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ΚΑΘΑΡΟΣ: THE PURE
SETTING NARRATIVE IN THE FOURTH-CENTURY ROMAN EMPIRE

By

Emma K. Branstetter

Honors Scholarship Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

Olivet Nazarene University

for partial fulfillment of the requirements for

GRADUATION WITH UNIVERSITY HONORS

March, 2023

BACHELOR OF ARTS

in

Biblical Studies

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my parents, Christopher and Julie Branstetter, for their constant support as I wrestled with my first ideas and their encouragement for me to embrace them early on when I would not have on my own.

I thank my friends and peers for being willing to lend a listening ear throughout the process of brainstorming and writing and for talking through the stress with me.

I thank my critical and peer reviewers for putting in the effort to engage with my project to make the story far better than it could be on its own.

I thank my writing department advisor, Dr. Andrew Hoag, for talking me through every large and small detail of storytelling and for his constant support and patience with me.

I thank my church history department advisor, Dr. Mark Frisius, for the contribution of his expertise in late antiquity to help me accurately reflect my story's world, as well as for his reliable cheerful attitude.

Finally, I thank God for the gift of words that He has lent me for a time in order to tell a story of faith and struggle in a time very different from ours and to usher in His Kingdom with the power of fiction. He has taught me so much in every step, and He is with me through it all for His glory.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis illustrates the development of the Christian historical fiction novella named *Καθαρός* set in the early fourth century of Christian history closely following the events of the Great Persecution and its long-term effects on Christian communities in Asia Minor and North Africa. Previous Christian novels set in the Roman era primarily focus on the first century, and with the significant thematic potential found in later centuries after the life and resurrection of Christ, I embarked on this writing project. The research that affects my narrative is separated into four categories: the history and effects of Diocletian's Great Persecution, fourth-century churches in Carthage and surrounding North African regions—particularly the nature of the Donatist Schism and its anthropological history, the early reign of Constantine the Great and his interactions with the church, both catholic and otherwise, and the Council of Nicaea and its impact on Christian history going forward. Effort was taken into researching the development of novel writing and historical fiction and its many facets as well.

Keywords: creative writing, fiction, historical fiction, Christian history, Donatism, Great Persecution, Council of Nicaea, Constantine the Great, fourth century

INTRODUCTION

Our Creator is a Storyteller. If you haven't yet witnessed that, let me guide you through the Story of Salvation. Created in the image of the One who is beyond us, humanity was offered the choice of eternal completeness... or the temporary freedom of prideful thinking. In the form of a delectable piece of terrible fruit, temptation overpowered salvation. Humanity chose their interests over fellowship with God. And ever since, to our present day, we have fallen further and further away into the chasm that we have created between us and divinity.

But when we thought we had had enough of God, God never had enough of us. In the greatest plot twist of all, God did not stray away as others might believe. Rather, He became one of us and, yet unmarred by sin, lived a life of unearthly love and truth-filled devotion to be the blameless Exemplar.

And then, as if it could not become even more unbelievable, Christ *died*. He became the Lamb for slaughter, the living sacrifice. The sins of the world were buried with Him, and they remained buried while He broke Death itself and rose again, once and for all. From there, He ascended to His place in heaven to allow the Holy Spirit to descend upon the people who followed what was then known as "the Way," and the age of the Spirit fulfilled began. And until the harvest is ready for Christ's return, the Spirit works among us in this world, and the Church is, or at least is meant to be, the vessel of God's story revealed to us through His Word that is the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments.

Many Christians take little time out of their lives to study the origins of their own religious beliefs. Even if you asked a number of Christians if they read their Bibles, the chances are that there will be a disappointing percentage of them who do not read it regularly nor even understand it. It is harder still to find people who know about the historical context of

Christianity and its early struggles. There is a distance put between us and them, distally, temporally, and culturally. We convince ourselves that the lives of people 1,800, 1,900, or 2,000 years ago have nothing to do with the lives we live now.

This is false, to put it simply. We, if we call ourselves Christians and truly wish to accept and become all that being a Christian entails, are called to emulate the life of the Son of God who came to earth as a fleshly being two millennia ago. Without the calling of His apostles and the lives they led after His resurrection and ascension, the world would not be the same. We have God to thank for bringing Christianity this far, but without the apostles to act as vessels of the Spirit for God's work, much fewer people might very well be saved.

