

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

FIRST SEVEN ALLEGED
PERSECUTIONS.

A.D. 64 TO A.D. 235.

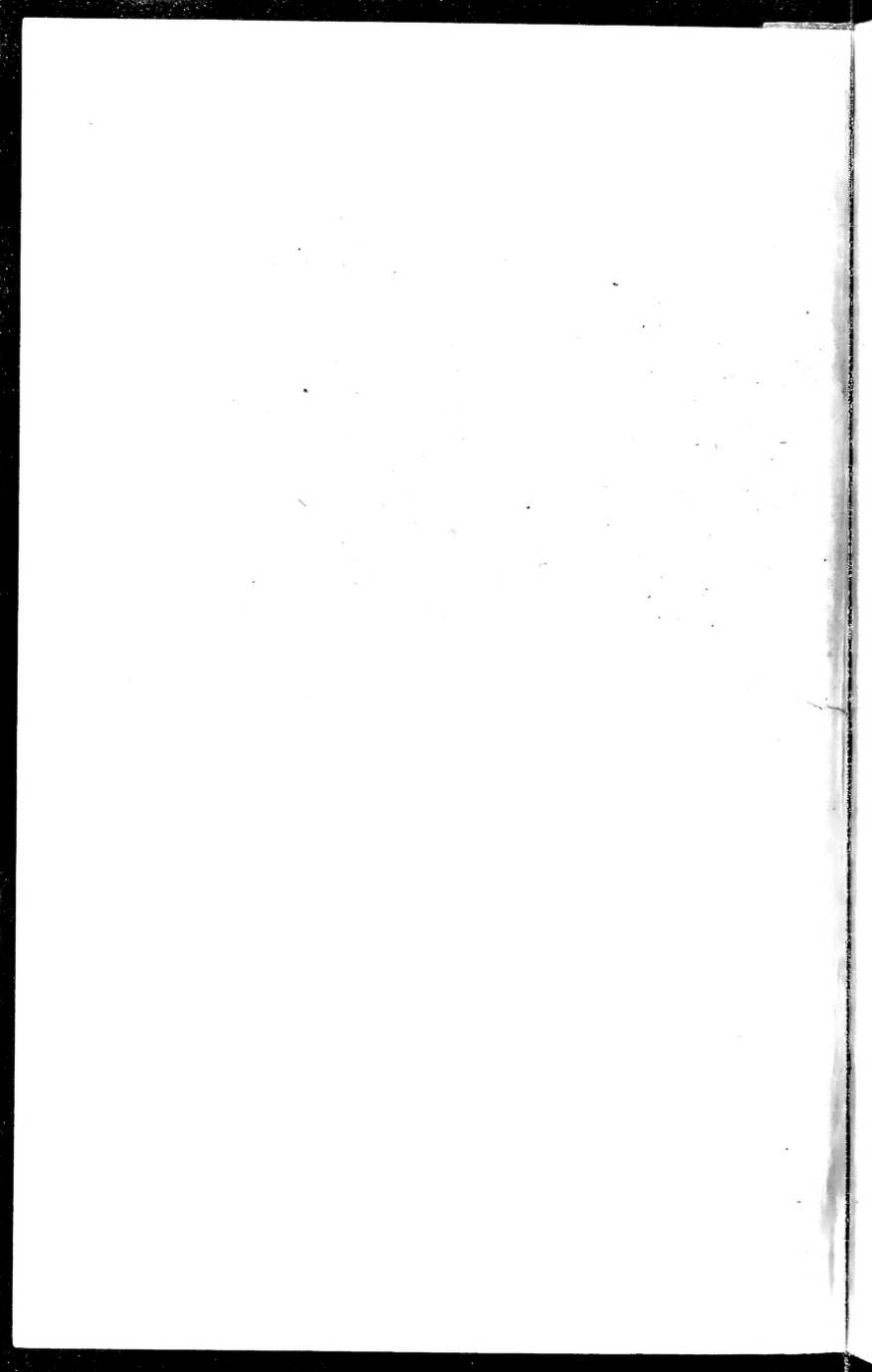
*τρὶς μὲν ἐφωρμήθη, ἔλθειν τὲ με θυμὸς ἀνώγειν,
τρὶς δὲ μοι ἐκ χειρῶν σκιῇ εἴκελον ἦ καὶ ὄνειρῳ
ἕπτat'.*

λ. 206-- 8.

LONDON :

FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,
28 STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

Price Sixpence.]



B2429

N221

THIS TRACT IS

Sacred

TO THE MEMORY OF THE LATE

Thomas Scott, Esq.,

BORN 26TH APRIL, 1808, DIED 30TH DECEMBER, 1878 ; AND

WHO, BETWEEN THE YEARS 1856 AND 1877, BY HIS WELL-

KNOWN SERIES OF TRACTS, MOST ABLY ADVOCATED

THE RIGHT OF ALL MANKIND TO

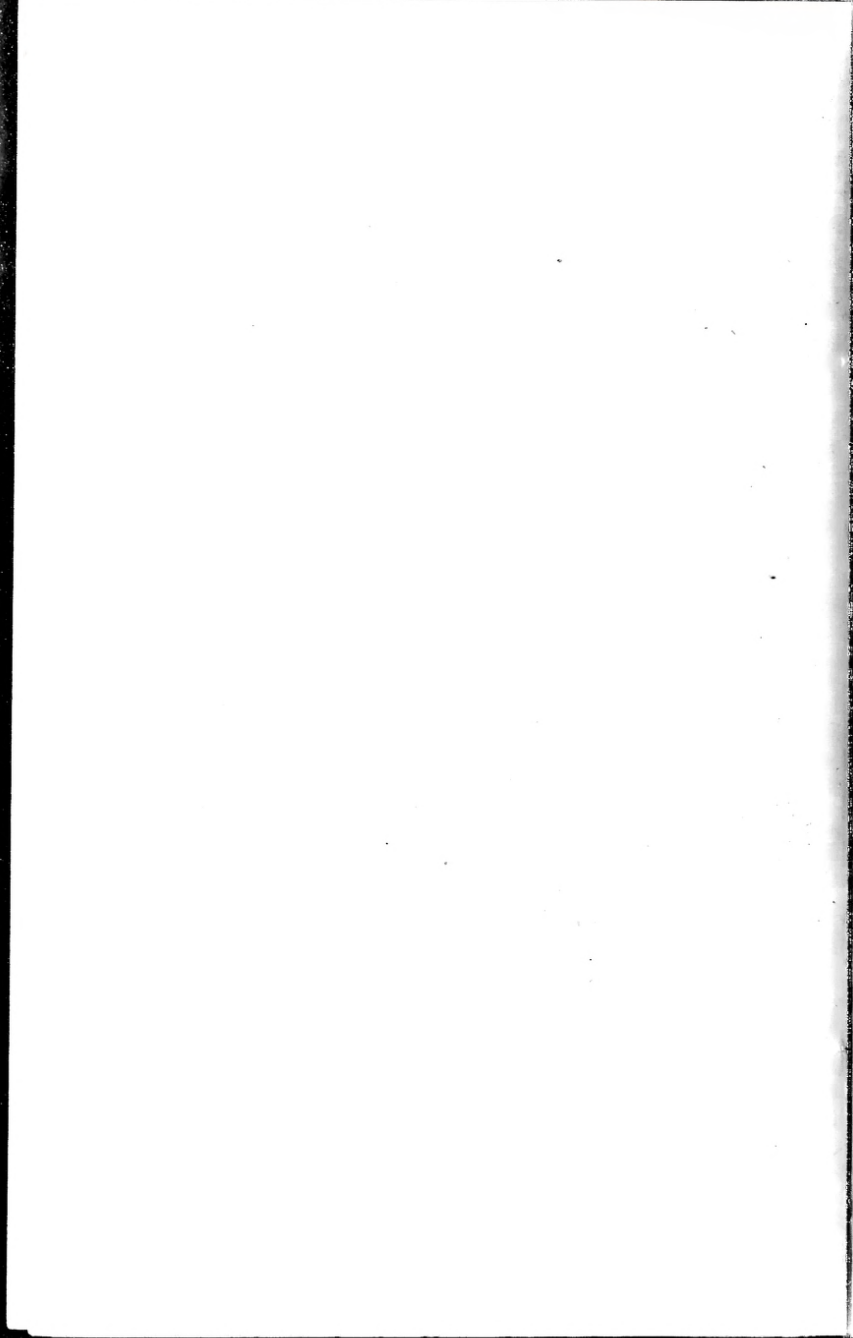
“FREE EXPRESSION AND FREE INQUIRY.”

Faint, illegible markings or text in the top left corner.

PREFACE.

ALL dictionaries and other compilations on the subject of "Roman Antiquities," are quite silent regarding the existence of any laws or edicts directing the Romans to persecute on account of religious opinions. Roman History does not record any such thing. The punishment of the Bacchanals was inflicted for purely criminal and political reasons. The Romans never punished anyone on account of his religion. On the contrary, all their conquered nations—including the Jews, and some Persians, both of whom were monotheists—were permitted to continue in their own religions. Therefore the question arises naturally, on what foundation do those stories rest which relate persecutions of the Christians for their religious opinions, by the Roman Emperors Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Aurelius, Severus, and Maximin? Ignorance regarding the correct answer to this question misled Gibbon, and caused him to make very erroneous concessions to the friends of Christianity, especially in the sixteenth chapter of "The Decline and Fall." Those who wish for the answer to this question will find it in the following pages.

KILFEREST,
Feast of St Mark, 1879.



FIRST SEVEN ALLEGED PERSECUTIONS.

