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Letters To and From Julian the Apostate

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Anastasia Kaliabakos Sends her Fondest Greetings to Our Reverential Lord and Emperor, Julian the Second:

My old friend, it seems as if it were just yesterday that we were students at the Academy, devouring ancient texts and philosophies without a care in the world, without any idea of what the future had in store for us. Now, you are emperor -- Constantius has suddenly perished, and who is more fit than you to take over his throne, ruling the entire empire with your mighty right hand? Frankly, when we were young and your elder brother, Gallus, was chosen to be Caesar by Constantius, I could not picture your future in politics or military command. The Julian I remember was humble, shy, an aspiring scholar in the Classics, who would have deep discussions with me about Plato and Aristotle until the sun rose in the distance and dew would form on the grass at our feet. What I would give to have those old days back! But your life has changed, and you have been tasked with being the leader of the most powerful empire in history. You made yourself into an acclaimed general within just a few years, and a fine candidate for emperor in the same stretch of time. I have no doubts that you are well-equipped for the job and that you will make the finest emperor that Rome has ever seen. I trust that the gods will guide you and fill you with their divine blessings. I know that I personally have made sacrifices in your honor each day before I recline for dinner with my family.

However, Julian, there is one matter that I believe I must advise you on. I know of your distaste for the Christians, as that was one of our most discussed topics when we were close at the Academy. Your Neoplatonic views are inspiring, and I understand your dislike for that group of religious fanatics, in no small part because they have labeled you an “apostate.” I remember the scorn and hatred you possessed for your ancestor, Constantine, the first Christian emperor. While he was so revered by all the empire and respected among the people, you saw through to what he really was -- an egotistical coward. What better example is there to display his arrogant personality than when he had that gargantuan sore thumb of a statue built -- a statue where his head alone was twenty feet tall! How conceited must one be to have such a large statue made? You were one of the few who understood how hypocritical his “Christian” values were, and I cannot blame you. After his death... you remember what nearly unspeakable thing happened. When his three terrible sons had to split up the empire, they set out to get rid of all others who were a threat to their power, killing your entire family, including your parents. You still do not even know how you and Gallus survived, although I am forever grateful that you did. And it did not stop there -- after Constantius thought Gallus was abusing power in the Western provinces (though all evidence I have acquired points to the contrary), he had him killed as well. Your own brother, dead because of that Christian. I know, as you do, Constantius did this because Gallus was a Hellenophile and a believer in the traditional gods, like us. It is no surprise that you abhor Constantine and Constantius’ Christian legacies and that you wish to do away with the remaining Christians who were loyal to them in the royal family. An imminent purge of those Christians

must undoubtedly be what is on your mind...

I know that you are settled in Antioch for the time being. The people there, so I have heard, are distrustful of you and your “pagan” beliefs and customs. I would just like to warn you, brother, that you must mull over the consequences of your desires. Even if you strive to live peacefully with the people of Antioch, their unrest with your rule could only grow if you decide to purge the royalty of the Christian people. Believe me, I do not particularly like the Christians based on what they have done to you, my dear friend, but during my free time I have begun to do some research on the past treatments of Christians within the Roman Empire itself, and what I have found... it concerns me greatly. And I have grown to believe that your ancestors, the Christians who killed your parents and brother, might not accurately represent Christians as an entire group. One text I came upon was a letter by Pliny the Younger, written about 200 years ago. In the letter, he addresses the mistreatment of Christians... after discussing his letter, I hope that you may think twice about what you may do to the Christians in your own family.

In his letter to the Emperor Trajan (Letter 47, *On the Punishment of Christians*), Pliny gives a brief account of how the trials for the execution of Christians were conducted and the various verdicts that were decided upon. He says that he first would ask the accused if they were, in fact, Christian: if they confessed that they were, he interrogated them twice more, threatening them with death if they continued to confirm their beliefs to him. If they did not renounce their faith, then he ordered them to be executed. On the other hand, if they were Roman citizens, he ordered

them to be released and taken to Rome: “*Fuerunt alii similis amentiae, quos, quia ciues Romani erant, adnotauit in urbem remittendos.*” Despite his uncertainty about the offenses connected with being a Christian, Pliny says that he has no doubt that, whatever the nature of their “creed” is, at the very least their stubbornness deserves punishment. Their attitude showed that the Christians were hostile to the government, openly defying an official who was asking them to abandon a superstitious cult. In my opinion, Julian, Pliny’s trials of the Christians made me think of what you would like to do. The royals you know are *Romans* -- you cannot forget that, my friend. No matter what they have done in regards to their personal beliefs, they are Romans. Following Pliny’s logic, your purge should not come to pass. Spare them!