The Church as a whole, as we know, grew even in an environment that was openly hostile towards it. The apostles spread to reaches of the known world, alongside Paul, who brought the Gospel to the Gentiles and founded multiple churches that grew to be well known across the Roman Empire.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This is where most stories end among the most well-known Christian novels of the historical fiction genre. I've always been an avid enjoyer of realistic historical fiction. The learner in me always wanted to be transported to another world where I would see, hear, and feel things that were not typical of my everyday life. I also wanted to empathize with the experiences of Christians from other places, times, and cultures, which narrowed the focus of my project to Christian historical fiction. Because the era of the Roman Empire, the birthplace of Christianity, has fascinated me for as long as I can remember, I began to look back fondly on all the stories I had read from that time period.

Two novel series that impacted me in a creative sense were *The Mark of the Lion* by Francine Rivers and *The A.D. Chronicles* by Bodie and Brock Thoene. *The Mark of the Lion*¹ followed the story of a young Christian girl, Hadassah, who lost her entire family in the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to be carried off as a household slave to Rome, where she witnessed to her mistress and her family, of whom is the mistress' older Roman brother, with whom she falls in love with. The first book culminates in her death sentence to the arena, which prompts the brother to embark on a faith journey to the Holy Land in search of what made Hadassah so different. Rivers also employs an incredible amount of research in her writing, as she had taken the time to know the setting within which she placed her characters, and this is incredibly important when writing historical fiction.

*The A.D. Chronicles*² is a much longer and expansive series and does not center on the same characters throughout like *The Mark of the Lion*, but they all connect in one way: exploring the lives of biblical figures in the New Testament whose lives changed when they met Jesus. From the blind man at the pool of Siloam to an estranged leper community, from the Samaritan woman at the well to the story of Mary and Joseph and the fates of the boys sentenced to death in Bethlehem, all of these people and more are brought to life in the *A.D. Chronicles*.

What quickly became apparent to me, however, especially while I took a Christian history class at the same time, which was taught by none other than my church history advisor Dr. Frisius, was that most of the stories I had read centered on the years during Jesus' life or the years immediately following His life. I noticed that the first century is where most stories end among the most well-known Christian novels of the historical fiction genre. I was left unsatisfied with this revelation. I knew that the first century was the most immediate and dramatic century

¹ Rivers, Francine, *Mark of the Lion Gift Collection* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2012.)

² Thoene, Bodie, and Brock Thoene, *A.D. Chronicles* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2003).

of the early Christian era. Still, I began to look for Christian historical fiction set in later centuries, as I found the fourth century in my Christian history class to be immensely interesting. I soon discovered that I could not find any notable evangelical Christian works set in such a time period.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the Christian church continued to grow exponentially, resistance met it face to face. When most Christians are asked about instances of persecution in the Roman Empire, they will likely refer back to the early persecutions of Nero, Trajan or Claudius. But these persecutions, while violent and intense, were comparatively sporadic, poorly executed, and short-lived. The targets were Christians at random who were seized at the closest convenience and died horrible deaths in the streets or the arenas.

While noble and often tragic, these martyrs left little impact on the Christian church as a whole as the emperors hoped they would. They would not be scared into submission, that was the power of the Truth of God at work. This did not mean that the Roman authorities gave up trying. Over time, they grew more calculated and methodical. Persecutions lasted longer, intending to squeeze Christians to a breaking point. The Valerian and Decian persecutions of the second century were notoriously intense throughout the Empire. They decided to target the leaders instead of the followers. If they cut off the heads of the operation, the community would surely crumble.

The Great Persecution

The worst persecution arguably to date, preceding the rise of Constantine by a mere decade, was known as the Great Persecution under Caesars Diocletian and Galerius. Just before,

Diocletian had set up the Tetrarchy to reinstate a semblance of order throughout the Empire, as it had fallen into chaos in the past century as a result of invading tribes, numerous civil wars, frequent famines, and much more.

Diocletian's Rule

Diocletian was the first of a line of emperors who had failed to reign for more than a few years. He set a new record of recent history for longest-standing ruler from the years 284 to 305. He set up a new governing system that came to be known as the Tetrarchy, splitting the expansive empire into four large sections for different rulers to have to themselves. He attempted to stem the rapid rise of inflation, reforming the taxation system. The Roman government became bureaucratic, divided provincially to stabilize the empire.

After being prompted by Galerius, in 303, Diocletian's first edict, the *Dies Traditionis*, required the Church to surrender both holy scriptures and church property. The edict became more severe by 304 when it ordered everyone to perform an outward ritual act in order to create apostates out of leading bishops. The penalty of disobeying the edict was death.³ It also forbade Christian social and religious gatherings in any form.

At this time, the church had grown to such a scale that some have contested that up to ten percent of the Roman Empire was Christian by the time of the Great Persecution. However, much of the empire's Christian population still worshiped and often didn't have churches to call their own. They might assemble in spaces that were usually privately owned, such as "storefronts, warehouses, and, most frequently, homes."⁴ What little they did have in terms of

³ Frend, W.H.C., *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2000).