SO "sweet is pleasure after pain" that men, who have experienced very painful sufferings, delight in relating them. To this rule the Christians are not any exception whatever. Immediately after the time, A.D. 313, when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, took the Christian Church under his protection, several Christians entertained themselves with compiling traditions regarding alleged persecutions of the early Christians by Roman Emperors who reigned during our first and second centuries. This we know from the ancient but spurious *Acta Martyrum* and from the stories contained in the *Acta Sanctorum*, the compilation of which was commenced by John Bolland, about A.D. 1640. It does not appear that these supposed persecutions were originally confined or increased to any particular number. In the time of Eusebius, A.D. 315, they were in a very uncertain state. He does not mention any number, but he relates about eight supposed persecutions. It was not until the fifth century of our supposed Christian era that the number of these alleged persecutions amounted to ten. Sulpicius Severus, A.D. 422, was the author of this computation. But even he is not quite clear on the subject; for he seems desirous of reserving the tenth and greatest persecution for the coming of Antichrist.

Those alleged persecutions, and the dates at which they are supposed to have occurred, are now generally stated by the Christian writers, who are "the best authorities," as follows, namely: that by Nero, A.D. 64; by Domitian, A.D. 95; by Trajan, A.D. 107; by Hadrian,

A.D. 125 ; by Aurelius Antoninus, A.D. 165 ; by Septimius Severus, A.D. 202 ; by Maximinus, A.D. 235 ; by Decius, A.D. 249 ; by Valerianus, A.D. 257 ; and by Galerius, A.D. 303.

THERE ARE NOT EXTANT ANY LAWS ENACTED BY THE ROMANS OR EDICTS ISSUED BY THEIR EMPERORS AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS.

Dr John L. Mosheim, ("Institutes of Ecclesiastical History," century 1, part i. chapter 5,) says : "The persecutions of the Christians by the Romans, have for ages been accounted ten in number. But the ancient history of the Church does not support exactly this number ; for if we reckon only the general and more severe persecutions, they were fewer than ten ; but, if we include the provincial and more limited persecutions the number will be much greater than ten. Some Christians of the fifth century were led by certain passages of scripture,—especially one in 'Revelation,' xvii. 12,—to believe that it was decreed the Christian Church must pass through *ten* grievous persecutions ; and to this opinion they afterwards endeavoured, in different ways, to accommodate the *reluctant* testimony of history An ancient lawyer named Domitius, collected all the imperial laws against the Christians, in his treatise 'De Officio Proconsulis,' which, if it were now extant, would doubtless throw much light on the history of the Church under the Pagan emperors. In the meantime very much is left wholly to conjecture."

Our New Testament does not mention any laws or edicts against the Christians, nor does it record any of those alleged ten persecutions. Even the writer of our "Acts" does not appear to know anything regarding a persecution of Christians at Rome during A.D. 64, the date commonly ascribed to a supposed persecution of Christians by Nero. On the contrary (Acts xxviii. 30, 31,) the writer of our "Acts" represents St Paul

preaching Christianity freely from A.D. 63 to A.D. 65, the year after the alleged persecution of Christians by Nero. For, after representing St Paul as having arrived a prisoner at Rome, A.D. 63, the writer says, "And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him." It is scarcely conceivable and most improbable that if Paul were a prisoner on account of his being a Christian, he would have been permitted to preach the doctrines of that belief while he was in custody,—or to preach Christianity at Rome the year before Nero's alleged persecution of the Christians there,—to continue preaching it during the year of that alleged persecution,—and during the year following. So then, if our book of "Acts" be written by divine inspiration, or even if it be a genuine and authentic narrative of the events and persons that it purports to relate, it contradicts and utterly subverts the story that, A.D. 64, Nero persecuted the Christians.

To obviate this and many other chronological difficulties, Dr William Smith has edited in a unique manner a work which he is pleased to call "The New Testament History." The period comprised in that so-called "History" extends from A.D. 1 to A.D. 70, and dates are assigned to the events narrated with such care and skill that all contradictions, like that above indicated, are avoided. The consequence is an arbitrary chronology which is at variance with all other New Testament chronologies, both ancient and modern. One of Dr Smith's dates is peculiarly remarkable. He states (p. 155,) that the birth of Jesus Christ took place "B.C. 4." This date bears a significance of which most probably Dr Smith was not aware. For the fact is that

CHRISTIANITY IS OLDER THAN JESUS CHRIST.

Hermas, author of "The Shepherd," is supposed to have flourished about A.D. 140. This work is quoted

by Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," iv. 20, 2, as "scripture." Origen, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans," bk. x. 31, gives it as his opinion regarding "The Shepherd," that it is "divinely inspired." We know from Eusebius, "E. H." iii. 3, that in his time "it had been already in public use in our churches." Yet in that tract Jesus Christ is never mentioned, nor does the writer ever quote from our New Testament.

Theophilus, of Antioch, has left us an apology for the Christians in three books, addressed to his friend Autolytus. He is supposed to have flourished about A.D. 168. He never mentions Jesus Christ, nor does he quote from our New Testament. His authorities for the doctrines he inculcates are Homer, Hesiod, the Greek Tragic, the Septuagint, and the prophecies of the Sibyl. He professes to be a Christian, and says, "we are called Christians on this account, because we are anointed with the oil of God."

Athenagoras is supposed to have flourished about A.D. 171. He calls himself a Christian in his "Plea for the Christians." Yet he never mentions Jesus Christ, nor does he quote from our New Testament. The authorities he quotes are Homer, Hesiod, the Greek Tragic, the Septuagint, and "Sayings of the Logos."

Tatian is supposed to have flourished about A.D. 172. In his "Address to the Greeks" he endeavours at once to defend Christianity and to expose the enormities of heathenism. He never mentions Jesus Christ, nor does he quote from our New Testament. The authorities he quotes are Moses, the Logos, Orpheus and Democritus.

In his "Evidences of Christianity," bk. i., ch. 3, first three lines, Paley says, "Of the primitive condition of Christianity a distant only and a general view can be acquired from heathen writers. It is in our own books that the detail and interior of the transaction must be sought for."

In his "Roman History," translated by Hare and Thirlwall, ed. of 1831, vol. 1, 176-195, in the section relating to "Æneas and the Trojans in Latium,"

Niebuhr avows that his aim is "to determine whether the Trojan legend is ancient and homesprung, or adopted by the Latins from the Greeks, and whether there is any chance of explaining how it originated." The conclusion he arrives at is "That the Trojan legend was *not* brought into Latium by Greek Literature, but must be considered as homesprung; and that it has not the least historical truth—any more than the descent of the Goths from the Getes, or that of the Franks and Saxons from the Macedonians, all which are related with full faith by native writers—nor even the slightest historical importance," and that the Trojan legend was manufactured from Roman names and ceremonies the meaning of which had been forgotten, and from poverty of materials for compiling early Roman History, and from national vanity.

It is a historical fact that during the first seventy years of our first century, and during almost the whole of our second century, all heathen writers are silent regarding the existence of Christianity and the Christians. The traces of them in the writings of Josephus, Suetonius, Pliny junior, and Tacitus, between A.D. 70 and 110, are uncertain, scanty, dubious and improbable. Consequently Paley's candid statement regarding the fact that there are few, if any, genuine notices of primitive Christianity or primitive Christians by heathen writers, amounts on his part to a confession of weakness. It reduces Jesus Christ to the condition of such heroes as Meleager, Adrastus, Ajax, Prince Arthur, William Tell, and the like. In fact the very name "Christians" is traceable to the worshippers of the Ægyptian god Serapis, as appears by a letter from the Emperor Hadrian to his son-in-law, Servianus, preserved by the historian Vopiscus, who flourished about A.D. 294. It is given in his history of Saturninus, and was written about A.D. 134. The scope of that letter is as follows:—

"Hadrianus Augustus, to the consul Servianus, greeting. The Ægyptians [of Alexandria], whom you so praise to me, I thoroughly know: they are frivolous,

undecided, and always shifting with every changing report. The worshippers of Serapis are Christians; those are devotees of Serapis who call themselves bishops of Christ. We have not any one there who is a chief of the synagogue of the Jews, not any follower of the Samaritans, not any elder of a Christian flock, not any astrologer, not any soothsayer, not any one to anoint the wrestlers in the schools. The Patriarch himself, when he visits Ægypt, is compelled by one party to pray to Serapis, by another to Christ. The sort of men that you have there are seditious, conceited, mischievous to a degree: the city, as a state, is wealthy both in money and in produce; because there is not any one who lives there that is without some occupation. Some melt glass, others make paper, others are linen-weavers; all have at least the appearance of following some trade, and are considered to do so. Even the gouty have something to do; and so have the blind, even those who have rheumatism in the hands are not idle. They believe in one God, who is worshipped by Christians and Jews and by all the people. I wish only that the city were more moral than it is; for in truth on account of its greatness and antiquity it deserves to stand at the head of all Ægypt. To this city I have made all the concessions demanded, besides restoring its ancient privileges and adding new ones with such liberality that they offered me their thanks when I was present in person; and when at length I left them they immediately paid many compliments to my son, Verus, and you know of course what they also said about Antoninus."

Outside the Christian Church, this letter of Hadrian contains the earliest mention of the Christians that is genuine and authentic. It is quoted by Vopiscus to shew the character of the Alexandrians. It has not been quoted by the advocates of Christian evidence. From Hadrian's statements it appears probable that Christianity originated among the worshippers of Serapis, regarding whom the account may be stated briefly as follows:—

Isis was the goddess who taught the Ægyptians the cultivation of wheat and barley. She was the wife of the Nile god Osiris, who taught the Ægyptians the use of the plough. In fact, Isis was the goddess of the Earth, which the Ægyptians called their mother. Hence it was that Isis and Osiris were the only deities worshipped by all the Ægyptians. In later times Isis was identified with Demeter and Ceres, while Osiris was identified with Dionysus and Bacchus. When Osiris was overthrown by Typhon, Isis was left without a husband until the reign of Ptolemy Soter, B.C. 285-250. By that king the worship of Serapis was introduced into Egypt, and that God became identified with Dionysus and Bacchus. Soon afterwards Serapis became the husband of Isis. The offerings sacred to Isis were bread and the fruits of the Earth. The offerings sacred to Serapis were wine and such things as were offered to Bacchus. The worship of both Serapis and Isis was celebrated with licentious orgies. Here we have the bread, wine, and dove of Christianity, about three centuries before Christianity existed according to commonly received chronology!

