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‘SUFFERING FOR CHRIST’: A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Early Christian narratives often demonstrate the struggle of human beings because of their unique faith. The New Testament writings provide ample evidences concerning the afflictions of Early Christianity in the Jewish and pagan environment. The study attempts to delineate the following aspects in detail: the etymology of ‘persecution’ in the NT narratives; persecution of the church in the early Christian context; the Jewish and Roman persecutions against the church; the implications of the study in the contemporary Indian context; followed by concluding statements. The following questions are important in the process of addressing the topic: How the NT and extra-Biblical documents help us in understanding the Early Christian situation? How the Jewish and Roman persecutions against the Christians shaped the community as co-sufferers with God/Christ? How the Biblical axioms are paradigmatic in the contemporary Indian context? The aim of the paper is threefold: to foreground the NT and extra-Biblical records of persecution; to detail the concept of ‘suffering for Christ’ in perspective and in rhetorical terms and to see the implications of the Biblical understanding of persecution in the contemporary Indian context.

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Terminological Details

The NT uses different words in multiple contexts in order to narrate the idea of persecution. The Greek word *diōgmos* literally means “the *hunt* to bring someone down like an animal.”

In religious sense, it means “to *punish God’s messengers with vengeance*—like a *hunter* trying to conquer (obliterate) someone as their ‘catch.’” *Diōgmos* is used in ancient and biblical Greek for *persecution* (hostility) shown by confused, spiritual ‘leaders’ (see Matt 13:21; Mark 4:17; 10:30; Acts 8:1; 13:50; Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 12:10; 2 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 3:11).¹ Other words used for persecution are: first, *diōkō*, a verb found in around fifty contexts meaning ‘persecute,’ ‘follow,’ or ‘pursue’ (Matt 5:10, 11, 12, 44; 23:34; Gal 4:29; 6:12); and second, *ekdiōkō*, a rare verb found only twice and meaning to ‘persecute’ (Luke 11:49) and to ‘drive out’ or ‘banish’ (1 Thess 2:15).² These words are used to demonstrate the tormenting situation the Early Christian community/ies underwent.

The words used for ‘suffer’ or ‘suffering’ are also varied: first, *paschō*, a verb found in around forty places meaning ‘to suffer,’ referring to enduring both physical and emotional trauma. Christ’s suffering on the cross is anticipated in Matt 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15;³ second, *adikeō*, a verb found nearly thirty times with the predominant sense of ‘hurt,’

‘do wrong’ (Luke 10:19; Acts 7:24, 26-27; 25:10-11; 1 Cor 6:7-8); and third, *zēmioō*, a verb found six times meaning ‘to lose’ and also ‘to suffer lose.’ In Phil 2:8, Paul declares that he ‘has suffered the loss’ of all things for the sake of Christ.⁴ All these words address the aspect of suffering that affect human life in multidimensional levels.

The aspects of persecution and suffering require a comprehensive treatment as the NT narratives deal it in multifarious contexts. The noun form ‘persecution’ is a cognate of its verbal form ‘persecute’ which means “to treat somebody in a cruel and unfair way, especially because of their race, religion or political beliefs.” According to Kruse, “The experience of persecution, suffering for one’s religious beliefs or behaviours widely attested in the pages of the NT.”⁵ What Kruse says here can be better understood from the scriptural evidences outlined below. The scripture witnesses through evidences about Christianity’s growth as a World religion from its humble and sectarian beginnings of the First Century CE. In that sense, persecution and suffering are treated together for a wider understanding of the early Christian Situation.

An Overview of Persecution in the Early Christian Context

In the Early Christian context, persecution played its role at two levels: first, the Christians considered persecution as a gift from God and at the same time honourable in the sight of God. Secondly, persecution in

¹<https://biblehub.com/greek/1375.htm>, accessed on 29th November 2019.

² See Stephen D. Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Peabody: Hendricksen, 2010), 726-727.

³Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 944-945.

⁴Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 944-945.

⁵ C. G. Kruse, “Persecution,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 775.



the form of punishment was imposed upon the Christian communities from various quarters of their *Sitz-im-Leben*.