If this does not convince you, consider what Pliny writes next. Pliny details the practices of Christians, describing how they would meet on a certain day before sunrise, gathering to sing hymns to Christ (as we would sing hymns to the gods during our time at the Academy). They all bind themselves by oath to never commit any crimes such as fraud, theft, or adultery: “*stato die ante lucem conuenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum inuicem seque sacramento non in scelus aliquod obstringere, sed ne furta ne latrocinia ne adulteria committerent, ne fidem fallerent, ne depositum adpellati abnegarent.*” This is interesting in comparison with Constantine’s cult of Christians, as they seem to attempt to be just and good people. Pliny states that the Christians subsequently abandoned these practices after he prohibited any of their political associations. Emperor Trajan pushed for the abolition of Christian groups, as he believed they would stir up unrest, leading to grumbling about the state of civic and political

affairs, and ultimately doing grave harm to the empire. Look at this evidence, my friend. Some Christians do seem to have a standard by which they live their lives! Perhaps some of the royal Christians will not follow the paths of their predecessor Constantius. It seems as if some of that group is *good*, Julian -- give them a chance to prove it.

If I have still not won you over, brother, Pliny adds that he thought it was necessary to investigate further by having two female slaves called “deaconesses” tortured in the hopes of gaining information. Who knows what kind of torture he inflicted upon them! Is that not cruel?

Ultimately, he discovered, in his own words, nothing but depraved, excessive superstition: “*Nihil aliud inueni quam superstitionem prauam et immodicam.*” In calling Christianity a superstition rather than a religion, Pliny denigrates the Christians’ beliefs as being outside our traditional religious practices. By abandoning the old temples of the gods, Pliny believes (and I think you would agree here) that the Christians were threatening the *pax deorum*, the harmony or accord between the divine gods and mere humans. But we are not gods, Julian. We cannot expect to control others and their beliefs. Just as you are trying to coexist with the people of Antioch, let the Christians of your own family coexist beside you! But I will go further... Pliny ends his epistle by saying that Christianity is endangering people of every age and rank, spreading not only through the cities but also through the rural villages as well, like a disease: “*Neque ciuitates tantum, sed uicos etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio peruagata est; quae uidetur sisti et corrigi posse.*” However, he does say that it will be possible to keep this superstition in check. Keep the superstitious ones at bay, but do not try to get rid of them altogether.

As you have known me since I was young, you are aware of the fact that I am not extremely keen on executions of any people -- even those I despise. I think that your hatred of the Christians is somewhat justified, since, as Pliny writes, their beliefs align more with superstition than reality. However, I know you well, my friend. I have not forgotten your stubborn nature. I understand what I am about to write may come as an unexpected surprise, but although I deeply care for you, I also wish to preserve as much human life as I am able to; therefore, I will draw on whatever sources I must to try to convince you to alter your mindset.

In his letter to Romans, written about three hundred years ago, "Saint" Paul, formerly Saul, the Apostle discusses how his "God" will be the ultimate judge of his people, basing his decision on their true character. He writes "For at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things." (Romans 2:1) "The judgment of God" is not what men face in this life, but what will follow after death, which is called judgment to come. According to the Christians, it will be universal as to persons and things and is here called "the judgment of God," in opposition to the judgment of men. Since it will be carried on by God only, who is apparently omniscient and omnipotent, it will be definitive: this is and will be the ultimate truth. All hypocrisy and unrighteousness, the law and light of nature belonging to the Gentiles, the law of Moses proclaimed by the Jews, and the Gospel of Christ by which all have enjoyed the Gospel Revelation will be judged.

In summary, my dearest Julian, you can see that there are at least some things worthy of condemnation in Pliny's letter and many things to be admired in Saint Paul's approach to divine matters. Even if we both do not agree with the Christians on every matter, it is important that we can coexist beside them, setting an example as superior Romans to the rest of the known world as inclusive and merciful leaders. Take my letter to heart as you proceed in making this heavy decision.