But the fact is that our "Homer," our "New Testament," and the first four books of Eusebius' "Ecclesiastical History," are merely pieces of comparatively modern patchwork.

HOMER, NEW TESTAMENT AND EUSEBIUS.

Morality is a growth, like mathematics or any other science; and ancient literary morality is not an exception to this rule.

Until the time of Aristotle, B.C. 340, all the Greek epic poems on the Trojan war were attributed to Homer. It was Aristotle who first confined the name of Homer to our Iliad and Odyssey. His reason for doing so was because those epics were written very much better than the older Cyclics. Here he omitted the consideration that in point of time rude and uncouth works of art must always precede those of their own kind which

are wrought with artistic skill. So, putting the cart before the horse, he ascribed to old Homer our skilfully constructed Iliad and Odyssey, while he attributed the rude and uncouth Cyclics to persons bearing the names of much later rhapsodists. But observe how Aristotle's "Homer" discloses the cloven foot of modern ideas. He describes (Iliad xxiv. 155-8) the savage Achilles as one "who is not silly, nor inconsiderate, nor a transgressor against the divine commands; but will very heartily spare a suppliant man." And (Iliad vi. 90) he represents the Trojans as offering to Minerva the Athenian sacred *shawl*, *πέπλος*.*

Whoever wrote the book of "Ecclesiastes" did not perceive any difficulty in representing Solomon as a philosophical Atheist, who (ix. 11) represents all things as taking place without the influence of Divine Providence. He says, "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all." Neither did he who wrote the book of "Wisdom" consider that it was utterly impossible that Solomon could have written in Hellenistic Greek, a language which had not any existence until several centuries after the supposed time of that mythical king.

Pythagoras did not leave behind him any of his philosophy committed to writing. Yet his Neopythagorean biographer eulogises the later writers who compiled the Pythagorean philosophy; because, he said, they renounced the fame that was their own, inasmuch as they attributed their works to the Master of the School.

At an early period in primitive church history (Hierome, De Script. Eccl. tom. i., p. 350; ex Tertulian, lib. "De Baptisma," cap. 17) a priest published

* See the admirable edition of our "Iliad" in two volumes in the "Bibliotheca Classica," by Mr Frederick A. Paley, M.A. The reader should especially read and carefully consider the "Introduction," a piece of classical criticism which has never been equalled.

a book entitled "Acts of Paul and Thecla." It was proved against him that he had forged that compilation. Thereupon he plainly confessed that the love he entertained for St Paul was the only cause that incited him to do it. When he made this confession the church authorities pardoned him, continued to use his work, dedicated a festival day to these saints, and the story of Paul and Thecla is still extant in the Apocryphal New Testament writings.

From these circumstances regarding Aristotle's "Homer," the forgeries of the Neopythagoreans, the double forgery of Solomon's name, and the confessed forgery of the story regarding Paul and Thecla, it is highly probable that the names Mark and Luke attached to our second and third gospels are names of men who were famous in the Christian Church before Jesus Christ and the Twelve Apostles were thought of. A subsequent writer in the places where Mark and Luke respectively flourished would put their names to his compilation as a matter of course, and make them write a history regarding persons of whom those saints had never heard. The coincidences between the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are certainly far less remarkable than the contemporaneous discovery of fluxions by Leibnitz and Newton, or that of development by Wallace and Darwin.

A glance at the table of contents in the Apocryphal New Testament, referring to "The Epistles of Jesus and Abgarus, or Agbarus," and the gospels of "James," "Thomas," "Nicodemus," &c., will shew how freely the early Christian writers used names attributed to primitive worthies of their church.

From St Jerome we know that the Galatians spoke a language similar to that of the Gauls. Yet "Paul" is made to address them in Greek as naturally as Aristotle's "Homer" transformed Achilles into a Quaker!

And the compilers of the Pentateuch represent the Moses, who is supposed to have lived about fifteen centuries before the Christian era, as writing in the Syro-Chaldee language!

Both Mosheim ("Institutes," century 1, part ii., § 16) and Strauss ("Life of Jesus," *Introduction*, 13) agree that there is not any reliable trace of our New Testament until about the middle of our second century. The extant apocryphal literature is universally admitted to be not older than our second century. When ("Acts" xxviii. 5) Paul shook a viper off his hand and did not feel any harm, he performed the last miracle recorded in the so-called inspired pages of our New Testament. That exploit was performed A.D. 62. Protestants say that they make use of their private judgment. The miracles related among the incidents recorded in our New Testament during the period (Luke i. 5, Acts xxviii. 5) from B.C. 6 to A.D. 62, are the only miracles, outside our Old Testament, which Protestants recognise. Regarding those miracles and incidents the contemporary Pagan world was as silent as the grave. That commonly received chronology of our first and second centuries is grounded partly on the statements of Eusebius, written about A.D. 315, and partly on the fancies and conjectures of subsequent ecclesiastical historians. In his "Ecclesiastical History," bk. i. ch. i., Eusebius declares expressly that he was the first historian who had undertaken to write a history of the Christian Church—that it was beyond his power to present that history in a full and continuous state (*ἐντελῆ καὶ ἀπαράλειπτον*), that in attempting the subject, he was entering on a trackless and unbeaten path—that he was utterly unable to find even the bare vestiges (*ἴχνη γομνά*) of those who may have toiled through the way before him, and that he had not been able to find that any of the Christian ecclesiastical writers had directed their efforts to present anything carefully in this department of writing. And, accordingly, Eusebius prudently deals with chronology for the most part only in a general manner, that is to say, he assigns certain events and names handed down by ecclesiastical tradition as either taking place or doing or suffering certain things under the reigns of the Roman Emperors who governed during those two

centuries. But he seldom assigns to any event or person a particular date that we have sufficient means of testing. The definite dates which adorn some editions of Eusebius have been arrived at partly by his general and avowedly very imperfect arrangement, and partly by the fancies and conjectures of subsequent writers. However, while writing the history of that period, on one occasion, at least, the prudence and caution of Eusebius forsook him. The supposed birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are regarded by all Christians as being the most important events in the whole history of the Christian Church. Yet, strange to say, the dates of those events have never been agreed on by the extant ecclesiastical historians. In a rash moment Eusebius (*"Ecclesiastical History,"* bk. i., ch. 5, 10 and 13) attempted to ascertain the exact date of those events. Assuming most erroneously that our third gospel is the genuine and authentic work of a writer who flourished about the middle of our first century, Eusebius, ch. 5, represents the birth of Jesus Christ as having taken place "the same year when the first census was taken, and Quirinus was governor of Syria." And Eusebius adds, "this census is mentioned by Flavius Josephus, the distinguished historian among the Hebrews." Josephus (*"Antiquities,"* xviii. 1, § 2) does mention this census; but he says it was "made in the thirty-seventh year after Cæsar's victory over Anthony at Actium." This brings us down to A.D. 7, a date which neither the writer of our third gospel nor Eusebius could have intended to assign to the birth of Christ. Again, (ch. 10) Eusebius says, "It was about the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius . . . when our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, was in his thirtieth year, that he came to the baptism of John, and then made the beginning of promulgating his gospel . . . he passed the whole time of his public ministry under the high priests Annas and Caiaphas . . . the whole of this interval does not give even four years." Be it so; nevertheless, this period would cause his ministry to terminate about the first year of

the two hundred and third Olympiad. But (ch. 13), when relating that after the ascension of Jesus, and in accordance with a promise made by him to Abgarus, Prince of Edessa, St Thomas sent Thaddeus, one of the seventy, to Abgarus, whom Thaddeus miraculously cured of a disorder, Eusebius adds, "these things were done in the three hundred and fortieth year." That year, according to the account of the Edessens, corresponded with the first year of the two hundred and second Olympiad. For the Edessens numbered their years from the one hundred and seventeenth Olympiad, thereby fixing their era upon the first year of Selucus' reign in Asia. This we know from the "Chronicon," compiled by Eusebius himself! From that year to the beginning of the two hundred and second Olympiad there are three hundred and forty years exactly. The beginning of the two hundred and second Olympiad coincides with the fifteenth year in the reign of Tiberius, in which year, according to both Luke and Eusebius, the ministry of Jesus Christ commenced. So Eusebius thereby contradicts himself completely. The fact is that Eusebius was here trying to assign accurately a time to events that never really took place. Outside the pages of our New Testament and ecclesiastical tradition, there is not a single event in the history of Jesus Christ which is recorded by contemporary civil history, Grecian, Jewish, or Latin. Moreover, outside the pages of our New Testament there is not anything implicitly believed in our day regarding the lives, actions, doctrines, and ultimate fate of the Twelve Apostles and the other characters who figure in the narratives therein contained. And even those narratives are far from being perfect or even self-consistent. Even Dr William Smith, in his "New Testament History," p. 210, says, "It is impossible to determine exactly from the gospels the number of years during which the Redeemer exercised his ministry before the Passion." So unerring and luminous are the contents of

"the Book divine, by inspiration given!"

As already stated, our New Testament is not older than about the middle of our second century. The fact is that it is a much later compilation. The most ancient ecclesiastical historian, Eusebius, flourished more than three centuries after the commonly received date of Christ's birth. That historian compiled his history in a manner far from being accurate, or even self-consistent. But it is an act of only bare justice to him to keep constantly before our mind, that he candidly avows his inability and utter want of valid and available materials for his work. So then, how can we reasonably be called on to rely on the dates and statements which Eusebius gives? And, *a fortiori*, how much less reasonably can we be called on to rely on dates assigned by subsequent ecclesiastical writers to such obscure individuals as the so-called Apostolical Fathers, and the still more obscure writers who are commonly but unwarrantably supposed to have succeeded them? Instead of doing so our duty is to disregard all mere authorities, since the oldest authority, Eusebius, is too modern and too self-contradictory to be depended on. We must examine the works of the so-called Apostolical Fathers and their alleged successors, and from the contents of those works we must draw inferences and arrive at conclusions grounded on sound philological principles. For our purposes here two inferences will be sufficient.