Early Christians expected suffering. Christ had died on the cross, so there was no higher honour than to imitate that death through accepting martyrdom (i.e., witness by one's blood).⁶ The Jewish legacy portrayed, in writings such as the Fourth Book of the Maccabees, the glorious nature of death. Similarly, as the writer of 1 Peter expressed it: "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (4:16).⁷ Perkins states that, "First Peter's concern with the relationship between Christians and the surrounding culture raises an issue that always faces believers. For some who are a minority within the larger society, the letter could be describing their situation exactly."⁸ These details demonstrate that Christianity's growth and development in the Roman Empire was not without challenges. Even though there was a favourable situation of growth, its minority status, consideration as a sect within Judaism the negative understanding as a cult in the Greco-Roman World helped it undergoing various afflictions.

⁶<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/persecution-in-early-church-did-you-know.html>, accessed on 1st December 2019.

⁷<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/persecution-in-early-church-did-you-know.html>, accessed on 1st December 2019.

⁸ Perkins states that, "The correspondence between Pliny and Trajan (c. 110 CE) established that the mere name 'Christian' was not criminal. First Peter 4:16 encourages readers not to be ashamed but to glorify God when they suffer because of that name." See PHEME PERKINS, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 72-74.

The Roman imperial context created a mixed experience of both good and bad times for the Christian Communities across the empire. From 30-311 CE, a period in which 54 emperors ruled the Empire, a dozen took the trouble to harass the Christians more acutely: Claudius (41-54); Nero (54-68); Domitian (81-96); Trajan (98-117); Marcus Aurelius (161-180); Septimius Severus (193-211); Decius (249-251); Valerian (253-260); and Diocletian (284-305).⁹ Troublesome situations under these emperors and local civil authorities shaped Christianity to the next level and enabled it to face emerging situations in life.

Preceding the conversion of Constantine (until the Fourth Century CE), the church was persecuted for various reasons.¹⁰ Several institutions, like the Jewish authorities, the imperial government, and the local civil authorities were involved in that.¹¹ The Gospels and the *Acts* show that the Jewish communities in Palestine and other cities of the Greek East drew Romans into the persecution of the church. The execution of Peter and Paul at Rome, before Nero issued his edict against the Christians in 64, may have the result of complaints about their activity from the Jewish community. When a great fire ravaged Rome in 64, Nero attempted to shift the blame for the fire from himself onto another party and ordered the mass arrest and execution of Christians in Rome. This was the event which led later

⁹ See Mark Galli's article: <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecution-in-early-church-gallery>, accessed on 1st December 2019.

¹⁰ See Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1965), 163.

¹¹ D. S. Potter, "Persecution of the Early Church," *ABD* 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 231.



Christian writers to claim that persecution was a “Neronian institution.”¹² These incidents made Early Christians to be rooted in their convictions irrespective of trials and temptations.

Pliny’s letter (*Ep.* 10.96) to Trajan (98-117) makes it clear that persecution against Christians was widely practiced in the Roman Empire.¹³ Pliny even records that persecutions against Christians was practiced even during the reign of Emperor Domitian (81-96).¹⁴ The crimes associated with Christianity were attacks on pagan temples or images of the gods, cannibalism and incest. It is also clear from this letter that Pliny attempted to discover whether or not the Christians in his area were actively engaged in these crimes.¹⁵ He discovered that they were not.¹⁶ The practice of the Christian faith was illegal because the Roman authorities thought that it involved the commission of crimes, but it was upto individual governors and other magistrates to act against Christians as they saw fit.¹⁷ In the third century, even during the reign of Emperor Decius (249-251) Christians were brutally persecuted. Christians were exiled, their properties were confiscated, imprisoned, and had to suffer death. Christianity was considered as a cult in the imperial territory and this treatment continued until Constantine in 324.¹⁸

The writings of the apostolic fathers contain polemic passages directed against Jews (*Diogn.* 3.1-5; 4.1-6; *Ign. Magn.* 8.1; 10.2-3; *Ign. Phld.* 6.1-2).¹⁹ In the first three centuries, most outbreaks of persecution did not begin with the imperial authorities. They began as local programs inspired by a feeling on the part of the inhabitants of individual cities that the Christians in their midst were atheists whose presence upset the traditional gods. It was a reaction that is summed up best by Tertullian’s observation (*Apol.* 40.1) that, “if the Tiber rises to the walls; if the Nile does not rise to the fields; if the sky stands still; if the earth moves; if there is famine; if there is pestilence, the cry goes up, ‘Christians to the lion.’”²⁰ Thus Christians were treated as scapegoats in most of the situations in life.