⁴ Sessa, Kristina, *Daily Life in Late Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 202.

church buildings was taken from them in the years of the Persecution, with records of properties being destroyed by fire in Nicomedia under the authority of the edict.

The Persecution officially ended in 305, though Eastern provinces likely endured the extent of it until as late as 311 under Licinius. The edict continued to be enforced in 306 in Licinius' realm of Asia Minor. In 306, "lists were drawn up and individuals [were] called up by name to sacrifice."⁵ The death penalty was no longer enforced, but capital punishment was still the mode of preference. Many lost eyes or limbs or were sent to work in mines. Eventually, however, there were simply far too many prisoners, and many clergy were released, as long as they were made to sacrifice. Some were even "physically constrained to go through the motions of sacrifice,"⁶ and upon release were granted certificates of pardon. A few did not even sacrifice at all, for there were simply too many to manage at once. However, Jones supposes that these measures were likely only undertaken in the East.

Martyrdom

From as early as the second century, martyrology became a study and an art among the Christian people. Claiming the identity of a martyr was equated with a secure path to heaven, to a point that groups of Christians were throwing themselves into the hands of soldiers who were instructed to arrest and try them. This phenomenon, which has been deemed "voluntary martyrdom," grew so popular that ancient patristic fathers like Cyprian and Irenaeus directly addressed it in their recorded sermons. Most discouraged it, but the veneration of the martyrs grew to be so widespread that Christians would visit the tombs of saints and martyrs for meals

⁵ Jones, A.H.M., *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 72.

⁶ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, 72.

and prayers for healing, as if they were praying to the martyrs themselves as mediators between them and Christ.⁷

While persecution was rampant by the time of Diocletian and Galerius, Alan Vincelette argues that after limiting the count, only 12 percent of named martyrs in official records fit the bill for true voluntary martyrdom in the early church.⁸ Thus, the majority of martyrs arrested and executed for the faith were not taken of their own volition.

Effect On the Clergy

The clergy of the eastern provinces were the most heavily targeted among the Christian population. Bishops were forced to recant their faith or face prolonged and uncomfortable imprisonment. By the Great Persecution's end, a large percentage of clergy had been imprisoned and tortured for their faith, though many were never arrested. Instead, they submitted and turned in their scriptures to be confiscated and destroyed by Rome. These people came to be known as the *traditores*, the Latin word from which we derive "traitor," as they came to be known as traitors of the faith.

The significance of these events, excluding the lasting trauma that would have been the consequence of imprisonment, was the theology of the validity of the sacraments as it relates to the clergy administering them. Protestants often adhere to the doctrine of *ex opere operato*, in that the grace of God works through the sacraments independent of the minister to save the recipient. However, this doctrine was largely founded for the events that occurred in the fourth century.

⁷ Sessa, *Daily Life in Late Antiquity*.

⁸ Vincelette, Alan, "On the Frequency of Voluntary Martyrdom in the Patristic Era," *Journal of Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2019).

However, in order to understand the context of the fourth century, there must be a letting go of certain Protestant presumptions. The doctrine of *ex opere operantis*, accordingly, depends on the validity of the minister who gives the sacraments. At the time, laypeople in certain churches were readmitted into the church so long as they performed the required penance as instructed by the clergy. What were they to do, however, when the clergy themselves were not doctrinally admissible? Some took extra measures to allow these clergy back into the church—though many did not retain their positions—and others took the stance that they should not be allowed back at all. Cyprian, for example, encouraged his own diocese to cut ties with the lapsed, as they came to be known.

North Africa and Donatism

Christian communities of every province responded in different ways to the persecutions, the most intense of these found in the realm of North Africa. This is a land that has known violence for centuries, still bearing the scars of the infamous Punic Wars, and a people that were strongly loyal to their faith. Overwhelmed with distrust for Roman occupation and authority as well as fraught with the awe of the second coming of Christ, the *Parousia*, that many Christians of the fourth century were convinced would take place soon, Christian identity in North Africa became intrinsically tied to loyalty to the faith, and consequently the shunning of *traditores* who did not remain loyal during the Diocletianic persecution. “It engendered the perfect hatred,”⁹ says Shaw.

We turn our attention to a special group of North Africans who distinguished themselves from Catholic belief and came to be known in Christian history as the Donatists. These

⁹ Shaw, Brent D, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 82.

Christians were much more rigorous than was typically common, similar to our modern extreme fundamentalists. They claimed that anyone who had been baptized by, was taught under, or received Eucharist from any *trahitor* had done so invalidly. They sought to more or less purge the Church of the unfaithful and purify the Bride for the imminent Bridegroom.

