FROM THE GREAT PERSECUTION TO THE PEACE OF GALERIUS

BY

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The long peace of Gallienus was a truly extraordinary phenomenon, and about eighteen years of its approximately forty years fell under the rule of Diocletian before what is usually referred to as the Great Persecution. Eusebius' glowing report about this peace and the unusual conditions enjoyed by the Church under its protection; about the rise of the Christians to the highest positions in the provincial government; about freedom from obligation to sacrifice to the idols; about highly favoured Christians in the Imperial household of Diocletian; about Christians in various and often high positions in local government across the Empire; and, finally, Lactantius' report, sounding totally unbelievable, yet very possibly true, that the Emperor Diocletian's wife and daughter were Christians—all these reports may appear like a veritable fairy tale after 200 years of persecutions. Also, the Christians quite naturally built magnificent churches. The main church of Nicomedia was in a conspicuous place and faced the Imperial palace. These new dimensions were perhaps necessary to accommodate the greatly increased Christian communities, but perhaps also the tastes of the upper classes coming into the Church. Christians of more modest status had perhaps to be satisfied with the more modest office of duumviri, and some of them were not selective enough and became even flamines and sacerdotes of the pagan cults. It is difficult too to see how the ecumenism of the Christians of the late third century could make such compromises, for the later councils imposed only light or no penance for such obviously wide-spread practices.

When he gives the theological reason for the end of the long era of peace and the beginning of a long era of harsh persecution, Eusebius may have been thinking about these and many other deviations in Christian faith and morals for which the Christian Church received—the Bishop of Caesarea says, perhaps beating his own breast—the well-deserved punishment of God.
The origin of and the reasons for the outbreak of the Great Persecution are, and of course will be, disputed. It certainly did not start with the few and apparently isolated cases of the military martyrs. The case of the Theban legion and the martyrdoms of Maximilian, Marcellus, Fabius, Cassianus, and others were not part of the Great Persecution. While these martyrs may have acted out of honest conviction that by their conduct they were avoiding idolatry, their military superiors nevertheless condemned them for gross infraction of military discipline. However, these cases may have led, directly or indirectly, to what Eusebius regarded as something like a prelude to the Great Persecution.

He makes references to what appears to be a series of army purges that took place long before the beginning of the persecution. Lactantius may be telling us the origin of these purges when he relates the apparently fateful episode of the pagan haruspices, in which they were apparently checked in their soothsaying efforts by the application of the sign of the cross, and blamed the Christians for their failure. Diocletian, apparently very upset, ordered all in his palace to sacrifice to the pagan gods; those who declined were beaten. Thus those Christians, who enjoyed the privilege of being excepted from pagan sacrifices were now for the first time obliged to go through the ritual. Since there was still no bloodshed the famous Christians of the Imperial household must have survived this ordeal, perhaps only with a painful fustigatio for refusing to sacrifice. What appears to be even more important than the discomfort of these very important Christians was that Diocletian at the same time ordered that soldiers were to be compelled to sacrifice and that those not complying were to be simply dismissed from the army. Eusebius may of course be speaking of the same purge, in which Christian soldiers were allowed to choose between the army and dismissal to civil life if they disobeyed the order to sacrifice. This report by Eusebius is definitely similar to Lactantius' description (above) of Diocletian's purge of his own army. In fact, Eusebius too may be speaking of the same purge by Diocletian, although it is generally assumed that Galerius was the Emperor who effected the purge. The unnamed commander, identified in his Chronicon (ad loc.) as Veturius, gives a similar choice to his soldiers. The odd cases of martyrdoms taking place in these purges may however have resulted from breach of military discipline, especially since Diocletian's policy still was to avoid bloodshed.