- I. Ignorance and inefficiency must precede knowledge and skill. Consequently the writings attributed to Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus being more meagre and unskilfully written than those attributed to the Apostolical Fathers we are rationally bound to consider the former as being older than the latter.
- II. Of the extant early writings attributed to our first and second centuries, the first that shews unmistakably a knowledge of the greater part of the writings contained in our New Testament are those of Irenaeus, who is alleged erroneously to have been Bishop of Lyons in Gaul, A.D. 178. But if the Apostolical

Fathers flourished between A.D. 90 and A.D. 149, how is it that the writings attributed to them do not shew unmistakably any knowledge of our New Testament? Moreover there is not any evidence to prove that there was any Christian church in Gaul prior to A.D. 249. Of Irenaeus we do not know anything except his name and his treatise, "Against Heresies." That work is first quoted by Eusebius, A.D. 315. Consequently from these facts the correct inference is that our New Testament had not any existence until some time prior to the days of Irenaeus, who flourished at a period considerably later than the date commonly but erroneously assigned to him by writers who knew very little, if anything at all, about him beyond what we of the present day know, namely, his own name and that of the treatise which he is said to have compiled.

Now let us examine the account of the persecutions given by Eusebius.

TESTIMONY OF EUSEBIUS.

For the alleged persecution of the Christian church by Nero, Eusebius ("E. H." ii. 25) quotes only Tertullian, who was not born until about a century after the date of that alleged persecution. To say the least of it, a very remarkable circumstance relating to this matter is the fact that Tertullian does NOT quote Tacitus, "Annals" xv., 44, in support of that alleged persecution, although Tertullian was well acquainted with the works of Tacitus. And a still more remarkable circumstance is the fact that our book of "Acts" represents St Paul as preaching at Rome before, during, and after that alleged persecution.

For the alleged persecution of the Christian Church by Domitian, Eusebius ("E. H." iii, 17—20,) does not quote any authority whatever. He does not give any

details, or even any general narrative, any date or any locality concerning that alleged persecution. Dr William Smith says, "Christian writers attribute to him [Domitian] a persecution of the Christians, but there is some doubt upon the matter; and the belief seems to have arisen from the strictness with which he exacted tribute from the Jews, and which may have caused much suffering to the Christians also."

For the alleged persecution of the Christian Church by Trajan, Eusebius ("E. H." iii. 33) quotes Hegesippus, who is supposed to have flourished, at Corinth and Rome, about A.D. 170. For his existence our only authority ("E. H." ii. 23) is Eusebius, who says, "Hegesippus, born in the time of those who immediately succeeded the apostles, gives the most accurate account of James, the brother of the Lord." But there has not been anything really ascertained about Hegesippus. Eusebius places him in our second century. How then could Hegesippus have been born "in the time of those who immediately succeeded the apostles?" Of course this question is based on the supposition that we are dealing with history, not miracles.

Regarding the alleged persecution of the Christian Church by Hadrian, Eusebius does not say anything about it. On the contrary, "E. H." iv. 9, he represents Hadrian as protecting the Christians; and Eusebius quotes a letter said to have been written in their favour by Hadrian, and addressed to Minucius Fundanus, the Roman proconsul for the government of Asia Minor.

Regarding the alleged persecution of the Christian Church by Antoninus Aurelius, Eusebius does not say anything about it. On the contrary, "E. H." iv. 13, he attributes to Antoninus a letter addressed to the Assembly of Romans, who governed Asia, in which letter Antoninus is represented as directing that the Christians are *not* to be persecuted. Niebuhr and Dr William Smith are silent regarding this alleged persecution. And Dr Charles Merivale, in his "General History of Rome," ch. lxvi., says, "the great merit of

this paternal ruler [Antoninus] was his *protection* of the Christians."

Regarding the alleged persecution of the Christian Church by Severus, Eusebius, "E. H." vi. 2, says, "It was in the tenth year of the reign of Severus . . . that the kindled flame of persecution blazed forth mightily, and many thousands were crowned with martyrdom." But for this statement Eusebius does not give any authority. Moreover, his statements imply that this alleged persecution was almost entirely confined to Egypt. Dr William Smith and Dr Charles Merivale are silent regarding this alleged persecution. Niebuhr ("Lectures on R. H." by Dr Leonhard Schmitz, Vol. ii. ch. 72), says, "In the reign of Severus Christianity had not obtained any political importance. Severus himself, but more especially his wife, Julia Domna, was favourably disposed towards Christianity, though she confounded it with magic ceremonies. Unction was at that time often prescribed as a remedy in cases of illness, and Severus had once received the unction in a severe attack of illness, and as he attributed his recovery to the influence of the unction and to the prayer of the bishops he afforded protection to Christianity by special regulations."

Regarding the alleged persecution of the Christian Church by Maximinus, Eusebius, "E. H." vi. 28, says, "The Emperor Alexander [Severus, the predecessor of Maximinus] being carried off after a reign of thirteen years, was succeeded by Maximinus, who, inflamed with hatred against the house of Alexander, consisting of many believers, raised a persecution, and commanded at first only the heads of the churches to be slain, as the abettors and agents of evangelical truth. . . Maximinus did not reign longer than three years." During his short reign, Maximinus never passed an hour at Rome. His authority over the Roman Empire was never fully established. He was constantly engaged in carrying on war with the Germans. And, altogether, he had on his hands matters which were to him of much more importance than the existence or persecu-

tion of the Christians. Niebuhr is silent regarding this alleged persecution. So are Dr William Smith, Dr Charles Merivale, and Dr John Lemprière. Gibbon, "Decline and Fall," ch. xvi., gives an exceedingly probable explanation of this myth. He says, "In his domestic chapel he [Alexander Severus] placed the statues of Abraham, of Orpheus, of Apollonius, and of Christ, as an honour justly due to those respectable sages, who had instructed mankind in the various modes of addressing their homage to the supreme and universal Deity. A purer faith, as well as worship, was openly professed and practised among his household. Bishops, perhaps for the first time, were seen at court; and, after the death of Alexander, when the inhuman Maximin discharged his fury on the favourites and servants of his unfortunate benefactor, a great number of Christians, of every rank and of both sexes, were involved in the promiscuous massacre, which, on their account, has improperly received the name of Persecution."

Now, we are in a position to examine the passages regarding the Christians, at present found in

PLINY, JUNIOR, JOSEPHUS, SUETONIUS, AND
TACITUS.

Tertullian, who flourished about A.D. 195, is the first apologist who quotes a heathen writer as evidence for the historical existence of Christianity during our first century. Pliny the younger was proconsul of Bithynia, about A.D. 110. Tertullian appeals to a letter on the subject of the Christians, supposed to have been written from that province by Pliny to the Roman Emperor Trajan. A German critic and divine, John S. Semler, considers this letter to have been a fabrication of Tertullian, and this opinion is borne out by the scope of the letter.

In that supposed letter, Pliny expresses a wish to be favoured with the orders and guidance of Trajan.

Pliny says, or rather is made to say, "Having never been present at any trials concerning those persons who are Christians, I am unacquainted not only with the nature of their crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them." After expressing some minor doubts, Pliny is made to say, "In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this : I interrogated them whether they were Christians : if they confessed, I repeated the question twice, adding threats at the same time ; and if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed immediately." Such an alleged piece of conduct as this is utterly at variance with all we know about the conduct of the Romans in general, and concerning that of Trajan, and Pliny in particular. Pliny is also made to say that of the persons brought before him, "some said they neither were, nor ever had been Christians ; they repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered wine and incense before your statue, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods. . . . These, I thought, ought to be discharged." Regarding this passage more will be said hereafter. Finally, Pliny is made to represent the "absurd and extravagant superstition" of the Christians as being very prevalent in Bithynia, A.D. 110, so much so, that "the temples were almost abandoned." This is a silly statement, and forms a strong contrast to the lamentations of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, who, in the middle of the third century of the supposed Christian era, complain that the extensive diocese of Neo Cæsarea—comprising, amongst other territories, Bithynia—then contained only about seventeen Christians! Regarding this persecution, more will be said hereafter.

Eusebius is the next Christian writer who quotes external evidence regarding the existence of the Christians. He quotes from a pretended passage which he alleged was written by Josephus, who flourished about A.D. 70. The passage so quoted is at present found in the "Antiquities of the Jews," Book xviii., ch. iii., § 3.

There Josephus is made to say, "At this time there existed Jesus, a wise man, if it be allowed to call him a man, for he performed wonderful works, and instructed those who received the truth with joy; he thus drew to himself many Jews and many Greeks; he was Christ; Pilate having punished him with crucifixion on the accusation of our leading men, those who had loved him before still remained faithful to him; for on the third day he appeared unto them, living anew; just as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct even at the present day." This is a translation of the whole passage as it now stands in Josephus' "Antiquities." It has not the least connection with what precedes or follows. It is not quoted by any of the previous defenders of Christianity. Josephus was a Jew, and always remained such. It is quite contrary to the Jewish creed to say that Christ has appeared on earth. The destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of their nation are to them standing proofs that the real Christ, their triumphant deliverer and restorer, never can have come on earth. Consequently, it is impossible that Josephus wrote this passage.