Rural and Urban Communities

A considerable native Christian population dwelled in the hills past the city of Carthage. One could find both Catholic and Donatist villages, each of them Romano-Berber on average, dotted across the landscape every two and a half miles on the Numidian plains.¹⁰ The famous inscription *Deo laudes*, which is attributed to the Donatists, is found in many rural archaeology sites. You could even find both factions in some of these villages rather than one or the other. These Christian communities were largely self-sufficient, but they all held one thing in common: financial burden.

It was not an uncommon thing to live in poverty, especially in the rural population. Frend argues that the reasons behind the anger and desperation seem to be that “though their economy was relatively prosperous, they were continually subjected to acts of extortion and cruelty”¹¹ by authority, whether that be their tax collectors, military troops, or local councilors. Under constant pressure of their landlords and their senatorial higher-ups, rural African laity was largely responsible for the production of bread from wheat, olive oil, wine, and pork depending on the season, and tax quota was constantly fluctuating from difficult to undoable. Perhaps a promise of exalted life after physical death—the veneration of martyrs—would provide some amount of escape.

¹⁰ Frend, *The Donatist Church*.

¹¹ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 68.

Circumcellions

Much of the violence that took place in this corner of the Roman world of late antiquity stemmed from the culture of the North African peoples themselves. There was much closeness in the African cities, a festering response to the severe persecution in years past that created a nesting ground for gangs such as the *circumcellions* to commit violence. The *circumcellions* were people who assembled around rural shrines erected in memory of local martyrs and exalted them higher than need be. Much like the *catervae* gangs found in Caesarea, Augustine equated the *circumcellions* with thugs and brigands who identified with the sectarian violence primarily found in North Africa.

The *circumcellions* received their name from Augustine, though the word *circumcellio* was apparently a slur. The groups preferred the names *agonistici*, meaning contestants or combatants. Their activities were likely those of harvesting gangs that have been found scattered throughout cultures and regions. They would have likely been accustomed to “a wide range of normal violence,”¹² or at the least, normal according to North African standards. Unfortunately, violence was so common that any outsider would balk at such notions.

Lenski draws a surprising parallel in his article “Harnessing Violence: Armed Force as Manpower in the Late Roman Countryside” regarding the actions of the *circumcellions* and comparing them to modern football hooliganism, defined as “an expression of surplus violence in search of meaningful causes, perpetrated in prescribed places created for the symbolic expression of antagonism...”¹³ The *circumcellions* would take on patronal duties that should

¹² Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 649.

¹³ Lenski, Noel, “Harnessing Violence: Armed Force as Manpower in the Late Roman Countryside,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6, no. 2 (2013), 234.

have been fulfilled by Donatist bishops and clergy,¹⁴ though they typically only went so far as to commit acts of terror in the countryside like property damage and physical assault. Records of mass killings or violent revolutions have not been found, as they were not usually heavily-armed groups.

Carthage

There are no recorded martyrdoms after 304 in North Africa during the time of the Great Persecution. In fact, many of these records turn to the rural farmers rather than the townspeople. The desire to defy and rebel grew to an extreme degree in the region. The people saw “the powers of evil [...] in the Roman officials and magistrates... Martyrdom was their means to victory, in itself an act of vengeance, for martyrdom gave them hope of revenge hereafter...”¹⁵

With the division that happens consistently in the modern world among Protestant Christian denominations, political parties, or anyone with “right-or-wrong” stances on socio-political agendas even in a nation that is free and democratic, we are forced to reflect on the reality that human nature has always been messy. In the face of persecution, as we still see in numerous countries today, Christianity flourishes. But it can also lead to terrible splits in the Church, as we see with the Donatists.

Tilley makes the argument that if one should be allowed to choose between having to deal with either heresy or schism, she advises her reader to choose heresy every time. Quash and Ward support this as well, as they point out that heresies only address a theological difference

¹⁴ Miles, Richard, ed., “The Donatist Controversy,” from *The Donatist Schism: Controversy and Contexts* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Friend, *The Donatist Church*, 107-8.

between people groups, but schisms create tears in Christian communities that are not quickly mended.

As for the inclusion and fixation on the Christian sects of North Africa, there is an underappreciated plethora of teaching, apologetics, and important events that took place on the shores of the Mediterranean. Even in today's world, Quash and Ward suggest that the Donatists were rigorists through and through. They even draw a similarity between ancient Christianity's conflicts and the resentment of modern African Christians to "fellow religionists in the West."¹⁶ This poses a question, then: what should the relations between stringent and syncretistic Christians be in today's world, both on the national and the international level?

