



[Peter of Alexandria, Canonical Epistle V-VII](#)

On the various methods employed by Christians to avoid performing pagan sacrifice

Name of the author: Peter of Alexandria

Date: 306 CE

Place: Alexandria

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: Canonical Epistle

Reference: V-VII

Commentary:

Peter of Alexandria became the bishop of Alexandria in 300 CE, and for the first three years of his office the church enjoyed relative peace. The Diocletian persecution then struck, and it is the resulting reactions of the Christians targeted by the Roman authorities that gave rise to the present source. The so-called Great Persecution of Diocletian was the last persecution of Christians at the hands of Rome, and began in 303 CE after Diocletian had consulted the oracle of Apollo. Some scholars, however, have suggested that Christian authors have greatly exaggerated the scale of Diocletian's persecution (see, for instance, the influential article of Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?"). After the persecution broke out, Peter fled Alexandria and went into hiding, during which time the Meletian controversy occurred, so-called after Meletius, bishop of Lycopolis. Meletius was concerned over the ease with which "lapsed" Christians, who in fear of the consequences imposed by the Roman government had renounced their faith, were being accepted back into the church. Despite the issuing of an edict of toleration by the emperor Galerius in 311 CE, which ended the Diocletianic persecution, according to Eusebius, Peter was beheaded along with various other Egyptian bishops in this year suddenly, and without any apparent explanation (*Ecclesiastical History* IX.6.2).

There are conflicting accounts of the Meletian schism in Peter's absence. The first, based on three Latin texts, argues that Meletius, angered by Peter having fled from Alexandria, leaving his flock without a leader, stepped in to guide the Alexandrian church, holding secret church services and performing other duties as a surrogate bishop. Upon hearing this, Peter denounced Meletius as a usurper, and upon his return to Alexandria, held a council which formally excommunicated Meletius (for an acceptance of this story, see Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, p. 37). The second account, which comes from Athanasius of Alexandria, claims that Meletius was guilty of sacrificing to the Roman gods (*Defence Against the Arians* II.5). This information from the staunchly anti-Meletian Athanasius should be taken with caution, however, especially since these charges were not mentioned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, when a truce between the Meletians and the wider church was sought. Finally, according to Epiphanius (*Against Heresies* LXVIII), Meletius and Peter disagreed over the reconciliation of the lapsed Christians, with the latter being more lenient. This account is accepted by Tim Vivian in his study, but is slightly problematic, as Epiphanius probably derived his information from a Meletian source, and his story contains historical errors.

The situation remains uncertain, but the *Canonical Epistle* is evidence that Peter was certainly very willing to reconcile Christians who had denied their faith with the church. In this sense, then, it offers us a picture of how the church in the East struggled to cope not only with the brutal realities of persecution at the hands of Rome, but also with the lasting effects that Diocletian's edict would have on Christian unity. The text can be dated to 306 CE based on the fact that the first words of the *Epistle* claim that the fourth Easter from the beginning of the persecution is approaching (the start of the persecution occurring during Lent of 303 CE). The passages cited above from the *Canonical Epistle* are select illustrations of how Peter saw fit to deal with particular groups of lapsed Christians. The rest of the letter should be consulted for further examples.

By way of a concise summary, Canon V deals with Christians who have employed one act of deception or another in order to avoid sacrificing to the Roman gods. For instance, such individuals might have convinced a non-Christian to take their place, or somehow managed to avoid touching the sacrificial fire. These Christians are



compared to David, who in 1 Samuel 21 pretended to be mad when fleeing from Saul in order to escape death. While these individuals may have believed that their deceit was preventing them from committing an act against Christ, however, as far as Peter is concerned they are no more virtuous than children who have engaged in clever, yet still dishonest trickery, as they have failed to stand by their faith in times of testing. For such lapsed Christians, Peter decrees that they must do penance for a period of six months. Canon VI relates to Christian slaves who have been forcibly sent by their masters to offer sacrifice. In this case, Peter has some sympathy for the slaves, as they were acting under duress. However, he still imposes punishment upon them – a year’s exclusion from the church – the justification being that they should really have been more afraid of their heavenly master, Christ, than their earthly owners. The words of Ephesians 6:8 are drawn upon here for support, which argues that all men are equal when it comes to how their actions are judged, regardless of whether they are slaves or freemen. This seems to stand out as a harsh stance from the supposedly lenient Peter, and can really only be understood as such in comparison with the comparatively harsher viewpoints of other bishops. As for the masters of these slaves, Canon VII prescribes a much harsher penalty of three years owing to the fact that they have committed two crimes against Christ. Firstly, like the Christians in Canon V they have employed trickery to avoid having to perform the sacrifice themselves, and therefore not fully embraced their commitment to Christ. Secondly, they have directly disobeyed Paul’s teaching regarding the proper treatment of slaves by their masters, who are instructed not to threaten them (see Ephesians 6:9). Moreover, these slave-masters have driven their servants to commit idolatry when otherwise they might have escaped it, meaning the former bear extra responsibility in this regard.

This source is interesting when compared with the opinions of Cyprian regarding lapsed Christians during the Decian persecution initiated in 250 CE (for a discussion of this, see [Papyrus Rylands 12](#) and [112a](#)). Decius’s edict required universal sacrifice by the empire’s inhabitants to the Roman deities, witnessed by appointed officials and confirmed by a *libellus* (a certificate confirming the sacrifice bearing a statement of loyalty to the gods from the individual in question). Cyprian criticises certain Christians who had apparently managed to obtain a certificate of sacrifice without actually performing it (perhaps something similar is what is meant in the present text by the “giving of a writing,” ????????, *apograph*?). These were termed as the *libellatici*, and were distinguished from the *sacrificati*, which referred to Christians who simply chose to perform the sacrifice (for the former, see Cyprian, [On the Lapsed XXVII](#), and for the latter, [On the Lapsed VIII](#)). Although several decades apart, both Cyprian and Peter of Alexandria were forced to deal with similar issues arising from the problems caused when Christians were required to show their loyalty to Roman state religion. In their criticisms of the “lapsed” Christians, we see another side to the Christian reaction to the Roman requirement for the empire’s inhabitants to prove their loyalty to the gods, one which focuses not on the injustice of the situation, but rather on whether the faithful have risen to the challenge of being good disciples. Peter’s attitude, however, is relatively sympathetic to those who while not wanting to actually sacrifice, are too afraid to risk their lives by making an outward statement of defiance. Rather than excommunicate them, he prescribes periods of penance; clearly for Peter, keeping the body of Christ together, and fixing what was damaged, was a better prospect than seeing it thin out, especially after such a trying period during the persecution. Peter’s leniency, then, ought be understood within this context.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Alexandria](#)
- [demon](#)
- [Diocletian](#)
- [idol](#)
- [lapsed Christians](#)
- [master](#)
- [penance](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [Roman authorities](#)
- [sacrifice](#)
- [slave](#)

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Rubenstein, Richard E., [When Jesus Became God: The Epic Fight Over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome](#) (London: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999)

Other sources connected with this document: Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Text

[Cyprian, On the Lapsed VIII](#)

The eagerness of lapsed Christians to sacrifice under the Decian edict



- [Read more about Cyprian, On the Lapsed VIII](#)

Text

[Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* XXVII](#)

Christians who have acquired fake certificates of pagan sacrifice

- [Read more about Cyprian, On the Lapsed XXVII](#)

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