The total number of Christians who suffered death or imprisonment for their faith is difficult to estimate. Potter says, “A figure of around 30,000--50,000 victims in the centuries before Constantine, which would allow for an average of between 75 and 125 victims a year throughout the empire, may be roughly correct.” While Christians were persecuted they considered that their suffering as a ‘time to prove ultimate devotion’ and in facing the authorities a Christian might feel that ‘he was re-enacting the Passion.’ In that sense, martyrdom and persecution were considered honourable.²¹

Jewish Persecution of Christians in the New Testament

The first century persecution of the Christians can be properly interpreted only in

¹² Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 232.

¹³ Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 232.

¹⁴ See D. W. Palmer, “Pliny the Younger,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 808-812.

¹⁵ Palmer, “Pliny the Younger,” 808-812.

¹⁶ Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 232.

¹⁷ Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 232.

¹⁸ Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 233-234.

¹⁹ See Kruse, “Persecution,” 776.

²⁰ Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 234.

²¹ Potter, “Persecution of the Early Church,” 235.



relation to the sufferings of Jesus. The passion and crucifixion of Jesus together can be understood as a paradigm of Christian suffering. The passion narratives in the Gospels are found in the Gospels of Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23 and John (scattered throughout chaps. 10-19).²² These accounts narrate the arrest, trial, suffering and death of Jesus. It is also important to take note what Apostle Paul proclaims in 1 Cor 1:23 that “we preach Christ the crucified.” The incarnation of Jesus, as the slain Lamb of God, is a symbolic representation of the ‘crucified but victorious’ Messiah who came to save the sinners (Rev 5:1-14).²³ Green states that,

The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth under Pontius Pilate is well attested in Christian and non-Christian sources. It is reported in the four canonical Gospels in the midst of remarkably full passion accounts, and referred to as an historical event throughout the NT (especially in Paul).²⁴

The Latin historian Tacitus mentions Jesus’ death in *The Annals*: “Christus . . . had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberias, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate” (15.44). In a text whose authenticity is under suspicion, as Green states, Josephus recalls that Pilate condemned Jesus to be crucified (Josephus *Ant.* 18.3.3 §§63-64).²⁵ Green further states

that, “For these and other reasons, the historicity of the death of Jesus on the cross is beyond doubt.”²⁶ In that sense, the death of Jesus can be considered as an event happened in history.

The followers of Jesus suffered from the hands of the Jews. The Jewish rivalry is recorded both by Evangelist Luke and by Apostle Paul in the following scriptures: Acts 5:17-42; 6:8-8:1; 17:1-14; 18:12-17; 21:27-36; 2 Cor 11:24; Gal 5:11; 6:12; 1 Thess 2:14-16; and others. In the early years of Christianity, other Jews regarded Christians as sectarians (*minim*; see Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22).²⁷ The Jewish Christians suffered religious persecution under their fellow Jews on account of their faith in Jesus. The Church-and-Synagogue tension and the subsequent expulsion of the Johannine community are made obvious within John’s Gospel.²⁸ The Early Christians had considered all the sufferings because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus as matters of prestige.²⁹ On the one hand, the Early Christians desired martyrdom in order to be considered honourable, on the other hand, the imperial and civil authorities imposed persecution upon them. In that sense, persecution was both a ‘desired’ virtue and an ‘imposed’ punishment.

²² See J. B. Green, “Passion Narrative,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1992), 601-604.

²³ Kruse, “Persecution,” 776.

²⁴ J. B. Green “Death of Jesus,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 148.