Early Donatist History

As would be reasonable, the Donatists created a rift in North African Christianity that would not be easily mended. Just as Constantine became Emperor of the West in 311, a bishop of Carthage known as Caecilian was elected by a supposed *traditor* by the name of Felix of Aptungi. Caecilian was elected to replace the late previous Carthaginian bishop, Mensurius.

While his election by Felix is integral, there is also mention of Caecilian being involved in the case of the 49 martyrs of Abitina. These lives are immortalized in the *Acts of Saturninus* and even gave the Donatists a form of martyrological self-identity.¹⁷ The martyrs were their heroes, their champions, and Christians longed for a personal association with the ones who had died for their Church.¹⁸ In 304, it was alleged that the bishop at the time and Caecilian had

¹⁶ Quash, Ben, and Michael Ward, eds., *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why It Matters What Christians Believe* (London: SPCK; Hendrickson, 2007), 86.

¹⁷ Tilley, Maureen A, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Tilley, Maureen A, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996).

stopped the would-be martyrs' families from visiting them, ensuing a melee along the path.¹⁹ This was simply an act beyond forgiveness in the Donatists' eyes, and they elected their own bishop, Majorinus, to rival Caecilian.

Significance

The *traditores* and how one must approach them was at the heart of the Donatist schism. African Christianity was solely focused on the imminence of Judgment and their propitiation of God's wrath. "It was a religion of fear and dread, not of love."²⁰ These men were convinced handing over scripture was synonymous with betraying God Himself, and moreover, they were even calling them agents of the Devil or the Antichrist,²¹ who was soon to arrive, so they believed.

It is alright to sympathize with a people who had been fighting for decades for their faith, it contextualizes their lot of passion and solemnity. They believed that a church that flirts with the world is no church at all, and as such, we might see a parallel in the attitudes of modern African Christians as they might address Western Christianity now. Much of this is largely cultural rather than exegetical or theological. Joyce Salisbury compares the Donatists to modern examples such as the cults led by Jim Jones or David Koresh, with congregations meeting in order to band together against the risk of martyrdom and hope for imminent salvation as one.²² It is with these attitudes that people can be coerced to the side of violence. Quoting Nussbaum, the ideal of "...a church uncontaminated by serious sin," at its roots, is not heretical; "it's just

¹⁹ Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*.

²⁰ Friend, *The Donatist Church*, 97.

²¹ Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 67.

²² Salisbury, Joyce E, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).

impossible.”²³ And even more so, such rigorist stances can easily ferment into purism, which is certainly not how God has called His church to be.

Political Clashes

As Nussbaum has said, it is impossible to rid a church community of sin entirely. In attempting to bring reform, the Donatists had failed to carry out the Christian mission of loving both neighbor and enemy. They left no room for God’s grace to abound. The crudely armed, ruffian-type *circumcellions* went so far as to damage property and physically assault Catholics.²⁴ The division eventually caught the attention of a fresh-minded Constantine, who was working to achieve a policy of unity, even aggressively so.²⁵

Constantine tried to mediate the matter with multiple councils that were held in succession for the next few years. He ultimately vindicated Felix and the Catholics, upheld Caecilian over Donatus (the man whom the Donatists are named after), who succeeded Majorinus after his untimely death, and turned a careful eye to North Africa. And in rapid response to the increased hostility, Constantine issued an edict in 317 for the local government to reclaim Donatist church properties in Carthage. Violence and some bloodshed ensued, particularly the martyrdom of Honoratus of Sicilibba, though there is no record of heavy violence after 321 until after 347, during Constans’ rule.²⁶ However, the response of the blade proved ineffective for the inexperienced Constantine, as Donatism would survive for another century at least, making numerous appearances as an antagonist to the hectic formation of Western theology.

²³ Nussbaum, Melissa Musick, “Insight From a Fourth-Century Crisis,” *National Catholic Reporter* 51, no. 2 (2014), para. 1.

²⁴ Lenski, “Harnessing Violence.”

²⁵ Shaw, *Sacred Violence*.

²⁶ Shaw, *Sacred Violence*.

Constantine the Great

Constantine came to power through the previous rule of his father, Constantius, Caesar of the West during the years of the Tetrarchy. After Constantius' death, Constantine filled in his place as ruler and immediately set out to expand his territory. Constantius had previously ended most of the persecution in the West, but Constantine's conflicts with the other emperors in fighting for land brought a new era that would change the course of Christian history. Christians would not fully know peace until 313 at the issue of the Edict of Milan, "the first official government document in the Western world to recognize the principle of freedom of belief"²⁷ according to Mutie.

