The question addressed in this paper is limited in scope but has, I believe, quite wide ramifications. It is simply this: Why was Paul subjected by some of the Jews he met to judicial punishments? The problem is an issue above all for Jewish rather than Christian history, since the aim is to discover the motivation of the persecutors, not the explanations given for their suffering by the persecuted.

Some distinctions will be useful at the outset. From the point of view of the persecutors, judicial punishments require quite a different attitude than less formal types of persecution. Thus judicial punishments should be distinguished from passive approval of punishments carried out by others, as in the support apparently expressed by the Jews for the execution of James, the brother of John, and the arrest of Peter, by Agrippa (Acts 12:1–19). They are also to be distinguished from mob action engendered by zealous enthusiasm, such as (probably) the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:51–60),

\(^1\) or the expulsion of Christians from synagogues (e.g. John 9:22),

\(^2\) or verbal attacks, from sophisticated religious polemics to formal cursing.

\(^3\) All such informal violence may have been just as terrible to undergo as judicial punishment, but those responsible will not have needed to think so much about their hostile actions. By contrast, judicial punishments are by definition deliberate.

A second distinction must be between, first, the explanation of persecution given by the victims, who will naturally have wanted to

---


make sense of, and ascribe some meaning to, their suffering; second, the judicial charges brought, which may have been trumped up in particular cases, but whose existence as potential charges was nonetheless clearly essential if a case was to stick; and third—my topic here—the reasons for electing to bring such charges, since the existence on the statute book of laws against particular behavior does not in itself necessitate in any legal system action to enforce those laws, and this will have been all the more true in ancient societies, which lacked any state prosecution service and therefore relied on private initiative for accusations to be brought. My theme will therefore be the incentives which impelled some Jews to bring charges against some early Christians, in the full expectation that such reasons may have differed in every case.

The investigation is not without problems. Most obvious is one of method: almost all the accounts of persecution come from the Christians who were persecuted, and since martyrdom early became a potent theme in Christian literature, as in Acts 5:40, which refers to “suffering for Jesus’ name,” it will be hard to find reliable evidence of the views of the Jewish persecutors concerned: the issue raises in a particularly acute form the problem that references to Jews in Christian texts relate only obliquely to references to Christians in Jewish texts, a disjunction which should not really surprise.

The problem for the historian of Judaism grappling with the persecution of early Christians is the abundant evidence of the pluralism tolerated within Jewish society in this period. The variety of coexisting Judaisms has been, if anything, confirmed by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially if the evidence of the scrolls is not robbed of its value by unnecessary identification of the sectarians who produced them with one of the numerous groups already known from literary sources. Disputes between such groups are of course well attested in late Second Temple times, but although Pharisees and Sadducees indulged in political struggle under the Hasmoneans and

---