lest it harm the whole body, so it would be
good to put to death any member of society
that “falls into any incurable evil”.7

However, there are five reasons why
Clement cannot be construed as justifying
the death penalty. First, he considered
the execution beneficial to the wrongdoer: “it
will be for his good if he is put to death.”

Second, the relevant passage also declares,
“it is the highest, most perfect good, when
one is able to lead back anyone from the
practice of evil to virtue, and well-doing,
which is the very function of the law.”

Third, the only specific example Clement
gave of “incurable evil” was covetousness—
which was not a capital offence or a criminal
offence at all. Fourth, Clement wrote the
Stromata for pagan readers and used
examples, quotations from pagan
philosophers, current Greco-Roman views
on morality, and other sources for the
purpose of persuading them to embrace or
think more highly of Christianity. He was
the leading Christian intellectual of the A.D.
190s, Origen’s predecessor as dean of the
Christian school in Egypt, and a pioneer in
making Christianity acceptable to educated
pagans.

Fifth, an ancient analogy that a non-
Christian government justifiably inflicts
the death penalty does not mean that a Christian
may in good conscience be an executioner
or otherwise contribute to it. What the other
authors cited in this article were expounding
was Christian morality, i.e. the ethics that
were taught and practised by Christians.
Because what they were describing was
specifically Christian, unlimited in
geography and binding even if they attained
political office, the ancients would no more
have extended official Roman conduct to
present-day believers than they would other
objectionable practices of the Roman
Empire.

1 All quotations from Clement of Alexandria are
at ANF 2.339.
2 Irenaeus Against Heresies 3.3.3 (A.D. 180s) at
vol. 1 p. 416 of The Ante-Nicene Fathers:
Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down
to A.D. 325 ed. Alexander Roberts and James
Donaldson. American Reprint of the Edinburgh
ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, N.Y.:
Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885-96;
continuously reprinted Edinburgh: T & T Clark;
Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Peabody,
Mass.: Hendrickson) (hereinafter cited as ANF).
3 Athenagoras Presbeteia 35 under title A Plea
for the Christians ANF 2.147.
4 Tertullian On Idolatry 19.
5 The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of
Saint Hippolytus of Rome trans. and ed. Gregory
Dix, revised Henry Chadwick (London: Alban
6 Apostolic Tradition 16.10-11, 16.15-17 and
16.19-20 at pp. 25-27.
7 Bardesan ANF 8.733.

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Early Challenges to Capital
Punishment

David W. T. Brattston

The earliest church prohibited Christians
from participating in capital punishment, as
is evident from the following pronouncements by Christian writers before
the Decian Persecution of A.D. 249-251.
This period marks the 200th anniversary of
the beginning of distinctively Christian
literature, and the first quarter-millennium of
our era. Dating from before the division into
modern-day denominations, such writings
are the common inheritance of all
Christians.

In addressing a rebellious faction in the
church at Corinth, 1 Clement 45 recalled that
when in the Old Testament the righteous
were persecuted or put to death, it was only
by the wicked, the unholy, and the hate-
consumed. Variously dated between A.D. 70
and 97, 1 Clement is one of the oldest extant
Christian documents outside the New
Testament. This letter was written while in
the church at Rome “there were many still
remaining who had received instructions
from the apostles.”1 It was so authoritative
and influential that it was included in some
early editions of the New Testament. It
refers in passing to a recent government
persecution of Christians, which means that
the death penalty was not far from the
author’s mind as a punishment for some acts
and beliefs regarded as criminal.

Around A.D. 177, the philosopher
Athenagoras of Athens wrote a defence of
Christianity and description of its beliefs and practices. In it he dealt with and refuted pagan allegations that the Christian faith commands its adherents to murder and practise cannibalism. Athenagoras stated that Christians not only are forbidden to kill anyone for any reason but also that we cannot endure even to see a man put to death, though justly. …. We, deeming that to see a man put to death is much the same as killing him, have abjured such spectacles. How, then, when we do not even look on, lest we should contract guilt and pollution, can we put a man to death?2 For this reason, he said, Christians oppose even such killing sanctioned by the law as gladiatorial combats, at that time perfectly legal and promoted by the secular authorities.

Tertullian was a prominent Roman lawyer prior to his conversion and ordination in middle age, which means he was probably familiar with death-penalty cases. Dating sometime between A.D. 198 and 220, Tertullian’s On Idolatry indicates that Christians could not conscientiously inflict the death penalty. This treatise considers the dangers of contributing to sin inherent in certain professions and trades. One of these was the Roman military, partly because the higher ranks participated in capital punishments. For Tertullian, killing of any sort—including the state-ordered death penalty—excluded military service as a livelihood for Christians.3 In On the Resurrection of the Flesh 16, he classified hangmen in the same category as lascivious women, gladiators, and priests of a pagan cult.

Attributed to the central Italian bishop Hippolytus, The Apostolic Tradition 16.17 (A.D. 217) is similar. Even if possessing the necessary government authorization and ordered to do so, a soldier “must not execute men”.4 As a corollary, the church must cast out any Christian who volunteers for military service. The Apostolic Tradition considers such soldiers and volunteers to be in the same category as pimps, priests of idols, makers of idols, gladiators, and prostitutes.5 The Book of the Laws of Regions, also called On Fate, is ascribed to Bardesanes, who prior to his death in A.D. 220 was a friend and guest of a king of Edessa. It contains expositions of how the laws of various nations and regions differ from one another while Christians follow their own law (what we would call “ethics”) no matter where they are, with this law being identical everywhere in the known world. Among the contrasts was that one particular country stoned thieves to death, with the implication that Christians did not do so anywhere, even where secular law permitted them to. Nor did Christians commit “honour killings” of wives and daughters as non-Christians practised in another country.6 In short, the Christian religion forbade all its adherents to inflict the death penalty for these offences.

In Against Celsus 7.26 the church father Origen in the late A.D. 240s contended that if Jews were free of Roman control and constituted their own sovereign nation again, they would probably practise stoning and burning of malefactors as Moses had commanded, e.g. put murderers to death. However, Origen wrote, if Christians were in government they would be restrained by the laws of their religion from doing so. In fact, he wrote that God’s purpose in destroying the Jewish state was partly to end capital punishment and other bloodshed by the people of God. Origen was dean of the world’s foremost educational institution of the era (in Alexandria, Egypt) and later established one of his own in Palestine. He was the most influential and most prolific Christian preacher, Bible scholar, and writer of his own day and for centuries afterwards. He was probably the most knowledgeable Christian of the first half of the third century, or at least the most able to relate the consensus of ancient Christian teaching because he was one of the most travelled, being called upon as a consultant by bishops throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Are the above writings representative of earliest Christian belief? By default, yes. Of the extant Christian documents I have examined from this period, these are the only authors to have considered the death penalty from the viewpoint of Christian ethics, and all considered it forbidden to Christians, even where permitted by secular law and would be so if ever Christianity constituted the government of a state. From these surviving records, it is clear that Christian writers disavowed capital punishment in each of the first three centuries.

Clement of Alexandria’s Stromata 1.27 has been cited as an early Christian source in favour of state-inflicted capital punishment, because Clement applied the analogy of surgery to the death penalty: just as a surgeon excises a diseased member or organ