When it comes to the nature of Constantine as a controversial figure as he relates to us today, Constantine "was, first and foremost, a politician."²⁸ Especially in his early reign, he was impulsive and ambitious. He built the new capital of Constantinople, which outlived old Rome for a thousand years. He also reorganized the mobile Roman army and reformed the currency in gold to further improve economic stability.²⁹ But most of all, he encouraged the practice of Christianity and practically stamped out paganism until the rule of Julian the Apostate in the 360s. Without Constantine's efforts, I do not believe the distribution of Christianity to become the world's leading religion would have gone the way it did.

However, even among the Christians of his time, his rule received mixed receptions. For some, it was a relief from the burden of persecution that they had just endured. But he also began to mix Christianity and politics in ways that some Christian communities (like the Donatists)

²⁷ Mutie, Jeremiah, "A Critical Examination of the Church's of Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan of AD 313," *Journal of Ministry & Theology* 25, no. 1 (2021), 14.

²⁸ Leadbetter, Bill, "Constantine and the Bishop: The Roman Church in the Early Fourth Century," *Journal of Religious History* 26, no. 1 (2002), 10.

²⁹ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*.

disagreed strongly with.³⁰ This was the eve of the era of imperial Christianity. Constantine began to act as a universal bishop who had been appointed by God for some task that no one, not even him, defined, and this would change Christian history forever.

Council of Nicaea

Turning his focus away from the Donatists, Constantine meandered in political-personal affairs for another few years before involving himself in yet another theological schism: this time over the Arian controversy. In order to settle the dispute, he called the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical church council called upon by the state. This set a precedent as the first allowance of a theologically unqualified political figure to determine the outcome of a theological dispute.³¹ The Council of Nicaea began on the 20th of May, 325. Half a dozen Western bishops attended, while between 250 and 300 bishops from the Eastern provinces traveled to attend alongside them, with Constantine presiding over them all, even actively playing a role in the discussions.³² It was at Nicaea that the official Nicene Creed was formed, a creed that shaped orthodox Christian belief even until the present day. From there, of course, the era of Christendom began, and the rest... is history.

Winning Side: Catholics

The recorded Nicene Creed sums the side of the Catholics. Such a creed is still used today in many denominations. It is similar to the earlier Apostles' Creed except where it adds to the statements about the nature of the Father and the Son, which was where the dispute with the Arians lingered in. But the Council of Nicaea did more than form the Creed. It also solved

³⁰ Mutie, "A Critical Examination."

³¹ Mutie, "A Critical Examination."

³² Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*.

various smaller disputes that had been found across the empire within the last decade as Christianity was rising back to its feet, not limited to the concretization of a standardized date for the celebration of Easter.

Losing Side: Arians

The opposing view—the heretical view—was defended by the man Arius, who came from Alexandria and had disputed the identity of Christ as the Son of the eternal Father with Alexandrian bishop Alexander. He had already been excommunicated in the past, and he was excommunicated again at the close of the Council of Nicaea. However, it was short lived, as he was readmitted three years later and even baptized Constantine on his deathbed in 337.

Arius argued that the Son was not coeternal with the Father, so this heresy was just as much about the definition and identity of the Father as it was about the Son. “Arius saw the Son as a being distinct from and inferior to the Father...”³³ And Arius, even stooped as he was, was described as a charismatic preacher, turning many away from orthodox belief in Alexandria. This incensed Alexander and his successor Athanasius badly, Leithart described Athanasius as a “tough, skillful infighter, a community organizer and rabble-rouser, willing to use intimidation or other tools in pursuit of his aims.”³⁴ Without his contribution to the Council of Nicaea arguing against the Arians, the Council might not have gotten as far as it did.

RESULTS

I collected a total of 18 scenes from *Καθαρός* from Parts 1 through 6, half of which were complete and the other half incomplete but sketched. I compiled them into a document and

³³ Ayres, Lewis, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

³⁴ Leithart, Peter J, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 8.

submitted them in March to my reviewers for study. Within the week, I had received a total of six reviews, with more expected to arrive soon after. Alongside it, I sent them a document with questions as prompts for review about the drafts. I quote my reviewers' responses to these questions below.

My critical reviewers were: Professor Lori Fulton, Dr. Karen Knudson, and Terri Jones.

Lori Fulton is an assistant professor of history at Olivet Nazarene University and teaches American history. She received her Master's at Illinois State University and is involved in Christian author circles. She enjoys historical fiction and historical romance.

Karen Knudson is an English professor at Olivet Nazarene University with a Master's from the University of Richmond and a PhD from Purdue, her concentration being medieval literature. She teaches both general and special topics in literature at Olivet. She is also a member of the Conference on Christianity and Literature.