Still more remarkable than this passage, even if we admit that it is genuine, is the silence of Josephus regarding the Messiah all through his works. On this subject, the Rev. Charles Merivale, in his "Romans under the Empire," vol. vi., 536, observes painfully, that, Josephus "makes no more allusion to the false Christ than to the true Christ. The subject of the Messiah was one he shrank from!" Such an assertion is utterly unwarranted. All that can be said on this subject is this, namely, that Josephus, writing about the time of A.D. 70, when the Christians had not any real existence, does not mention the "false Christs" of our Gospels (Matthew xxiv. 24, Mark xiii. 22, Luke xxi. 8), who never were heard of until after the second destruction of Jerusalem in the reign of Hadrian, 14, July A.D. 135.

Orosius, who flourished about A.D. 416, quotes a curious passage regarding the Christians, which is now found in the life of "Nero," § 16, by Suetonius. There that writer is represented as stating that Nero devised a new style of building in Rome, and that he designed to extend the city walls as far as Ostia, and then there follows a statement that "many severe regulations and new orders were made in his time. A sumptuary law [to check expense in banquets] was enacted. Public suppers were limited to the sportulae, and victualling-houses were restrained from selling any dressed victuals, except pulse and herbs, whereas before they sold all kinds of meat. He likewise inflicted punishments on the Christians, a sort of people who held a new and mischievous superstition. He forbade the revels of the charioteers, who had long assumed a license to stroll about, and established for themselves a kind of prescriptive right to cheat and thieve, making a jest of it. The partisans of the rival theatrical performers were banished, as well as the actors themselves."

After a lapse of about three hundred years, we are by Orosius called on to accept this exceedingly abrupt mention of the Christians in a passage attributed to Suetonius, where the profession of Christianity and expense in banquets, and other public amusements, are huddled together in one and the same paragraph!

Sulpicius Severus, who flourished about A.D. 422, is the first writer who quotes a passage, which is now to be found in Tacitus' "Annals," xv. 44. After relating a conflagration which consumed a considerable part of Rome, in the reign of Nero, A.D. 64, and that a report had broken out among the populace to the effect that Nero had ordered the conflagration, Tacitus is represented as saying, "Hence to suppress the rumour, he falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. The founder of that name, one Christus, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in

the reign of Tiberius ; but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly, first those were seized who confessed they were Christians ; next, on their information, a vast multitude (!) were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of hating the human race."

It is remarkable that while in the writings attributed to some early fathers of the Christian Church even the name of Jesus Christ is never mentioned, yet, in the foregoing extracts supposed to belong to the genuine works of Pliny junior, Josephus, and Tacitus, those writers are represented as being comparatively well acquainted with his *history*—so called.

So, this alleged passage from Tacitus, "Annals," xv. 44, after having been unnoticed by Tertullian (who has quoted largely from Tacitus,) or by Eusebius, or by any of the early Christians in their various Apologies and their disputes with objectors, and after a lapse of more than three hundred years subsequently to the time when the composition of this passage is alleged to have taken place, we are called on by Sulpicius Severus to believe this passage to be genuine ! The truth of this allegation is most improbable. And the facts, namely, (i.) That this passage is uncorroborated by any contemporary heathen testimony ; (ii.) That it is contradicted by "Acts" xxviii. 30, 31 ; (iii.) That there could not have been "a vast multitude" of Christians at Rome A.D. 64, since there was not "a vast multitude" of them at that time even in Palestine; and (iv.) That Tacitus is represented as being well acquainted with the original locality of Christianity, with the name of its founder, and with that of the alleged procurator who was said to have put him to death, "suffered under Pontius Pilate," sufficiently prove that we are here dealing with matters the last of which, at least, was a disputed point in the Christian Church centuries after

the time of Tacitus. For even in the time of Eusebius ("E. H." i. 9,) the statement that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate was not universally received in the Church, and was introduced into the so-called "Apostles' Creed," a composition which, according to Mosheim ("Institutes," century i., part ii., ch. iii., § 4,) was received by the Church so lately as our fourth century. Moreover all our present editions of Tacitus are only copies of one manuscript, which was in the possession of one individual who could have made any interpolations he pleased without having his accuracy tested by a second manuscript.

All the Pagan writers, who flourished during our supposed second century, and during the first forty-eight years of our third century, are silent regarding both Jesus Christ and the Christians. Paley, in his "Evidences," is sadly puzzled to find "evidence of the sufferings of the first propagators of Christianity, from profane testimony." The only quotation he gives is from the "Meditations," bk. xi., ch. 2, of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, A.D. 161, namely, "Let this preparation of mind [to die] arise from its own judgment, and not from obstinacy like the Christians." But Aurelius does not say what class of Christians he refers to. He may here refer to the Christians, who (as we have seen by Hadrian's letter) worshipped Serapis at Alexandria. The truth is, Paley felt that the above quotation from the "Meditations" did not prove anything; for, in the very next sentence, quoted above, p. 10, Paley says, "Of the primitive condition of Christianity, a distant only and general view can be acquired from heathen writers. It is in our own books that the detail and interior of the transaction must be sought for." To say the least of it, this is a decided confession of weakness. So, it is quite evident, that all the Pagan writers, who flourished during our supposed second century, and during the first forty-eight years of our third century, are silent regarding both Jesus Christ and the Christians.

Now, therefore, the question naturally arises: Is it

probable that Josephus, Suetonius, Pliny junior, and Tacitus, really knew more about Jesus Christ than Theophilus, Hermas, Athenagoras, and Tatian who never name him? Or, if "a vast multitude" of Christians (as Pliny junior and Tacitus are made to represent) during our first century attracted the attention of one Jewish and three Pagan writers, who flourished towards the end of that period, is it probable that not even one Pagan writer would have taken notice of so remarkable a sect during the whole of our second century, and during the first forty-eight years of our third century? Further, is it conceivable that Nero persecuted "a vast multitude" of Christians at Rome during A. D. 64, and, at the same time, during all that year permitted the apostle Paul to live at Rome, in his own hired house, "preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him?" These improbabilities amount to an impossibility. And the facts (i.) that there is not any Pagan writer of our second century who mentions Christ or the Christians; (ii.) that the statements in Suetonius and Tacitus are contradicted by the writer of "Acts" xxviii. 30, 31; and (iii.) that those early apologists for the Christians, namely, Theophilus, Athenagoras, and Tatian, never mention Jesus Christ, amount to positive proof that those passages now found in Pliny junior, Josephus, Suetonius, and Tacitus are forgeries.

To this may be added the consideration, that although an uncritical antiquity might not instinctively anticipate the doubts of modern criticism regarding the historical reality of Jesus Christ, yet it should be borne in mind (i.) That the historical reality of the Gospel narratives was assailed at an early period, even before the time of Tertullian; (ii.) That, as we have seen, so lately as our fifth century, the Christians were frequently destroying, altering, and substituting narratives and doctrines in their various, numerous, and very different gospels; and (iii.) That during several centuries the members of the Christian Church had

uncontrolled possession of all the remains of both Pagan and Christian literature now extant, and frequently corrupted them for apologetic purposes.

If the statements made in the foregoing pages regarding the first two hundred and forty-eight years during which the Christian Church is supposed to have existed rest on a substantially sound critical foundation, it follows necessarily that of the alleged ten persecutions of the Christian Church by Roman Emperors, the first seven of those persecutions, namely, those by (1) Nero ; (2) Domitian ; (3) Trajan ; (4) Hadrian ; (5) Antoninus ; (6) Severus ; and (7) Maximinus, are unreal and unhistorical. Taken as represented by those who relate them those seven persecutions were only local. Those by Nero and Domitian were confined to Rome. That by Trajan was confined to Bithynia,—unless we accept the exceedingly improbable story referred to in Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," chapter xvi. note 74, that "ten thousand Christian soldiers were crucified in one day by Trajan or Hadrian [it does not matter which] on mount Ararat." Those by Hadrian, Antoninus, Septimius Severus, and Maximinus are not assigned to any definite time or place : they have neither a when nor a where. So, on the very face of the stories on which belief in those seven persecutions rests we have not any definite statement regarding a general persecution of the Christian Church prior to that by Decius, A.D. 249.

In fact the principal authority for primitive Christian mythology is Tertullian. His extravagant statements form the foundation-stone on which rests the fabric of Patristic miracles and stories regarding persecutions of the primitive Christians by the Roman Emperors Nero, Domitian, and Trajan.

Some of Tertullian's statements are incompatible with sanity. Yet they have been hitherto received as if they were self-evident truths. So, according to the limits of our space, let us estimate the real value of the evidence borne to those miracles and persecutions by

TERTULLIAN.

Tertullian flourished about A.D. 200, and in our standard dictionaries, cyclopaedias, histories, and biographical repertories that treat of Tertullian's character as a writer, the authorities are virtually agreed in their opinions regarding him. Perhaps the best estimate of his character is that briefly and forcibly given by Mosheim ("Institutes," cent. ii., pt. ii., ch. ii., § 5), who says, "Whether his [Tertullian's] excellences or defects were the greater it is difficult to say. He possessed great genius, but it was wild and unchastened. His piety was active and fervent, but likewise gloomy and austere. He had much learning and knowledge, but he was changeable and credulous, and he was more acute than solid." To this may be added with perfect truth and safety, that whenever an assertion suited Tertullian's purpose there is not any evidence in his writings that he was ever hindered from making one either by reason of its improbability or even of its impossibility. Of this characteristic all that can be given here are a few specimens.

Tertullian ("Apology," 21) says that Pilate was a Christian: *ipse pro sua conscientia Christianus.*

He says (5), that Tiberius wished to deify Jesus Christ.

He says (20), that the offices of the seasons and the proper changes of the elements are out of course: *etiam officia temporum et elementorum munia exorbitant.*

He says (23), that he believes in magicians, dæmons, &c., and he asserts that when a person possessed by a dæmon "is commanded by any Christian to speak, that spirit will declare itself a dæmon;" and, he adds triumphantly, "If this be not so, shed upon the spot the blood of that most impudent Christian." And then he asks, "If they be gods why do they feign themselves dæmons?"