²⁵ Green, “Death of Jesus,” 148.

²⁶ See J. B. Green, *The Death of Jesus: Tradition and Interpretation in the Passion Narrative*, WUNT 2:33 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 1.

²⁷ See Kruse, “Persecution,” 776.

²⁸ See Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 38-39, 56-57, 63-64, 135-136, 202-204; Also see Johnson Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs: A Polyvalent Analysis of John 1:19-12:50*, BINS 136 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015).

²⁹ See Kruse, “Persecution,” 776.



Jesus' followers continued their existence within Judaism just as a sect.³⁰ But, later on the relationship between the Jews and the Christians became increasingly tense. This tense situation resulted into the expulsion of the Christians from the synagogues and other Jewish religious institutions. It further affected the community of Christians for their marginalization as an 'inferior religious group.' Their existence as a community of religiously devout people without distinguishable religious identity, institutional backups, canonized scriptures, and organizational settings helped the Jews to attack them often. This was the context in which the disciples of Jesus initiated the mission and evangelism.³¹

In the Book of Acts, the author Luke records that the high priest and the Sadducees arrested Peter and his companions and put them into prison (5:17-18) due to their evangelistic proclamations and wonder works.³² Bock says, "The Sadducees have more to lose, since they control the council and have worked out a compromise with the Romans to share power. Any destabilizing element in the culture could threaten their control."³³ They were questioned in front of the council (5:27) and flogged and strictly warned against speaking in the name of Jesus

(5:40).³⁴ Instead of turning back, the apostles "considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of Jesus' name" (5:41) and "they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah" (5:42).³⁵ Thus 'prohibitions' and 'civil disobedience' were progressing hand in hand. As an incipient community, as they follow the footprints of Jesus the charismatic leader, the Christians initiated a counter-cultural and civil disobedient movement.

In Acts chapters 6 and 7, the story of Stephen's martyrdom is described in detail.³⁶ Evangelist Luke describes about the secret instigation of the Jews against Stephen (6:11), stirring up of people against him, confrontation with him, seizing and bringing of him before the council (6:12), using false witnesses against him (6:13), and enraging and grounding their teeth at him (7:54).³⁷ All these descriptions point us toward the physical and psychological torture they instigated against Stephen. The harassment and physical torment toward Stephen do not end there.³⁸ It is recorded that the enemies of faith covered their ears, rushed together against him (7:57), dragged him out of the city, and stoned at him (7:58). Stephen suffered all these as an enduring servant of God.³⁹ Stephen stood firm even in the midst of increasing opposition and came out as a

³⁰ Kruse says that, "The Jews are portrayed as partly responsible for the martyrdom of Polycarp (*Mart. Pol.* 12.2; 13.1)." See Kruse, "Persecution," 776.

³¹ Kruse, "Persecution," 775-778.

³² See Tenney, *New Testament Times*, 185-187.

³³ The Sadducees are often seen as more hostile to the new movement than the Pharisees in Acts, whereas in Luke's Gospel the Pharisees are major opponents of Jesus." See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*. BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 238.

³⁴ Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Hyderabad: Authentic, 1983/2004), 366.

³⁵ See Bock, *Acts*, 241; Tenney, *New Testament Times*, 185-187; also see Toussaint, "Acts," 366-367.

³⁶ See Bock, *Acts*, 268-316.

³⁷ Toussaint, "Acts," 367-371.

³⁸ For more details about persecution in Luke-Acts, see Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations': The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSS 142 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

³⁹ Bock, *Acts*, 268-316; Toussaint, "Acts," 367-371.



witness of Christ and ultimately earned a place in the martyr tradition.

While Stephen endured suffering without reproach, Saul accompanied the enemies of the Gospel (Acts 7:58).⁴⁰ Bock says, "A great persecution arises against the church. This is the first use of the noun *diōgmos* (persecution) in Acts. We have moved from a warning (4:21) to a flogging (5:40) to martyrdom (7:58-60) to persecution."⁴¹ In Acts 9, it is recorded that Saul was one of the persecutors of the Way and he breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (9:2).⁴² Saul was granted an official letter from the high priest to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (9:2).⁴³ Thus, the religious Judaism of the First Century considered the followers of Jesus as an illegitimate religious group and treated them as those who commit blasphemy and heresy.