Terri Jones is a church organist, librarian, and freelance accompanist. She earned Master's degrees in music history and library science from Florida State University. Her experience in research for her librarian position was what drew me to ask her to review the project for its heavy historical content.

My peer reviewers included: Pamela Greenlee, Mary Mercer, Naomi McMahan, as well as a handful of reviewers who wished to remain anonymous.

Questions (not every question was answered by every reviewer):

Was the synopsis of *Καθαρός* comprehensive? Did it accurately represent the narrative? Would it catch your attention if you picked it off the shelf?

Pam Greenlee: Yes, it is brief, enticing and captures my attention.

Mary Mercer: It caught my attention the minute I began to read it. You might need some elaboration between sections to help transition from one section to another better.

Naomi McMahan: The synopsis did those things. I personally might not have picked it up, since I'm not big on historical fiction, but I admit I would have missed out on a lot. As soon as I started reading, I was entranced.

Terri Jones: The synopsis is good. On a bookshelf, it might need to be a bit snappier. This story has something for everyone—a father, a bishop, who is free but still haunted by his years in prison; a son who lost his father to prison and then to the trauma that remained, who feels that he lost his father in some way, seeking to forge his own path; faith, adventure, love, violence, what is worth living and dying for? I do think you can play with it even more.

Did you find the protagonist unique and likable? Would you have rather read the story from any other character's perspective? Was the first-person point of view limiting in any way?

PG: The autobiographical perspective is a good approach. Accius explains his own internal conflicts and his spiritual process.

MM: I was able to follow the protagonist's story with little trouble.

NM: I really liked Accius as well as seeing things from his POV (point of view). Even within his own mind, I could still see things from other characters' perspectives. He was relatable, especially with the hope in how his relationship with his father might progress. I really liked the easy, natural relationship with his best friend Cyrus as well. A POV from another character's perspective might have also been interesting.

TJ: Accius is likable and relatable. The "showdown" with his father was sad and seemed disrespectful, but it was realistic. The first-person narrative was fine.

Was there anything in the story that you wished to see more of? Was there anything that seemed unfulfilling to you from a narrative perspective?

PG: The limited sketches give a sense of the direction of the narrative. Working on developing and completing them would be most beneficial.

NM: I felt like there was a lot of potential in Rivkah. I also wanted to know what happened to Cyrus.

TJ: What happens to Cyrus?

Did you enjoy or appreciate the writing style? Were there points when it was too academic? Wordy? Non-compelling? Boring?

PG: The interjection of personality and doctrinal conflicts are useful, though they require more explanation.

MM: The use of language and sentences was phenomenally rich! It made the reading very interesting and engaging.

NM: I really did like it. I was instantly invested in the characters and the relationships they had with one another and was intrigued to learn more. I really liked how you told emotions through dialogue. I would have enjoyed a bit more action. You'll have to be careful to avoid making the theological conversations too long and heady, that might lose some people.

TJ: The writing style is good. There are some descriptive passages that need some polishing.

How was the pacing? Did it drag anywhere? Would you have preferred it slowed down anywhere?

PG: It was just fine. You use the secondary characters to move the narrative effectively.

MM: The pace should have been a bit more slowed for more background and explanation of setting.

NM: Action scenes needed slowed down and expanded upon. And the falling in love needs more detail.

TJ: The pacing is good. I would like more in-between scenes. What happens to Petrus? Cyrus? Majorinus? What about Donatus' rise to authority? The wedding?

What did you make of the tone of *Καθαρός*? Was it consistent? Was it fitting to the story being told?

MM: Yes, it was consistent and fitting.

NM: I think the tone of a young, maturing man with lots of hurt deep down inside is a good voice to tell the story through. It was consistent.

Καθαρός is heavily dependent on the richness of Christian and church history to aid its narrative progression. Were you able to follow the history? Were there moments when it was confusing or difficult to understand?

PG: You will need to flesh out the controversies more to inform the more naive reader.

MM: I could follow the history on a basic level, though I've not read a great deal from that period.

TJ: Your transition passages helped with that. It would be nice to include a very brief explanation of Greek and/or Latin terms within the text.

Did you find that Christianity was accurately and/or positively portrayed in *Καθαρός*?

PG: Both the truth and the misapplication of doctrine were aptly represented, as were the resulting conflicts among believers both in Phrygia and in N. Africa.

MM: Yes.

NM: I saw realistic issues of Christianity being addressed, like ministry trauma, blaming the church for things, jealousy, theological disputes. I liked hearing from Talitha and her pure, brave ideas about faith. I also liked that not everyone had the same faith, beliefs and practices, though they all claimed to pursue a similar faith.

TJ: Our faith is accurately and positively portrayed. I especially enjoyed Talitha's discussion with Accius.