He says ("On Prescription against Heretics") that the apostle John "was plunged into boiling oil and

did not suffer anything." That "between Peter and Paul there was a common faith and preaching." And shortly afterwards Tertullian exclaims, "Away with those who pass judgment on Apostles!"

He says ("Against the Jews") that except the Jews "all nations believe in the Christ now come." And that Christ is believed on "in unexplored regions and unknown islands." A vainglorious and stupid assertion. Even in the present day the Christians do not constitute more than about a fourth part of the human race.

From these cases of assertions, which every rational man is perfectly aware are contrary to facts as we know them, it may be safely concluded that the testimony of Tertullian is utterly worthless.

So, if we desire to ascertain the truth or falsehood of those stories which relate the first seven alleged persecutions of the Christians by Roman emperors, we must make search in a quarter never dreamed of by Mosheim or even Gibbon. In short, we must inquire and ascertain what were the laws and customs of the Romans regarding religious toleration and proselytism? The true answer to this question will prove a crucial test.

ROMANS AND RELIGION.

It is well-known (Macrobius "Saturnalia," iii. 9) that the Romans thought that all cities were under the protection of some patron deity. When they were besieging a city, and had made such progress that they considered themselves able to take it they used an incantation, *carmen*, whereby they supposed that they called out of the city its tutelary god. They did this because they thought it would be a wicked and dangerous act to carry the god into captivity. For this same reason the Romans wished the name of their own city's patron god and the name of the city itself to remain wholly secret; or, at least, known only to a chosen few. See Pliny's "Natural History," xxviii., 4, and

iii., 9. So, the names Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and Rome were not the secret names of their tutelary god or of their city.

Among the Romans the Christian vices of proselytism and religious intolerance were unknown. They had a national religion based on the principle of polytheism, which does *not* know of any false gods. So, the Romans conceded to all other nations that which they claimed for themselves, namely, the observance of their traditional rights; for their religion, like other religions with which it came in contact, was purely ceremonial. It taught how the gods were to be conciliated, but not what the gods were. It had not any dogmatic belief. Their view is concisely expressed by Cicero ("For Flaccus," 28), "Each state has its own religion: we have ours." They could not understand how any rational people could entertain a feeling of religious intolerance. Hence the point in Juvenal's satire, xv., 33-38, where he says, "Between neighbouring towns (Copti and Tentyra) there had been an inveterate and ancient feud, immortal hatred, and an incurable wound burns there yet. Thence on both sides the utmost fury raged in the people; because each place hates the deities of its neighbours, since it believes those are to be held as gods only whom itself worships." But the Romans were more than tolerant to alien deities: they regarded them with reverence and awe. This is clearly seen in that curious ceremony above mentioned and called the "evocatio deorum," or "evocatio numinum," by which when a town was about to fall into their hands, a Roman general sought to induce the gods of the town to leave it, in order that the soldiers might not do anything displeasing to those gods while the town was being pillaged or destroyed. Further, that the Romans might if possible secure the aid of gods who reigned in other places, observe (Livy v. 21) the form of evocation used at the siege of Veii, "Thou also, queen Juno, who inhabitest Veii, I beseech, that thou wilt accompany us when victors, unto our city, soon to be thine, where

a temple worthy of thy majesty will receive thee." This is somewhat rationalistic. The story, as told by Livy, runs thus, "When all human wealth had been carried away from Veii; they began to remove the offerings of the gods and the gods themselves, but more in the fashion of worshippers than plunderers. Youths, selected from the entire army, to whom was assigned the charge of conveying Juno the queen to Rome, having purified their bodies and arrayed themselves in white garments, entered her temple with profound adoration, applying their hands at first with religious awe, because, according to Etruscan usage, no one but a priest of a certain family had been accustomed to touch that statue; afterwards when some one, whether moved by divine inspiration or with youthful mirth said, 'Juno, art thou willing to go to Rome?' the rest cried out together that the goddess has nodded assent. To the story an addition is made, that her voice was heard declaring that she was willing. Certain it is that having been raised from her place by machines of trifling power, she was lightly and easily removed, as if she followed willingly." Other well-known historical instances of this public recognition of foreign objects of divine worship are the reception of Demeter, Persephone and Dionysus under the Roman names of Ceres, Proserpine, and Bacchus. Sometimes these identifications were very absurd. For instance: the Romans had a god of the hereditary homestead or "herctum," whom they called Hercules or Hercules. He was properly a farmer's god, but he was identified with the Greek hero Herakles who cleared Greece from wild beasts, tyrants and monsters. Of course here the identification was made through similarity in the sound of the names. But foreign deities were introduced at Rome without any such identification. Thus, B.C. 291, on the occasion of a plague, the Grecian deity, Æsculapius, was solemnly brought to Rome from Epidaurus. And, B.C. 205, during the life and death struggle with Hannibal, the great mother of Ida, Rhea, or Cybele, was brought to Rome from Pessinus in

Asia Minor. In these terrible emergencies it was thought wise to strengthen the religious garrison with alien powers.

It is obvious how much this disposition and conduct in reference to the religions of the vanquished facilitated conquest. At least one great source of disunion was avoided, namely, the antipathy of rival religions; as an ancient writer says, "In acknowledging the religious rites of all nations, they deserved to reign." This exercise of tolerance was easy to the Romans, and almost a necessary consequence of their belief in local gods: a belief which further precluded the idea of proselytism. The more value the Romans placed on the protection of their native deities, the less disposed they were to share that protection with foreigners. Far, therefore, from wishing to impose their religion on the vanquished, the Romans were very circumspect in even permitting the vanquished to adopt it. Thus, Livy, xliii. 6, tells us that when allies asked to be allowed to sacrifice to Jupiter Optimus Maximus in the Capitol it was only to those allies who had best served the commonwealth that the permission was accorded. As, for instance, he says, "The Alabandians said that they had erected a temple to the city Rome, and had instituted anniversary games to the goddess; that they had brought a golden crown, of fifty pounds weight, to be deposited in the Capitol as an offering to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, also three hundred horsemen's shields which they were ready to deliver to any one appointed to receive them; and they requested permission to lodge that offering in the Capitol and to perform sacrifice :" *donum ut in Capitolio ponere et sacrificare liceret, petebant.* In connection with these facts, it is curious to remark how the religious sentiment may change its aspect under different circumstances, and produce even opposite effects; for amongst the intolerant Christians excess of devotion ordinarily impels to proselytism and persecution, while it made the Romans averse to their employment.

Toleration, however, was not without political limits. The same reason that made the Romans tolerant out of

their native country hindered them from being completely so at home. Since they thought a form of religious worship is made specially for a people, they inferred that each deity should be master in its own domicile; and as they did not impose their gods on foreign nations, so they reserved to themselves control over foreign objects of divine worship at Rome. In exercising this control, however, they were actuated by political, not by religious, motives; and whenever a foreign ceremonial was proscribed at Rome this was done not in the interest of the gods, but for the preservation of the state. We are told by ancient authorities that people were prohibited from introducing new gods at Rome without the sanction of the Senate; but Cicero and Livy seem to differ. The former (*"De Legibus,"* ii. 8) quoting the old law, says, "Let not anyone have distinct gods, nor let him worship any in private whether they be new or brought from abroad, unless they have been sanctioned by the state." But Livy, xxv. 1, says, "Let not anyone in a public or in a sacred place sacrifice with a new or foreign religious ceremony." Probably the reconciliation of these authorities will be found in the fact that whatever the law may have been, that law was but little enforced, or rather never, unless the exercise of the foreign rites were attended with gross immorality and scandal. Thus, on one occasion, B.C. 186, the Senate intervened, and with terrible effect in the suppression of the Bacchanals, when hundreds of persons were executed. But the grounds of this suppression had not anything to do with religion. It was necessary to deal with a secret society that had reduced to a system murder and other hideous and revolting crimes. Yet even this case illustrates the extreme tolerance of the Roman authorities as regards the exercise of religion. These orgies were suppressed only when practised on a large scale. But "where two or three were gathered together" those orgies were allowed to continue even though they disturbed the night; for, as Livy, xxix. 15, tells us "with clatterings and howlings they resounded through the whole city." The Romans had an indis-

position to meddle with what might be really religious worship ; and, therefore, when at last authority was forced to strike, provision was made for tender consciences, and persons wishing to perform Bacchic rites were allowed to do so on application to the praetor, provided those rites were not attended by more than five persons.

If a great anti-social movement, veiling itself under a religious guise, was dealt with thus, it may be easily conceived how, in ordinary cases, sometimes with, more frequently without, the sanction of the Senate, foreign rites were continually insinuating themselves into Rome according as she increased her points of contact with the nations of the earth ; until at last foreign rites almost flooded the city to the extent we find these things described in the satirists.

Of course if the Christians, or any other monotheists, destroyed idols, desecrated pagan temples, or in any other manner did public violence to the religion of the Romans such transgressors would be put to death. That some Christians did transgress in this manner is evident from the fact that the sixtieth canon of the council of Illiberis, A.D. 324, refuses the title of martyr to those who exposed themselves to death by publicly destroying idols. See "Decline and Fall," ch. xvi. note 94.

An eminent writer observes that "The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. . . . A sacrifice is conceived as a present ; and any present is delivered to the deity by destroying it or rendering it useless to men : by burning what is solid, pouring out the liquid and killing the animate. For want of a better way of doing him a service, we do ourselves an injury ; and fancy that we thereby express, at least, the heartiness of our goodwill and adoration. Thus our mercenary devotion deceives ourselves, and causes us to imagine it deceives the deity. . . . Few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are so pernicious to political society as this corruption of theism. The human sacrifices of barbarous nations consist of victims

chosen by lot. But virtue, knowledge, love of liberty are the qualities which call down the fatal vengeance of inquisitors ; and when expelled, leave the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption, and bondage. . . . So sociable is polytheism, that the utmost fierceness and aversion, which it meets with in an opposite religion, are scarcely able to disgust it, and keep it at a distance."