Paul appears to have found persecution at the hands of the Jews the most difficult of his afflictions to bear. The trials and afflictions which Paul experienced were many and varied, and this is reflected in the catalogues found in his letters (Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10).⁴⁴ Of the afflictions which Paul experienced, none receives more attention in his letters than persecution on account of the gospel. He was

persecuted by Jews, Gentiles, and false Christians (2 Cor 11:26), but it was persecution at the hand of the Jews to which he referred most frequently (cf., e.g., Rom 15:31; 2 Cor 11:24, 26; Gal 5:11; 1 Thess 2:14-16), suggesting he found this hardest to bear. Paul's letters provide several hints concerning the reasons for this persecution: first, he preached the faith he once sought to destroy (Acts 9:1-2; cf. Gal 1:23);⁴⁵ second, he regarded cherished elements of Judaism as rubbish (Phil 3:4-8);⁴⁶ third, he encouraged Jews to neglect the law of Moses (Gal 2:11-21); fourth, he did not preach circumcision (Gal 5:11); and fifth, he relaxed ethical demands of Judaism (Rom 3:7-8).⁴⁷ Just as Jesus was a revolutionary, Paul was a radical one at several junctures of Christian mission.

In Thessalonica, Paul the persecutor turned proclaimer who preached about Jesus the crucified and resurrected Messiah (Acts 17:3). The jealous Jews of the city, with the help of some ruffians in the market-places, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar (Acts 17:5). Jason, the missionary associate of Paul, was dragged and whose house was attacked (Acts 17:5-6). The Jews politicized the situation and complained against the apostles by stating that "they are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor" (Acts 17:7). The major complaint they had against the Christians was that they were proclaimers of "another king named

⁴⁰ Toussaint states that, "This meant Saul was giving his approval by guarding their clothes (Acts 8:1; 22:20)." Toussaint, "Acts," 371.

⁴¹ See Bock, *Acts*, 317-318.

⁴² See Cunningham, 'Through Many Tribulations': *The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*.

⁴³ Bock, *Acts*, 317-318; Toussaint, "Acts," 375.

⁴⁴ C. G. Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," *DPL* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 18.

⁴⁵ Donald K. Campbell, "Galatians," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Hyderabad: Authentic, 1983/2004), 592.

⁴⁶ Robert P. Lightner, "Philippians," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Hyderabad: Authentic, 1983/2004), 659-660.

⁴⁷ Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," 19.



Jesus.”⁴⁸In that sense, the Jews were rooted in their misunderstanding about the Way of Jesus and his apostle Paul.

It is recorded that the Thessalonian Jews even reached the city of Beroea in order to stir up and incite the crowds against Paul and his companions (Acts 17:13).⁴⁹The determined Thessalonian Jews influenced the people of the surrounding regions against the apostles. The intolerant and antagonistic attitude of the Jews caused Paul and his companions to travel from place to place. Paul informs the Thessalonian believers that the Jews killed Jesus and the prophets (1 Thess2:14-16). While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal (18:12).⁵⁰Gallio the proconsul found the issue between Paul and the Jews as a matter of questions about words and names and their law (18:15).⁵¹The Jews were attempting to present the Christians as a disgraceful community before the tribunal. It further developed when Sosthenes was seized and beaten in front of the tribunal.⁵² Thus Paul and his companions confronted persecution at various levels of his missionary and ministerial journey.

In Acts 19, it is recorded that how Paul’s persuasive speech in Ephesus caused for the opposition of the local devotees of Artemis. In Jerusalem, the Jews from Asia stirred up

the whole crowd and seized Paul.⁵³ The entire city was aroused, the people were rushing together, and a great uproar was developed. Jewish antagonistic attitude toward Paul is explicit through their shout of “Away with him” (21:27-36).⁵⁴All the above records sufficiently prove the Jewish enmity against Christians and their patient endurance all over the Roman Empire. Thus, the Biblical narratives demonstrate that how Jesus of Nazareth and his followers were targeted, misunderstood in their ideology, emotionally put down, socially weighed down, physically abused, and religiously harassed.