Καθαρός rating average: 8/10 (out of 3 ratings overall, some were not comfortable rating it as it is not complete yet)

DISCUSSION

A very important piece of the *Καθαρός* puzzle, so to speak, was deciding how closely I would follow the events of history in my historical fiction. Many authors will fall under a spectrum in deciding how many creative liberties they will take, from “autobiographical” novels to speculative or alternate history fiction. I conclude that this all depends on how much emphasis the author places on the importance of the story that *they* want to tell, not necessarily the story

that needs to *be* told through history. Some want to shape history around their story, and others shape their story around history.

I chose to be one of the latter, as I find that authors can use history to tell a story that is pertinent to their current society. Brayfield and Sprott mention the historical novel as a larger metaphor—a combination of the author’s contemporary attitudes and a subjective view of the world.³⁵ History, when used in an organic and masterful way, can be a tool for building thematic material, because certain human values are universal. They will remain the same no matter the time period.

On the subject of worldbuilding, a writer’s term for how we create fictional universes in which our stories take place, there isn’t as much work to be done in constructing history’s world, but rather reconstructing it. And this is where research—and lots of it—is *profoundly* important when writing historical fiction. When you write, you must immerse yourself fully in the world in which you write in order to write well. I likely read far more sources than I needed to for this project, simply because I wanted to know so much about the world that my characters lived in that I felt like I was in it, too. I didn’t want to forget how everything made me feel, because I felt closer to them when I immersed myself in my research.

How, then, can a writer of historical fiction incorporate antagonists? The world is not as black and white as heroes and villains. Life is found in the details: the philosophies of the time, the daily frustrations, the values that they held and the beliefs that they clung to. If you cannot reconcile all of these in your writing, it simply will not feel *real*. In this way, no one is really the villain in your story, just people with different agendas. I wanted to show this in my portrayal of

³⁵ Brayfield, Celia, and Duncan Sprott, *Writing Historical Fiction: A Writers’ and Artists’ Companion* (London: Bloomsburg Publishing Public Limited Company, 2013).

the Donatists, a sect of Christianity that was neglected for most of history and has only been brought into the light through scholarship in the last eighty years.

How, then, did the events of fourth-century Christian history impact the flow of this narrative in particular? As I did more and more research on the twenty-year period from the end of the Great Persecution to the Council of Nicaea, I found something surprising. The ideas that I had come up with initially for my characters' arcs—the unconventional Prodigal Son, the struggle between a generation that suffered and a generation that lived in peace, the emphasis of faith in the midst of persecution and whether faith that thrives in a “tolerant” society is true faith at all—fell into place with the flow of this section of history. I do believe that many of these ideas were inspired by God, as very little conflicts came up in the process of outlining the progression of the story. Changes still had to be made, but they were usually small and minor when compared to the grander themes I wanted to tell.

God Himself almost seemed to be like a writing partner of mine, as I had never embarked on writing explicit Christian fiction before *Καθαρός*. I was very much relieved that it came much easier than I would have anticipated. I know that God uses creativity to speak truth. It often felt wrong of me to fabricate a relationship between a fictional man and a very real God, which is why I relied heavily upon the narrative structure of the parable of the Prodigal Son as well as struggles that I had faced in my own personal walk with God to give Accius a way to be relatable.

As it stands right now, *Καθαρός* will be effective as an eventual full-length novella with loose threads being tied by its end, but this is not where my characters' stories will end. With the intense potential of the era of the Great Persecution happening just before Accius' story, I would like to focus on Petrus in his own novella-length story of how he became a bishop and stood firm

in the face of imprisonment and persecution. His story will be titled *Ἄμωμος: The Blameless*. Then, as a final send-off, I would like to explore the life of Accius' son, Kairos, who will work to compile both his father and his grandfather's memories in the "book" that the modern audience has read while the rule of Julian the Apostate in the 360s begins to shake the Christian realm. Kairos' story will be called *Δίκαιος: The Righteous*. I must embark on even more research before they have the chance to be written, however. Altogether, they might eventually be compiled into a single, full-length novel: three generations, three stories.

CONCLUSION

The journey that I took to write *Katharos* taught me multiple skills in the art of creative writing: how to structure longer narratives, how to create consistent characters and dynamics, how to bring a flow both in and between scenes, and most importantly, how to integrate the Christian faith into fiction. It has helped me gain confidence in my writing skills and has shown me how to take great amounts of research and apply it to my work. Lord willing, *Ἄμωμος*, *Καθαρός*, *Δίκαιος: The Blameless, The Pure, The Righteous* will find a place on bookshelves within the next few years as I continue to study the Bible and apply its contexts to even more of my future creative projects.

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