

## Pliny at Pontus

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The Pliny/Trajan correspondence gives us one of the few firm dates in the history of Christianity. It also documents the Christian communities in Sinope, the Black Sea port in the Roman province of Pontus. These these turn out to be Alpha in character. I consider that evidence and note implications for the Birkat ha-Minim, the synagogue prayer said to have been introduced by Gamaliel II at Yabneh (Gk Jamnia).

### Pliny

**Pliny** was a seasoned fiscal administrator. In 98-100 he was head of the Temple of Saturn, the main Roman treasury, and later was appointed Curator of the Tibur, a responsible post involving flood control; in 104-107 he was a member of Trajan's cabinet. His most notable law cases involved officials accused of fiscal wrongdoing. Despite a seemingly serious illness not long before, he was the obvious choice for the Governorship of Bithynia/Pontus, where irregularities in the expenditure of public funds had occurred. The date of his appointment is uncertain. Pliny died in his third year there; the official Pliny/Trajan correspondence (now Book 10, letters 15-121) was probably edited by Suetonius, Pliny's protégé and companion in Bithynia.

**The Bithynia Chronology.** The original letter dates (and opening formulae) were removed by the editor. The *relative* chronology is easily derived from the letters. Taking 110 as the start date,<sup>1</sup> we would have the following:

- 10:15, Aug 110. Reports reaching Ephesus by sea
- 10:17, Sept 110. Reaches Bithynia, celebrates Emperor's birthday [18 Sept]
- 10:35, Jan 111. New Year felicitations to Trajan [1 Jan]
- 10:52, Jan 111. Felicitations on anniversary of Trajan's accession [28 Jan]
- 10:88, Sept 111. Birthday felicitations to Trajan [18 Sept]
- 10:90, 111. At Sinope, the major Black Sea port of Pontus
- 10:92, 111. At Amisus, at the east end of Pontus, and thus *east* of Sinope
- 10:94, 111. Asks a favor for his protégé Suetonius
- 10:96, 111. Asks for advice about the handling of accused Christians
- 10:98, 111. At Amastris, a major city *west* of Sinope
- 10:100, Jan 112. New Year felicitations to Trajan [1 Jan]
- 10:102, Jan 112. Felicitations on anniversary of Trajan's accession [28 Jan]
- 10:120, 112. Pliny requests an official travel pass for his wife
- 10:121, 112. Trajan replies, granting the request [end of the correspondence]

<sup>1</sup>Following Williams and Walsh. Other options are 109 (Sherwin-White), 111 (Mommsen).

It may be that Pliny's earlier illness was not fully cured. At any rate, we find him, as he reports on his progress, keeping an eye on his health:

**Letter 10:17A.** Although I had a very healthy voyage, Sir [domine], as far as Ephesus, yet thereafter, when I had begun to pursue my journey by carriage, I was troubled by the most oppressive heat and also by slight attacks of fever, and I halted at Pergamum. Subsequently, when I had shifted to coastal vessels, I was held back by opposing winds, and I entered Bithynia later than I had hoped, on September 17th. I cannot however complain about this delay, since it was my good fortune to celebrate your birthday in the province, which was a very good omen. At the moment I am examining the expenditures, revenues, and debtors of the state of Prusa; from the very process of investigation I am learning more and more that this is necessary. For many sums of money are being kept in their possession by private persons under different pretexts; moreover some sums are being paid out on wholly unlawful outlays. I have written to you about this, Sir, at the very moment of my arrival.<sup>2</sup>

Pliny's experience as an advocate came into play in Bithynia:

**Letter 10:94.** Suetonius Tranquillus, that most upright, honorable, and learned man, having admired both his character and his learning, I have included, Sir, among my friends, and have begun to love him all the more now that I have had a closer insight into his character. Two reasons make it necessary for him to be awarded the rights of a parent of three children: he both earns the good opinion of his friends and has had an unfortunate experience of marriage, and he must obtain from your kindness through our agency that which the hostility of fortune has denied him.<sup>3</sup> I know, Sir, how great is the favor for which I apply, but I am applying to you, and I have experience of your generosity in all my requests. For you can infer how greatly I want this from the fact that I should not be asking for it in my absence if I only wanted it in a moderate degree.

By this time, late in 111, having begun in the western part of his territory, Pliny has reached the easternmost city of Amisus, at the boundary with the Parthians, and is retracing his route westward. He is yet to reach the previously visited city of Amastris, whose affairs will occupy him in Letter 98, and thus is in the vicinity of Sinope, when a case arises for which he feels his previous legal experience has not prepared him.

**Letter 10:96.** It is my custom, Sir, to bring before you everything about which I am in doubt. For who can better guide my uncertainty or inform my ignorance? I have never been present at trials of Christians; for that reason, I do not know what the charge usually is and to what extent it is usually punished. I have been in no little uncertainty about whether a distinction should be made between different ages, or whether, however young they may be, they should be treated no differently from the more mature ones; whether pardon should be granted for repentance or whether it is of no help to the man who has been a Christian to have given it up; whether it is the name itself, if it is free from crimes, or the crimes associated with the name which are being punished.