Further light is thrown on this subject by a criticism of the popular religion, partly preserved to us in St Augustine's treatise "De Civitate Dei," from the pen of the great jurist Quintus Mucius Scaevola, a younger contemporary of the Scipio who destroyed Carthage. This Scaevola fell a victim in the civil war of Marius, B.C. 82. Of this distinguished man we are told that he separated critically three forms of religion, namely, (a.) the religion of the poets, (b.) the religion of the philosophers, and (c.) the religion of statesmen (*principes civitatis*). Regarding the first of these forms of religion he expresses himself most unfavourably. He considers that what the poets tell us of the gods is for the most part degrading and puerile. They make the gods commit murder, adultery, theft, and change themselves into the lower animals for the vilest purposes ; in short, there is not anything so cruel, unjust, sensual, monstrous, or shameless, there is not anything so inconsistent or irreconcilable with the idea of deity, that the poets do not attribute to the gods. From all these things the philosophic theology is free. This freedom is common to pantheism, the necessity which excludes the providence of the gods, and Atheism. But, according to Scaevola, the philosophic theology is unfit for public use. It cannot be made the state religion ; not only because it is beyond the comprehension of the people, and has not anything to do with the practical object of religion, but further, because it contains what it would be dangerous that the people should know, as, for instance, that the images of the gods in the temples have not the least resemblance to their true nature.

It may be well to mention here very briefly that Scaevola is quite in error in supposing that there is

the slightest connection between morality and religion. So far as regards fortitude, justice, temperance, and prudence, it is evident that they cannot in the least depend on whether the deity is round or square, or whether heaven is in the seen or the unseen universe. But so far as regards the payment of tithes religion is all important.*

To return to Scaevola. St Augustine does not give us the development of Scaevola's views regarding the religion of the magistrate, but they are easily inferable. It could not be anything except a form of belief intended to be adapted only to the masses, therefore remote from the true conception of the deity, namely, his manifestation only as Energy, and disfigured with gross errors. Its point of view and standard of reference were only those which were supposed to be consistent with public utility. What rendered the philosophic theology inadmissible was the supposition that although it was true, yet that its doctrines could not with safety be publicly inculcated.

In the theory that underlies these speculations we have the solution for which we are seeking. That which lends them importance is the fact that they proceed not merely from a man of the highest eminence, the founder of Roman jurisprudence, but from one who, as Pontifex Maximus—a position which combined the functions of a minister of public worship and an archbishop—was the head of the Roman religion. Now, then, what are we to think regarding the belief entertained by the Roman aristocracy in the state religion? Moreover, we are to remember that it was the members of the aristocracy who had been the mainstay of that religion from the foundation of the state. Yet such a man as Scaevola, without the least compunction, withers with his contempt things most closely fastened together with that religion, openly states that it is disfigured with grave errors, and regards much that is essential to

* On this subject see Hallam's "Middle Ages," ch. ix. part ii. and Francis Newman's "Phases of Faith," page, 54, 5.

it as a concession made upon grounds of policy to the ignorant masses !

But not only did Scaevola do this, but also, what is still more remarkable, he did so without the least disparagement to the man who, on the contrary, continued to be one of the greatest lights of Roman theology. For although Quintus was far superior to his father Publius, yet the latter was very highly esteemed, as we find in Cicero (*"De Natura Deorum,"* iii. 2, 5) where Cotta, who had been a consul, says, "In matters of religion I submit to the rules of the high priests, T. Coruncanus, P. Scipio, and P. Scaevola, not to the sentiments of Zeno, Cleanthes, or Chrysippus, and I pay greater regard to what C. Laelius, one of our augurs and sages, has written concerning religion in that noble oration of his than to the most eminent of the Stoics ; and, as the whole religion of the Romans at first consisted in sacrifices and divination by birds, to which have since been added predictions ; if the interpreters of the Sibylline oracle [the Quindecimviri] or the haruspices have foretold any event from portents and prodigies, I have ever thought that there was not any point of all these holy things that deserved to be despised ; even I have been persuaded that Romulus, by instituting divination, and Numa, by establishing sacrifices, laid the foundation of Rome, which undoubtedly would never have risen to such extreme advancement if the gods had not been rendered propitious by this worship." In this same treatise Cotta maintains the cause of the Academical or Sceptical philosophy, yet he professes full confidence in the haruspices and augurs. In like manner, although Julius Cæsar was an avowed atheist, yet in Africa he carried about with him a certain Cornelius, an utterly obscure man, but whose name might be deemed auspicious on the battlefields of Sulla and Scipio. Thus, also, with the instinct of self-preservation, Napoleon preserved his white overcoat which he had worn at the battle of Marengo. To the human mind so difficult is the task of liberating itself entirely from the shadows, illusions, and nonentities of religion !

Be that as it may, in the matter of religion the Roman was almost utterly unconcerned about dogma. What he cared for was ceremonial or what we call witchcraft. That is to say, the performance of certain rites and customs, from which acts certain definite effects were expected. With these acts the faith or morals of the worshipper or of the priest had not anything whatever to do, just as in the Christian Church "The unworthiness of the ministers hinders not the effect of the Sacrament."

It should be observed here that the worship of the Roman Emperors was not a worship that originated among the Romans. It originated in the conquered provinces, and was based on the same idea as that which originated the worship of the city Rome among the Alabandians. In both cases it was simply homage offered to what appeared to the worshippers to be irresistible and supreme power. But in neither case did the Romans suggest or enforce it. The exercise of such worship was left entirely to the discretion of those who wished to use it for their own advantage. The passage in Pliny's supposed letter to the effect that he punished Christians for not worshipping the Emperor's image proves that letter to be a forgery.

So it was possible to make a distinction between the man and the citizen, and while binding the latter with a chain of adamant, to leave to the former unbounded liberty of speculation. This is the genuine Roman point of view, and we find it illustrated at almost every turn. This same distinction that was made by Scaevola was made by Varro, who lived a generation later (B.C. 115-25), and whose great work on "The Antiquities of Rome" was the main authority to after ages upon Roman religion. But in fact the whole treatise of Cicero "De Divinatione" is itself a palmary example of this view which appears to us so extraordinary. There Cicero ruthlessly demolishes the science of divination. He covers with abuse the gods and their fables, and ridicules without mercy diviners and their miracles. Yet Cicero was an augur, and he was

most vain of the office, the duties of which he performed with the utmost and most scrupulous exactness!

In short this divorce between the sentiments of private and public life did not shock any Roman. He considered that a magistrate in the exercise of his functions ought to assume a certain attitude—a conventional mode both of thinking and speaking—that he should seem ignorant of things he knew, and that he should express opinions which might be utterly discordant with his own; but all this was prescribed, and its decorous performance was universally admired. The hypocrisy was so organised that it ceased to be hypocritical, and consequently there was not any Roman who was at all scandalized by the election of the atheist, Julius Cæsar, to the office of Pontifex Maximus.

From the foregoing facts and arguments it is easily perceived that even the Epicureans who denied the providence of the gods, and the Atheists who denied the very existence of the gods, would not be sought out for the purpose of being persecuted. As a matter of fact we know that such was the case. In the Senate we are told that Julius Cæsar denied the existence of the gods and derided them at his dinner table. Yet he was chosen, B.C. 63, to be the Roman pontifex maximus. Dean Merivale (*“General History of Rome,”* p. 278) tells us that “Neither the notorious laxity of his [Cæsar’s] moral conduct, nor his avowed disregard for the religious traditions of the state, hindered Cæsar’s advancement to the highest office of national worship. His duties indeed were simply ceremonial, however firmly the Romans believed that the welfare of the state depended on their due execution.” As before stated, the Roman was not in the least concerned about dogma, while, on the other hand, he attached the greatest consequence upon the most accurate and solemn performance of certain rites and ceremonies, from which definite effects were supposed to be caused by these external acts, and wholly unconnected with the faith of the worshipping priest or people. The truth of these facts we learn distinctly from Scaevola, B.C. 82, Cicero, B.C. 43, and Varro, B.C. 26.

Nor was the case different with regard to Christianity. Regarded as a religious system the Roman magistrate did not see any reason for excluding it from the general tolerance extended to other sects. The speech of Gallio ("Acts" xviii. 14, 15), when Paul was brought by the Jews before him, charged with persuading men to worship God contrary to the law, expresses with perfect precision the Roman sentiment and practice. On that occasion Gallio is reported to have said, "If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason there would be that I should bear with you; but if it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look ye to it; for I will be no judge of such matters." And, according to this story, "he drave them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. And Gallio cared for none of these things." But we know that, however little Gallio might care for religious nonsense, neither he, nor any Roman governor, would suffer his judgment seat to be desecrated by an act of violence. The beating of Sosthenes before Gallio proves the whole story to be mythical; and the story is valuable merely as showing the well-known indifference of the Romans to every religion held by foreigners. The author of "Supernatural Religion," (vol. iii., p. 320), says, "The Acts of the Apostles is not only an anonymous work, but, upon due examination, its claims to be considered sober and veracious history must be emphatically rejected."

It was the almost utter impossibility of obtaining the crown of martyrdom from the Romans that caused some Christian writers to invent stories about persecutions of Christians by Roman Emperors. Among the foremost of those mendacious writers is Tertullian. It is to him that we owe the stories about the persecutions under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Aurelius, and the story ("Apology," § 5) that "Tiberius, in whose time the name of Christ entered into the world, laid before the Senate, with his own vote to begin with, things announced to him from Palestine in Syria, which had

there manifested the truth of the divinity of that person. The Senate, because they had not themselves approved it, rejected it." It is ridiculous to suppose that the Senate would have dared to refuse such a request from Tiberius, whom we know from Tacitus ("Annals" iv., 37, 38), the Senate was willing to deify: just—as before mentioned, page 30—we have been called upon to believe that in one day Trajan or Hadrian crucified ten thousand Christian soldiers on Mount Ararat! But when once "a system of enormous lying" has been successfully introduced it is difficult to discern its "two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff,—you shall seek all day ere you find them; and, when you have them, they are not worth the search."