Roman Persecution of Christians in the New Testament

There are also evidences that Christians suffered under Roman officials (see Heb 10:32-35; 12:3-7; 1 Pet 1:6; 4:12-19; Rev 2:10; 6:9-11; 17:1-6; 20:4).⁵⁵In Rev 1:9, John the apostle of Jesus Christ shares that: “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Boring says that,

Christians in Asia at the end of the first century had problems to face which the population at large did not. They were considered to be adherents of a sect that primarily appealed to the lowest classes, a sect that had no long history or glorious institutions, a

⁴⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 552-553. Also see Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967/1979), 157-161.

⁴⁹ Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 166-167.

⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 351-353.

⁵¹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 353.

⁵² Kruse, “Persecution,” 776.

⁵³ See Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 463-502.

⁵⁴ Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, 549-553.

⁵⁵ See C. Osiek, “Early Christian Theology and Martyrdom,” *TBT* 28 (1990), 153-157.



suspect group which met for its cultic practices in private homes on a day which was not a public holiday, a sect that was widely suspect of being unpatriotic, a group about which wild stories were told.⁵⁶

The Book of Revelation, by the help of symbols and metaphors, provides ample evidences about the suffering of Christians in the first century context. As the book addresses the theme of victory over evil, the acuteness of the imperial cult and persecution are brought to the foreground. The book also promises an eternal hope to the persecuted.

Persecution and emperor worship were often cited as the primary problems addressed in the Early Christian contexts. The cult of the Emperor developed slowly in the Roman Empire.⁵⁷ Emperor worship involved the offering of divine honours, including sacrifices, to emperors, either living or dead.⁵⁸ Emperor Augustus, Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and others were either in lifetime or after death honoured as divine.⁵⁹ Christians were targeted due to their denial of worshipping the Emperor.⁶⁰ The Book of Revelation develops its emphasis on sovereignty of God, radical monotheism, exalted Christology, salvation, judgment and warnings, nonviolent lifestyle, and hope over against the prevailing Roman imperial cult.

That resulted into massive persecutions across the empire.⁶¹

The church at Smyrna was informed by the angel of the church: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction” (Rev 2:10).⁶² While most hold the view those ten days as a round number indicating a short period of time, others hold it to be a prolonged but definitely limited period. The Jews in the city, instead of being “the Synagogue of Yahweh,” remain as a “Synagogue of Satan.”⁶³ The church was brutally persecuted even by burning alive of Polycarp, the bishop of the church. The church is further informed that if they suffer they will receive reward (2:10).⁶⁴ The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* speaks of the blessedness and noble example of the martyrs (*Mart. Pol.* 2.1-2) and the privilege of being numbered among them (*Mart. Pol.* 14.1-2).⁶⁵

The Book of Revelation gives further inferences about Roman persecution in the following chapters. John sees in his vision “the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given” (6:9-11).⁶⁶ The ‘cry’ of the slaughtered ones and their ‘loud voice’ has special mention in v. 10. In 17:1-6, the woman named “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” is deciphered as one “drunk with the blood of

⁵⁶ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 11.

⁵⁷ Boring, *Revelation*, 18-21.

⁵⁸ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2001), 11.

⁵⁹ Reddish, *Revelation*, 12.

⁶⁰ Boring, *Revelation*, 13-14.

⁶¹ Reddish, *Revelation*, 22-26.

⁶² Boring, *Revelation*, 85-91.

⁶³ See J. Ramsey Michael, *Revelation*, The IVP NT Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IVP, 1997), 72-75.

⁶⁴ Michael, *Revelation*, 74.

⁶⁵ Kruse, “Persecution,” 777.

