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Temple, Coins and Persecution: Why the Pagans Persecuted the Early Christians

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It is common knowledge that the Romans were tolerant of most religions, as long as they posed no threat to the political or social structure. In fact, the worship sites of these various sects provided for an intricate network of cash flow within the Empire. These worship sites included the temples of the ancient world, and with trends in Christian conversion they faced a dramatic change in their economic utility. Temples were central to the economy. The Romans persecuted the Christians in part because the government saw the rapid growth of Christianity as a threat to that economic utility. Surely this was not the only reason for the persecutions, but it does offer some color to what may often appear black and white.

Jesus Christ, the very symbol and centerpiece of Christianity, went up into Jerusalem “and found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting” (John 2:14). Like the pagan temples of the time, the temple in Jerusalem had become a hub of commerce. This was nothing extraordinary for that time period, considering that it was common practice in pagan temples. Temples were the banks of old, the economic catalysts in which trade was the name of the game. They served as the vessels for very large endowments in money from “all over the Roman Empire as well as from Babylonia and Arabia.” These large endowments of money, as well as the buying and selling of goods and other related practices, enabled the temples to serve as locations for state currency exchange (hence the term “money changers”). Furthermore, some of these “holy places” maintained complete sales monopolies regulated by law.

If these temples were indeed keystones to economy then it makes sense that the Roman Empire would concern itself with keeping their activity continuous and stable. An unstable economy is the last thing any government wants to deal with. It is not easy to win the support of your people when the economy is

collapsing. Whether the government is actually to blame is irrelevant. However, the government certainly cared about the temples, and was directly involved with their operations on multiple levels. It was already mentioned that in some districts the government maintained sales monopolies that controlled the commerce of the city markets. In a city where purchasers of animals for sacrifice were scarce, the economy again flourished near a temple estate after Pliny got his hands in on its operations by carrying out many Christian trials and executions. Writing of these trials and of his first encounter with Christianity, Pliny tells Trajan:

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.3

Notice that Pliny tells us that it did not spread only to the cities but also to the villages and to the farms. This “contagion” of Christianity disrupted the norm. The already established religious rites shifted the worship practices, and their temples to a large degree lost their magnetism. Pliny expressed relief for the economy’s balance of supply and demand when he said that “from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found.” Due to the spread of Christianity, a previous center of commerce had come into disuse, at least until Pliny took care of things. Clearly, the Christian trials brought the desired reconciliation.

In addition to the economic role that temples played for society as a whole, they were also a means of generating both mass imperial and personal fortunes. Those who controlled the temples gained power and wealth. This economy was developed and in place before the Christian persecutions began, and our records tell us that these temple estates were used for that very purpose—to beef up the royal properties and wealth.

Pompey gained control of a number of territories where there were several “petty princes and high-priests of small temple-states who were confirmed in their offices, placed under the protection of the provincial governors, and ordered to pay tribute to Rome. The annual revenues that accrued from these new dependencies almost doubled Rome’s public income.”4 Tenney continues noting that Pompey did this primarily with an “interest in the revenues to be collected.”5

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5. Tenney, Ancient History of Rome, 177.
No matter the location or the sect, temples were the center of significant commerce. Again, it is not difficult to imagine why it was so important to the leaders of Rome that the temples were not suddenly forsaken. Consider another economic example that would set the stage for Christian persecutions.

In 25 B.C.E., Amyntas, the king of Galatia, was killed in battle. Augustus Caesar, who took over his kingdom, inherited all the temple estates of the Galatians and accrued a substantial sum of wealth. Besides increasing his royal properties and wealth with these temple estates, he did a few other things that contributed to temples being central pieces in the developing economy of the empire. These accomplishments played a part in the persecution of the Christians on the basis of their disruption of temple activity.

First, Augustus Caesar established peace and united the empire after years of civil war. This new peace was certainly beneficial to trade within the empire, not to mention the many miles of road he both constructed and renovated to better connect its various lands. The easier trade became, the more important temples became as banks. As trade became more and more universal, so did the demand for a common measure of value. This is more easily understood in light of Caesar’s second accomplishment, the establishing of the empire’s universal currency—the denarius.

“For the first and last time in their history,” Harl says, “the peoples of the Mediterranean enjoyed, in the denarius, a common measure of value.” This new Augustan coinage, he continues, “owed its success foremost to the economic growth stimulated by the Roman peace, but the coinage itself contributed to this growth by facilitating transactions, both large and small.” The denarius he explains is the keystone “against which all other coins, including provincial and civic ones, could be reckoned and exchanged.” This exchange took place in the temples by the money-changers or bankers.

Banking is as old as coinage sponsored by a state. Because of the confusion of uncoordinated local coinage the earliest bankers were money-changers who sat at their tables. The temples also “attracted the surplus funds of states.” In “addition to currency exchange, deposits, and loans temple banks could arrange transfer of funds from one part of the ancient world to another.”

The conductors of these transactions were the money-changers that Jesus alluded to. They sat at the tables of the temples, and the busier the temple the more important the money changers because they helped to facilitate the

8. Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy, 73.
9. Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy, 73.
expansion of the denarius as “a currency whose design and engraving could not fail to inspire confidence.” The iconography “depicted the emperor and his family at the heart of Roman traditions.” Christ asked the chief priests to bring him a penny and asked them, “Whose is this image and superscription?” (Matt 22:20–21) And what was the answer? “Caesar’s.”

Temples played such a significant role in the established economy of the empire that as attendance dropped, the local economic results were unsettling. Later, commercial banks would develop, but for the time being too much centered around temple activity. What happened at the temples was, of course, more than just sacrificial rites. People came to sell animals and others to purchase. Taxes and loans ran through the temple. It was more than religion; it was economy. People’s jobs were being affected. After his trials Pliny noted with approval that purchasers could again be found for the sacrificial animals brought to the temple. I submit the lessening support of temples as a contributing factor to the persecution of the Christians.