We now leave the region of mythology, and proceed to deal with real history. But, before entering into the region of history, let us examine the extant stories regarding the treatment of St Paul and St Ignatius while they were undergoing imprisonment. Those stories abound with alleged incidents, that are utterly at variance with what we know regarding the treatment of prisoners by the Romans, or by any other ancient people with whose treatment of prisoners we are tolerably well acquainted. To avoid confusion in our argument as much as possible, we shall make this examination the subject of a

SCHOLIUM.

An error, similar to that of supposing that the Romans persecuted people on account of their religious opinions, is the error of supposing that a prisoner in the custody of Roman soldiers was permitted to write and publish doctrinal essays, to have intercourse with his friends, and to preach sermons. Among the Romans when a man was made a prisoner, he was put into the common jail (in carcerem) and cut off from all communication with the external world. If a man were made a prisoner at a distance from Rome he was strictly guarded, and as much cut off from intercourse with his

friends as if he were in jail. The writers who have handed down to us the epistles attributed to St Paul, and those attributed to St Ignatius, and the stories regarding the respective imprisonments of those saints, have fallen into this error. The names of those writers are unknown. But the writer of the book called "The Acts of the Apostles," xxvii. 1; xxviii. 13, 14, 15, 16, relating the journey of St Paul in chains, from Cæsarea to Rome, accompanied by the writer, tells us that "they delivered Paul and certain other persons unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus' band" [which band never had any existence]; and at "Puteoli we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days, and so we went toward Rome . . . and from thence, when the brethren heard of us they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum, and the three Taverns; whom when Paul saw he thanked God and took courage." And "when we came to Rome the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him." Further (30, 31) we are told that in this manner, "Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no man forbidding him." In his epistle to the Philippians, i., 13, Paul says, "my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places." In the original the words here rendered "in all the palace," are ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ πραιτωρίῳ, from which Dr Smith ("New Testament History," p. 491) infers that Paul "was suffered to dwell by himself in his own hired house, of course within the precincts of the *Praetorium*, and—what he valued far more—to receive visitors and discourse freely with them of the Gospel." And Dr Smith explains in a note that the *praetorium* means the camp close to Rome constructed by Tiberius for the accommodation of the praetorian soldiers—in the midst of whom Paul preached Christianity! Dean Alford agrees with Dr Smith; but neither of them gives authorities.

In like manner Ignatius, in his epistle to the Romans, v., supposed to have been written while he was travelling in chains from Syria to Rome, is made to say, "From Syria even unto Rome I fight with wild beasts, by sea and by land, by night and day; being bound amongst ten leopards, I mean a band of soldiers; who even when they receive benefits show themselves all the worse."

These statements regarding Paul and Ignatius are incompatible with Roman laws and usages. But the fact is that the narratives, contained in the extant apocryphal and canonical New Testament literature, are merely fragments of a once extensive "system of enormous lying" in which the supernatural ceases to be miraculous, and the suspension of nature's laws becomes a sort of order. When a Christian prisoner is in the hands of Roman soldiers he is treated like a respected guest, or in "honourable captivity;" he preaches in the praetorian camp until Divine Providence chooses to release him, and then a little earthquake, perceived only by the prisoner, opens the doors of the prison and looses the prisoner's bonds, the city gate opens of its own accord, an angel leads the prisoner to the house of "Mary the mother of John whose surname was Mark," and then "function is smothered in surmise, and nothing is but what is not."

A good example regarding ancient prisons and the treatment of prisoners is given in the case of Jeremiah, xxxviii., concerning whom (B.C. 589) we are told that "They took Jeremiah, and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon there was no water but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire." But all savages have a fear of injuring madmen, consequently we are told that "the king commanded Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, saying, Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die. So Ebedmelech took the men with him, and went into the house of the king under

the treasury and took thence old cast clouts and old rotten rags, and let them down by cords into the dungeon to Jeremiah. And Ebedmelech the Ethiopian said unto Jeremiah, Put now these old cast clouts and rotten rags under thine armholes under the cords. And Jeremiah did so. So they drew up Jeremiah with cords and took him up out of the dungeon : and Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison."

Were the Romans more merciful than the Jews ? Or were the Romans more merciful than the Greeks ? To answer these questions in the affirmative is simply impossible. For the treatment by the Romans of their slaves, their prisoners, and even of their conquered but unoffending provincials was cruel in the extreme. During the period from the battle of Zama, B.C. 202, to that of Actium, B.C. 31, the Roman patricians practised towards the subject world a system of treatment very little better than a system of extermination. Even in Italy the severity of this system was felt. When Marius (B.C. 88) fled from his enemies to Minturnae, a once flourishing town about seventy miles south east of Rome, that town was reduced to a coast-guard station, and the district in its neighbourhood was a howling wilderness. Appius Claudius called the Roman jail "a receptacle for the commonalty." A Roman centurion would be quite as likely to give St Paul his liberty as permit him to go about visiting his friends, and preaching Christian metaphysics to Roman soldiers.

But to ascertain the severity with which prisoners used to be treated it is needless to go back to such remote dates. The imprisonment of a Christian subject by a Christian king, and the death of that Christian prisoner during his imprisonment are beautifully exemplified in the history of Sir John Eliot, A.D. 1632.

DECIUS WAS THE FIRST PERSECUTOR OF THE
CHRISTIANS.

After the mythical persecution of the Christian Church by Maximinus, the next alleged persecution of that church is the persecution of it by Decius, A.D. 249. This persecution is recorded by the writers of the "Historia Augusta," and by Zosimus. Its historical reality is generally admitted, and it is the first of the alleged persecutions of the Christians by Roman emperors of which this can be safely and correctly said. That it was the first of such persecutions is corroborated by the following circumstances.

A Christian Bishop of Sardis, Melito, who is said to have flourished about A.D. 170, addressed a letter to the Roman Emperor, Aurelius Antoninus, on behalf of the Christians. A portion of that document has been preserved by Eusebius, "E. H.," book iv., ch. 26. There Melito says, "What indeed *never before happened*, the race of the pious is now persecuted (*διώκεται*), driven about in Asia, by new and strange decrees. For the shameless informers, and those that crave the property of others, taking occasion from the edicts of the emperors, openly perpetrate robbery, night and day plundering those who are not guilty of any crime." And further on Melito adds, "The philosophy which we profess first indeed flourished *among the barbarians* (*ἐν βαρβάροις*), but afterwards, when it grew up, also among the nations under your government, under the glorious reign of Augustus your ancestor, it became, especially to your reign, an auspicious blessing."

These statements by Melito show clearly that he did not know anything about the alleged persecutions of the Christians by Roman emperors between A.D. 1 and A.D. 170. So we have now to account for a period of only about seventy-nine years.

One of the Christian fathers, Lactantius, was born about A.D. 250 and died about A.D. 330. In his work "De Mortibus Persecutorum," c. 3, 4, Lactantius says,

“After many years that execrable animal appeared, Decius, who persecuted the church.” The “many years” here spoken of need not be more or less than the seventy-nine for which we have to account. Of course it took “many years” to make the Christian Church worthy of *political* consideration. In the time of the Emperor Philip the Christians had become of sufficient *political* importance to induce him to befriend them. The Romans never persecuted any sectaries of any kind except on account of *political* considerations. Of course the friends of Philip were regarded by Decius as his *political* enemies, and as such, and only as such, he persecuted them.

In his “Roman History,” vol. v. p. 322, Niebuhr says that Decius “was the first who instituted a vehement persecution of the Christians, for which he is cursed by the ecclesiastical writers as much as he is praised by the pagan historians (the writers of the “*Historia Augusta*” and Zosimus). The cause of this persecution, I think, must be sought for in the feeling antagonistic to the tendency of his predecessor. The accounts which we have of earlier persecutions are highly exaggerated, as Henry Dodwell has justly pointed out. The persecution by Decius, however, was really a very serious one; it interrupted the peace which the Christian Church had enjoyed for a long time.”

At this point the human mind naturally pauses to take a retrospective view of the uncertain and shadowy figures which occupy the two hundred and forty-eight years which we have here passed under review. During all that period we cannot find any reliable Pagan authority for the alleged persecutions of the Christian Church by Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Aurelius, Severus, and Maximinus. In his “*Ecclesiastical History*”—so called—of that period, Eusebius gives a large number of stories regarding alleged events, and a still larger number of names regarding alleged persons supposed to have been connected with the Christian Church during that period. But those stories and

those names have not any perceptible existence outside the Christian Church. Even Eusebius does not give us a satisfactory, or even a self-consistent account of their times and their places. A man named Natalius, supposed to have flourished A.D. 193, alleged that he had been "flogged by holy angels." He proved this allegation by shewing that he had been flogged. *This satisfied Eusebius!* Moreover, how did Eusebius ascertain that Natalius was a Christian? How did Eusebius ascertain that the majority of the *names* that figure in his pages during our first and second centuries represented real persons who were orthodox Christians? He does not inform us. He may have been told that the names in question were the names of persons who were supposed to belong to the orthodox church because they were called Christians. But what did the name "Christian" signify during our first and second centuries? In the present day, what does the name "Christian" signify? We know that at present the name "Christian" has at least ninety-five significations attached to it!

In short, when we try to write a history, properly so called, of the Christian Church during the first two hundred and forty-eight years of its supposed existence, we find that almost all the extant stories regarding it are utterly unreal. Concerning that history we may say as Ulysses said concerning the soul of his deceased mother:

"Thrice I endeavoured it to clasp,
Thrice it escaped my eager grasp,
Between my close pressed hands outspread
Like shadow or mere dream it fled."