⁶⁶ Michael, *Revelation*, 104-108.



the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (v. 5-6).⁶⁷ In this book, John details the Roman persecution by way of symbolic and metaphoric presentations.⁶⁸

The growth of the Christian church is marked by persecution from the hands of the Jews and the Roman officials. The first century apostles and missionaries paid a special price for the expansion of the mission of God. In 2 Cor 11:24-25 Paul testifies that, “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.” In 2 Cor 11:23, he even tells about his experience of “far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death” (also see Gal 5:11; 6:12). Paul even talks about his experience of a gladiatorial type of suffering at Ephesus (1 Cor 15:32). Apostle Peter exhorts the people of God to rejoice in the midst of suffering various trials (1 Pet 1:6; 4:12-13, 16). All these exemplify the extent of persecution in the first century and the way people of God endured that.

Contemporary Implications in the Indian Context

What we discussed so far takes our attention toward the very existence of the church in the contemporary Indian context. While first century Christianity suffered as a sect within Judaism and was treated as a cult within the Greco-Roman world, Indian Christianity suffers even when it keeps the status of a world religion. In India, Christianity enjoyed considerable religious freedom before and after the independence. But, the scenario changed when Hindu fundamentalism

reached its peak during the last few decades.⁶⁹ Sookhdeo comments that,

The possibility of a deliberate attack on a church or ministry in your district might have seemed fairly improbable a few years ago. The rise in religiously motivated violence, even terrorism, with a higher likelihood of serious injury, death or major damage, is a recent phenomenon—even though it was not entirely absent in the past.⁷⁰

Today, Christianity suffers persecution from the hands of religious Hindus in different parts of the nation. The worst affected states are Orissa, Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, and Maharashtra. The attack on Christian mission workers and institutions is on an increase. The Kandhamal violence and the ‘cry and flee’ of the Christians gravely affected the prestige of the country across the world.⁷¹

The number of violent activities against the Christians alone, during the past few years, is in an accelerating mode. In recent years, there is an increase of social boycott that impinges on the right to live, food and livelihood. This includes physical violence, stopping worship services in churches, attacks on churches, arrest of pastors and

⁶⁷ Boring, *Revelation*, 86-87.

⁶⁸ Kruse, “Persecution,” 776-777.

⁶⁹ See Sebastian Kim, “Religious Freedom, Minorities and the Concept of Religion: Critical Issues in Legislation and Conversion in India,” *Religious Freedom and Conversion in India* (Bengaluru: SAIACS, 2017), 1-33.

⁷⁰ See Patrick Sookhdeo, *Pray and Protect: Practical Ways to Keep Your Churches and Ministries Safe* (McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2017), 8.

⁷¹ See Johnson Thomaskutty, “Reading John’s Gospel as a Jewish-Christian Conflict Narrative: A Paradigm for Contemporary India,” *Religious Freedom and Conversion in India* (Bengaluru: SAIACS, 2017), 138-161.



their companions, parading pastors and women associates nakedly in public places, sacred cow polarization, and raping nuns.⁷² These untoward activities in the name of religion and politics defame and deteriorate the secular nature of our nation.

The BJP-led Indian Government under the current leadership does not protect minority rights. Christian communities are persecuted throughout the country by way of aggressive *GharWapsi* and other campaigns and by means of anti-conversion laws. These issues and others at the local and the national levels have called into question the very nature of religious freedom and conversion in the country.⁷³ Both the national leadership and the civil authorities treat the minorities, especially the Christian communities, out of the fold of the real citizens and the citizenship in the country. The so called 'imperial' attitude from the side of the Indian Government wounded the very psyche of the Christians across the nation. This period has to be considered as *New Imperialism* in the global scenario.

Christianity remains as a persecuted religion wherever it has the minority status. The voice of the Christians is not recognized adequately even after considerable contribution of the community to the nation. Just as the Jews were scared of the growth of the Christian movement in the first century, the massive growth of Christian missions in the rural and urban contexts of India only

help the anti-Christian fundamentalists show their intolerable attitude toward it. Just as the first century Christianity grown up as a massive movement among the poor and marginalized sections of the society, in today's Indian context Christian missions attract the neglected strata of the society. All these show how Christian missions in India today suffer from the unfavourable socio-political scenario of the nation.⁷⁴

