



[Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* VII.10.1-4](#)

The previously tolerant emperor Valerian is persuaded to persecute the Christians

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: *Ecclesiastical History*

Reference:

VII.10.1-4

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on [I.6.6-11](#).

We read here of the apparently reluctant persecution of Christians under the emperor Valerian (reigned 253-260 CE, with his son Gallienus immediately proclaimed Casear). Eusebius is relating here events described by Dionysius in his letter to a certain Hermammon, whom we know virtually nothing about (Eusebius also mentions this epistle in VII.1, 22, and 23, the second of which hints that perhaps he was a bishop of a church in Egypt).

Even though he himself was away from Rome fighting the Persians at the time, Valerian is reported to have sent two letters to the senate about Christians, one on 257 CE, which required that all the clergy sacrifice to the Roman gods, and another in 258 CE. An intriguing piece of possible evidence for the persecution comes from a fragmentary papyrus (P.Oxy. XLIII 3119) containing the remains of what appear to be two official letters mentioning Christians, dated to 259/260 based on the probable mention of Lucius Mussius Aemilianus, deputy prefect of Egypt. Eusebius preserves in VII.11.6 a partial account of the court proceedings from the hearing of Dionysius and four others before this very same deputy prefect (see Lincoln Blumell, "The Date of P.Oxy. XLIII 3119"; for more detail on the papyrus and its dating, see J. Whitehorne, "P. Oxy. XLIII 3119," p. 187-190; Michael Sage, "The Persecution of Valerian," p. 144). [Cyprian's Epistle LXXXII](#) narrates some of the events of the persecution as follows: "Valerian had sent a rescript to the Senate, to the effect that bishops and presbyters and deacons should immediately be punished; but that senators, and men of importance, and Roman knights, should lose their dignity, and moreover be deprived of their property; and if, when their means were taken away, they should persist in being Christians, then they should also lose their heads; but that matrons should be deprived of their property, and sent into banishment. Moreover, people of Caesar's household, whoever of them had either confessed before, or should now confess, should have their property confiscated, and should be sent in chains by assignment to Caesar's estates" (see Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, p. 151; for a more detailed discussion of the edicts of Valerian, see Paul Keresztes, "Two Edicts").

The economic aspect of this persecution is made very clear by Cyprian. This is relevant to the present passage from Eusebius because of the villainising of the figure referred to as the ruler of the synagogue of the Magi (????????????????, *archisynag?gos*). The individual in question here is Fulvius Macrianus (he is specifically named in VII.10.5), who was one of Valerians influential generals, and held the office of chief financial minister. It is only Dionysius, according to the account preserved here in Eusebius, however, that seems to attribute to him the role of chief of the Egyptian magi. In other sources he is portrayed simply in military and political roles. During his time as financial minister, Macrianus was faced with the problem of inflation, and a struggling economy. It is therefore argued that he took advantage of the persecution in order to confiscate wealth from Christians in the empire who possessed it (see Whitehorne, "P. Oxy. XLIII 3119," p. 195 and Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, p. 422-423). The association of Macrianus with Egyptian magical practice in our passage is therefore interesting. This description has the effect of suggesting that the persecution of the Christians under Valerian was inspired by demonic forces, which in this case have exerted their influence upon the Roman emperor through one of his corrupted advisors. The notion of demonic influence upon Rome, driving it to mistreat Christians is one which can



be found in numerous early Christian sources (see, for example, [Matthew 4:1-11](#); [The Apocryphon of James 4.31-6.20](#); Justin Martyr, *First Apology* IV.1-V.4; [Trimorphic Protennoia 41.2-20](#)).

Our passage interprets Valerian as being the individual described in Revelation 13:15, who will speak both great things and blasphemy. This is then elaborated upon; at the beginning of Valerian’s reign, he expressed exceptional hospitality and tolerance towards Christians, even more so than emperors before him who had themselves professed to be Christian! The suggestion that there were other openly Christian Roman emperors prior to Valerian must not be taken at face value. VI.34 of the present work claims that the emperor Philip was a Christian, although the historical likelihood of this is doubtful. Moreover, VI.21.3-4 describes how Severus Alexander’s mother, Mamaea had summoned Origen to teach her about Christian doctrine. As discussed in the commentary on the latter passage, there are other possible indications of a positive relationship between the imperial household of Severus Alexander and Christianity, but the evidence must be handled with extreme caution. The description of Valerian’s household containing so many Christians (“pious people”) that it was a “church of God” is likely exaggeration (see the similar claim about the household of Severus Alexander in VI.28). However, that there were a significant number of believers in Caesar’s imperial household is supported by Cyprian’s assertion (see above) that such individuals had property confiscated or were sent into slavery during the persecution.

Eusebius’s incorporation of Dionysius’s account here should be considered on several levels. Firstly, Eusebius’s depictions of the Roman emperors are greatly varied depending on how he utilises them to aid him propaganda about Christianity. In this case, the inclusion of a somewhat forgiving portrayal of Valerian must be understood in context: the claim of a tolerant start to his reign, where numerous Christians filled the imperial household, makes a statement about the successful infiltration of Christianity into Roman society. No longer did it hide in the shadows, but rather Christians could be found even in the imperial court; the description of Caesar’s house as a “church of God” enforces this point strongly. Moreover, the suggestion that the emperor’s trusted advisors were corrupted by demonic magical arts, which result in the corrupting of the emperor’s own mind against the Christians implies that Christianity is not solely oppressed by the Roman authorities, but by malevolent cosmic forces as well.

Keywords in the original language:

- [?????????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [biblical exegesis](#)
- [Egypt](#)
- [imperial household](#)



- [incantation](#)
- [magi](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [piety](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [tolerance](#)
- [Valerian](#)

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Text

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