrious, they made their livelihood, many of them, out of the most worthless objects of merchandise; but they obtained in the famous capital a curious celebrity. There was something peculiar in this strange people at once attractive and repellent. The French writer Allard, in the exhaustive and striking volumes in which he tells the story of the persecutions in his own novel and brilliant way, epigrammatically writes of the Jew in the golden age of Augustus as “one who was known to pray and to pore over his holy national literature in Rome which never prayed and which possessed no religious books” (“Il prie et il étudie ses livres saintes, dans Rome qui n’a pas de théologie et qui ne prie pas”).

They lived their solitary life alone in the midst of the crowded city—by themselves in life, by themselves, too, in death; for they possessed their own cemeteries in the suburbs,—catacombs we now term them,—strange God’s acres where they buried, for they never burned, their dead, carefully avoiding the practice of cremation, a practice then generally in vogue in pagan Rome. Upon these Jewish cemeteries the Christians, as they increased in

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