The First Century Christians responded to Jewish and Roman persecutions through non-violent means. While ordering Peter to put his sword back into its sheath (John 18:10-11), Jesus' intention was avoidance of bloody means. He encouraged his disciples to follow the lessons of tolerance and non-violent lifestyle even to the point of death. In Matt 5:11-12 Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The apostolic fathers of the first and the succeeding centuries endured persecution and considered their sufferings for Jesus as privileges. The virtue of endurance is well described in Heb 11:35-38. A reward is promised for all who are tolerant in times of affliction and faithful in their Christian living (Rev 2:10). Thus, it is proved that the followers of Christ are targeted even after 2000 years of their glorious past.

Christians of the present day Indian context must learn lessons from the first century Christians. We must uphold non-violent lifestyle and cherish tolerant attitudes as

⁷² "Open Letter to Church Leaders," August 4, 2017, quoted in "Introduction," *Religious Freedom and Conversion in India* (Bengaluru: SAIACS, 2017), vii.

⁷³ S. M. Michael, *Challenges to Christian Mission: Problems and Prospects* (Pune: Ishvani Kendra, 2014), 30. Also see Thomaskutty, "Reading John's Gospel as a Jewish-Christian Conflict Narrative," 158-159.

⁷⁴ Kruse, "Persecution," 776-777.



Christian values in order to extend peace and harmony in the plural Indian context. We need to rejoice in times of trials, endure the sufferings, and be determined in holding our faith. The important mission of the church is to make peace and reconciliation between warring religious groups. The teaching of Jesus “Love your enemies” has a vital role to play in the religiously pluralistic context. We must maintain unity in the body of Christ and bring the unanimous voice of the church at the appropriate judicial and political bodies of our country. Christian organizations, both regional and national, should play key role so that we may get justice in times of trials. We need to emphasize both ‘prayer’ and ‘practice’ as complimentary Christian values. Christian church is established through shedding the blood of Jesus and grown up as a movement of the martyrs. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

Conclusion

Jesus is our model for suffering and sacrifice. He stated that, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The final resolution of this statement of Jesus is demonstrated on the cross. Throughout the writings of the New Testament, various terminologies are used to indicate people’s *shuntto* trample down Jesus and his followers. In recent years, the thirst for the blood of the martyrs, the hunger for the life of the believing community, and the hostility against the followers of Jesus are exhibited by the fanatics/fundamentalists in barbarian and acute terms and means. The

aspect of ‘suffering’ became a synonym for Christian living in India. As Christianity suffered under emperors and local civil authorities at its incipient stages, in contemporary India, the ‘new emperors’ of the twenty-first century tarnish the rights of the minority citizens. The Scripture and its supporting documents foreground the way ‘Jesus, the protagonist,’ ‘Paul, the apostle par-excellence,’ ‘Peter, the keystone of the church,’ ‘Thomas, the apostle to the East,’ ‘Stephen, the preacher of the truth,’ and others being persecuted and that resulted into their execution. As the early Christians had to face the antagonism of both the Jewish religious community and the Roman political authority, the Christians of India have to face increasing opposition from the Hindu religious communalists and from the current political structures.

In recapitulation, the research work was an attempt to foreground the following realities: first, the biblical and the extra-biblical documents, as indicated above, outline how the early Christian communities suffered under the religious and political authorities of their time. This understanding of the history equips us to face the ‘new political imperialism’ in the Indian context that promulgates an agenda over against the minority Christians of the nation; second, the aspect of co-suffering with God/Christ/Church/Community is part and parcel of the NT theology as Jesus, Paul, Peter, Thomas, Stephen, and others were co-sufferers for the realities of the Kingdom of God. This Scriptural basis gives the Indian Christians a new paradigm for their theological discourses; and third, early Christian faith came to its final shape through the sacrificial living and the history



of martyrdom. Hence, the suffering/martyrdom can be considered as a way of witnessing and at the same time indicators to the Way of the cross. In short, a ‘new Nero’ and a ‘new imperialism’ are at our doorsteps. It is our responsibility to deal with him/it in contextually relevant, ideologically dialoguing, and practically harmonious means.