I will keep you in my mind as I await your response. Farewell, or *Vale*, dearest, and I hope to hear from Your Excellency soon.

The Emperor Julian Caesar Augustus Sends his Deepest Regards to Jane Doe:

Upon receiving your letter, my dear comrade, I daresay I let out an unparalleled and unprecedented cry of joy! For it has been entirely too long, my friend, since our last correspondence. I had it in my mind to perhaps set about a search for you to ensure your safety, as it is a priority of mine that such a close confidante should always remain in the best condition.

Before I continue to address the content of your letter, I must take it upon myself to inquire about the health of your family. I hope that your parents are faring well and that you are collectively flourishing.

After removing the bindings of your epistle and perusing the lines and words several times over, I am slightly taken aback that you would think I have not already read Pliny's *On the Punishment of Christians*, as it was one of the first epistles by Pliny the Younger I read in my youth, apart from his letter on the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. I have considered Pliny to be one of my favorite authors. I even relate to him because he was governor of Bithynia, one of the multitudes of provinces in which my family is in possession of a small piece of property. And I enjoy Pliny's letter on punishing the Christians due to the fact that it is inherently cold and wicked in nature -- he displays minimal sympathy to those heathen peoples -- a trait I happen to share. I am somewhat appalled at you, therefore, that you would seek to draw the unfit comparison of our hymn singing to that of those beastly and ghastly wrongdoers. Our songs, dedicated to Lord Apollo, Lady Bellona, the revered Neptune -- to speak only of a few of the multitude of our divine masters -- were pure, gleaming in the iridescent moonlight as they rose from our mouths into the heavens above on their journey to lofty Mount Olympus. In contrast, the Christians' songs disturb the tranquility and serenity of my heart and my soul -- their mouths, silenced by the courageous and wonderful Pliny, deserve the punishment they received. And my darling friend, those base *ancillae*-- or what you called them, "deaconesses," as such -- in my oh-so-humble

opinion, deserved death as well. In all honesty, I doubt their fate should have bothered them too much, as they, clouded by their mystical, superstitious, and witch-like beliefs, certainly found solace in the fact that they would embark on a journey to their holy father after they had been sentenced by Pliny the Younger.

I scorn the fact that you have brought St. Paul the “Apostle” into your argument in the hope of winning over my already made up mind. As an apostate myself, I disregard every word that disgusting excuse for a Roman had to say on the subject of judgment and Christianity. He was a dissenter of the Christian faith, that *agros superstitionis istius contagio* -- a firm disbeliever, was he not? The only aspect of his futile being that managed to preserve the skin on his bones was his Roman citizenship -- if it were not for that fact, he would have been executed like the Christians who fell at Pliny’s hand.

I realize I am not a god; I recognize, unlike my predecessor, the *great* Constantine, that I am merely human. However, I am justified in believing that I have been sent by our divine gods to protect the Roman Empire as best as I see fit. Therefore, your argument about the “Judgment of God” placed forward by *that* Saint Paul is futile. I am fit to judge who lives or dies. This is revenge for what those disgusting Christians did to my family, to my Greek mother, to my dearest brother, Gallus. Their blood will run down the hallways of my palace and I will tremble with joy and satisfaction when I am fortunate enough to witness the carnage in person after my

arrival home from Antioch.

I understand your concern with death. Your kind, innocent, and womanly nature always left you weaker in resolve in matters such as the one we find ourselves confronting right now. However, this is not a fitting time to turn your back on the opinions you have spent all of your life forming in favor of a duplicitous enemy. This weakness of your womanhood never precluded you from having quite brilliant and remarkable ideas -- that is why you were able to study at the Academy and one of the many reasons I have enjoyed your company for the past several years, considering you one of my closest friends in the world, bestowed upon me by the divine nature of the gods themselves.

I would recommend that you tread carefully, my friend. Do not let the perfidious words of the malicious Christians penetrate and dull your evidently and disappointingly susceptible mind. Remember your beliefs, and keep in mind my past. I will go ahead with my plans as expected. The Christians in the government will be no more after the next Ides, and I hope that I may have your full support in my endeavors, as your friendship still means the world to me. I will be praying to the gods so that they may guide you during what I regard as a troubling phase in your intellectual development.

Farewell.

Resources

“On the Punishment of Christians” or “Letter 47” by Pliny the Younger

The Book of Romans by St. Paul the Apostle

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