<sup>2</sup>tr adjusted from Williams; so below.

<sup>3</sup>A favored status established by Augustus to encourage more children among the elite; those with fewer children could be granted that status by special dispensation.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were prosecuted before me on the charge of being Christians, I followed this procedure. I asked the people themselves whether they were Christians. Those who admitted that they were, I asked a second and a third time, warning them of the punishment. Those who persisted I ordered to be executed. For I was in no doubt that, whatever it might be that they were admitting to, their stubbornness and unyielding obstinacy certainly ought to be punished. There were others of a similar madness whom I have listed as due to be sent on to the city, because they were Roman citizens.

Subsequently, in the course of dealing with the matter, as usually happens, the charge spread widely and more forms of it turned up. An anonymous pamphlet containing the names of many persons was posted. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, after they had called upon the gods when I dictated the formula, and after they had made offerings of incense and wine to your statue which I had ordered to be brought in with the images of the gods for this purpose, and had also cursed Christ, none of which acts, it is said, those who are truly Christians can be compelled to perform, I decided should be discharged. Others, named by an informer, said that they were Christians and then denied it; they said that they had in fact been Christians but had given it up, some three years before, some longer ago than that, and a few as much as twenty (*non nemo etiam ante viginti*). All these also both paid homage to your statue and to the images of the gods and cursed Christ. Moreover, they maintained that this had been the sum of their guilt or error, that they had been in the habit of gathering together before dawn on a fixed day, and of singing antiphonally a hymn to Christ as if to a god, and of binding themselves by oath not to some wickedness but not to commit acts of theft or robbery or adultery, not to break faith, and not to refuse to return money placed in their keeping when called upon to do so. When these ceremonies had been completed, they said it had been their custom to disperse and to meet again to take food, but food that was ordinary and harmless; they said that they had given up doing even this after my edict in which, in accordance with your instructions, I banned secret societies.

So I believed it to be all the more necessary to ascertain what the truth was from two slave women who were called deaconesses (*ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur*), and under torture. I found nothing other than a depraved and extravagant superstition.

And so I postponed the hearing and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me worthy of your consideration, especially on account of the number who are endangered. For many persons of every age, of every rank, of both sexes, are and will be brought into danger. The infection of this superstition has spread, not only through the towns, but also through the villages and the countryside; it seems possible for it to be checked and put right. At any rate, it is established that temples which just now were almost abandoned have begun to be thronged, and customary rites which had long been suspended to be renewed, and the flesh of sacrificial victims, for which until recently very few buyers were to be found, to be sold far and wide. From this it is easy to conjecture what a host of people could be reformed, if room were given for repentance.

Thus far Pliny, ending with an appeal for clemency for those who repent.

Pliny's concern for the traditional sacrifices is more intelligible once we know that, at his request, he had earlier been granted priestly status. Also evident is discomfort with anonymous denunciation, and a wish to drop charges against Christians who renounce their membership; his report is a sort of advocacy on their behalf.

To clarify the legal issue as it appeared to the Emperor, here is Trajan's reply:

**Letter 10:97.** You followed the procedure which you ought to have followed, my dear Secundus, in examining the cases of those who were being prosecuted before you as Christians. For no rule with a universal application, such as would have, as it were, a fixed form, can be laid down. They should not be sought out; if they are prosecuted and proved to be guilty, they should be punished, provided, however, that the man who denies that he is a Christian and makes this evident by his action, that is, by offering prayers to our gods, shall obtain pardon for his repentance, however suspect he may be with regard to the past. However, pamphlets posted without an author's name ought to have no place in any criminal charge. For they both set the worst precedent and are not in keeping with the spirit of our age.

Trajan agrees that membership in the Christian sect is to be punished. The crime is refusal to worship the state gods, and will be canceled for those accused who forswear membership and worship the state gods, including but not limited to the Emperor. That required Emperor worship was the whole point of the Caligula threat of 40. No Jew, and no Christian with his inherited One Jewish God, could accept that requirement.

### The Alpha Christians of Pontus

So Pliny is definitely dealing with Christians, but what kind? It turns out that everything in his report matches the characteristics of Alpha Christianity:

- The "commandments" are not just from the Decalogue, they are from the part of the Decalogue that was recognized by Jesus in Mk 10:19.
- The signature Jesus commandment against fraud (Mk 10:19) is also visible.
- Women as leaders, long after the deuterio-Paulines (2 Tim 2:12) had dropped them.
- Simple observances, including a communal meal (as in Didache 9).

The hymn to "Christ as God," looks like a late trait, but that motif occurs already in the Philippians 2:4-9 hymn quoted by Paul in the 50's, more than half a century earlier.

**Establishing the Churches.** These then look like Alpha churches,<sup>4</sup> preserved from an earlier century. What was their origin? The largely fantastical list of first bishops in the 4c Apostolic Constitutions, at 7:46, does not even mention Bithynia or Pontus.<sup>5</sup>

We now come to a curious passage. In Acts 16:7, Paul and company "attempted to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not." This is the only place in Acts where Jesus, not God, gives direction. Did Luke know Bithynia (the first "we" passage follows, at Acts 16:10) as an early Alpha zone, one not reached by Paul?

<sup>4</sup>For the term Alpha" see Brooks **Two** 39; for details, see further below.

<sup>5</sup>For Rome, it gives Linus "ordained by Paul" and Clemens "ordained by me, Peter," but the Roman Mass preserves *three* names: Linus, Anacletus, and Clemens. For Caesarea, fictional Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) followed by fictional Cornelius (Ac 10:1-48), an obvious absurdity.

### The Birkat ha-Minim and the Dating of Texts

If the first denunciations in Pontus went back 20 years before 111, that is, to c91, we have confirmation of the 80's date which has been suggested for the composition of the Nineteenth Benediction, as issued from Yabneh under Gamaliel II:<sup>6</sup>

- For the apostates let there be no hope, and let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the Nazarenes and the Minim [heretics] be destroyed in a moment and let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous.<sup>7</sup>

and thus a clue about the dates of the NT texts which respond to it. One is the second layer of 1 Peter, which frames the original core.<sup>8</sup> That later material is here indented:

- **1 Pet 1:1.** Peter . . . to the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, [2] according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ . . .
- **1 Pet 1:3.** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy, begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . [4:11] . . . that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, whose is the glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.
- **1 Pet 4:12.** Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you, which cometh upon you to prove you, as though a strange thing happened unto you; [13] but inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings, rejoice, that at the revelation of his glory also ye may rejoice with exceeding joy. [14] If ye are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are ye, because the Spirit of glory and the Spirit of God resteth upon you. [15] For let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evil-doer, or as a meddler in other men's matters, [16] but if a man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God, and if it begin first at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the Gospel of God? . . .

Suffering death "for the name," and dying "as a Christian" are precisely what the Christians of Pontus were facing, as early as somewhere around the year 91.

Three passages in the Gospel of John refer to expulsion from synagogues:

- **Jn 9:22.** . . . they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man should confess him to be Christ, he **should be put out of the synagogue.**
- **Jn 12:42.** . . . many believed on him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they **should be put out of the synagogue.**
- **Jn 16:1.** These things I have spoken unto you, that ye should not be caused to stumble. [2] They shall **put you out of the synagogues**; yea, the hour cometh that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God.

These probably reflect persecutions at Ephesus, the locale often assigned to John.

<sup>6</sup>Now the 12th Benediction. Its composition by Samuel the Small at the request of Rabbi Gamaliel II is recorded at b.Berakoth 28a; see Martyn **History** 59f. For the earlier toleration of Christian writings in synagogues, see Torrey **Documents** 98, quoting Tosephta Yadaim 2:13.

<sup>7</sup>tr Martyn **History** 62 (modern versions, like that quoted in Lohmeyer **Prayer** 303, have been sanitized; Martyn's version is based on the better text of the Cairo Genizah).

<sup>8</sup>See Beare **Peter**. The analysis is due to Perdelwitz.

There is also the opening of 1 Clement, a Roman text commonly dated to c96:

- **1 Clem 1:1.** Owing to the sudden and repeated misfortunes and calamities which have befallen us, we consider that our attention has been somewhat delayed in turning to the questions disputed among you, beloved . . .

Acts II, with its threefold theme of separation from Judaism (\*13:46, 18:6, 28:29), is another seeming reaction to this event, this one probably in Antioch.

### Chronology

The new prayer probably made its way gradually outward from Yabneh, and need not have been universally adopted in the places it reached; the Rabbis had no power of enforcement. But they were the only authority left in Judaism, and their sense of what was proper in the daily prayers will have been influential. Allowing for a roughly constant rate of diffusion, and noting the location of major roads, we get something like this sequence of places affected, and any literary responses (most dates circa):

- 70. Destruction of Temple at Jerusalem
- 71. Yohanan ben Zakkai at Yabneh; toleration of Jesus sect in synagogues
- 80. Accession of less tolerant Gamaliel at Yabneh
- 85. Birkat ha-Minim (12th Benediction) framed at Yabneh (Judaea)
- 86. Birkat effect in Judaea
- 87. Birkat effect reaches Syria
- 88. Acts II responds to Birkat-induced separation from Judaism
- 89. Birkat effect reaches Iconium
- 90. Birkat effect reaches Ankyra and Ephesus (John 16, c91)
- 91. Birkat effect reaches Pontus (1 Peter B, c92) and Nicomedia
- 92. Birkat effect reaches Philippi
- 93. Birkat effect reaches Illyria and Corinth
- 94. Birkat effect reaches Rome (later recalled in 1 Clement, c96)
- 108. Renewed denunciations of Christians at Pontus
- 111. Pliny presides over further trials of Christians at Pontus

There is obviously a certain amount of give in the system. But this chronology is compatible with dates previously suggested for several texts and their modifications, and incorporates all relevant data from Rabbinic sources. It may thus perhaps serve as a working hypothesis for subsequent discussion of the dates and intertextual relations of other texts in the late 1st century.

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