



Summary :

The missionary activity of John of Ephesus is part of the broader religious policy of Emperor Justinian I (527-565), which aimed at unifying the empire by means of religion. A devotee Christian and leader of the Monophysites in Constantinople, John carried out the Christianising mission to the area of Ephesus and the mountainous Asian provinces of Phrygia, Lydia and Caria (542-546), by order of the emperor. He proceeded to contribute greatly to the struggle against the notable pagans of the capital (546).

Date

542-546

Geographical Location

region of Ephesus, provinces of Phrygia, Lydia and Caria

1. Historical framework

The mission [John of Ephesus](#) undertook in 542 aimed at Christianising the populations of the area of [Ephesus](#) and was included in the broader framework of Justinian's religious policy, which was targeted at unifying the empire through religion. Therefore, it involved two main axes: eliminating idolatry and smashing any kind of heresy. The struggle for the permanent consolidation of Christianity, which until the time of [Justinian I](#) (527-565) was the primary concern of numerous eminent apologists, priests and of the Church in general, was now taken up by the State. The emperor himself was responsible for the enterprise. Justinian tried to launch a many-sided and complex project of religious reforms. His constant attempts to play the leading role, as a judge and a legislator, in all ecclesiastical matters is obvious. The religious atmosphere in the empire at the time was quite heavy and tension arose by reason of the disputes between the followers of the doctrine defended by the [Fourth Ecumenical Council](#) and the opposing [Monophysites](#), who were spreading out mostly in the eastern provinces. Moreover, there was a considerable number of pagans in the lower classes, but mainly among the scholars and the distinguished state officials.

The ascension of the decisive and ambitious Justinian I to the throne inaugurated a new era of social and religious reforms. Already from the first year of his reign (527), following extensive persecutions against the [Manicheans](#), the new emperor issued an edict introducing a series of strict measures against any kind of heresy, including idolatry; he also provided the definition of the "heretic": "anyone who neither belongs to the established Church nor follows the Orthodox faith will be called a heretic".¹ The emperor acted with the same determination and ardour throughout his reign. He followed a policy of economic and administrative pressure on all non-Christians ([Montanists](#), Manicheans, gentiles, Jews, Samaritans, [Arians](#) and Monophysites). He was particularly stern with the pagans. The chronicler [John Malalas](#) describes the events of 529 as follows: "in the very same year a large-scale persecution was launched against Hellenes [i.e. the pagans]". The legislative regulations, largely formulated in the [Novellae](#), soon led all heterodoxes and non-Christians to the margins of public life. It should be noted that in the same period (529) the Academy, the philosophical school of Athens, suspended its operation, while the teachers —the scholar Damascius and his reputable students, [Simplikios](#), [Priscian](#), etc.— had to escape to the court of the Persian ruler.

Justinian was inconsistent only with the Monophysites. Although a [Chalcedonian](#) and Orthodox emperor, Justinian often chose to cooperate with eminent representatives of the sect for political reasons. As he wanted to maintain social stability, particularly after the Nika Revolt (532), Justinian showed compliance with the Monophysites who held senior administrative positions. The case of the devotee and Monophysite leader, John, is rather characteristic, as the emperor assigned him with a mission in the area of Ephesus and then made him his main partner in the struggle against the pagans of the capital. According to his writings, John, the subsequent bishop of Ephesus, was for thirty years a key figure in the imperial religious policy, "lived in the capital and was in charge of all economic matters that concerned the congregation of the entire empire".²

2. Missionary activity of John of Ephesus



In 542 the eminent Monophysite John undertook a mission with the permission to employ any means he could in order to convert to Christianity the pagan inhabitants of the mountainous Asian provinces of [Phrygia](#), [Lydia](#) and [Caria](#). John's main partner was his trusty follower Deuterios. Their mission started from the mountainous area around [Tralles](#), lasted about four years and was absolutely successful.³ Approximately 70,000 heathens adopted Christianity, 96 churches were built and 12 monasteries were founded, the most important being the one at D'RYR' (Daireira?),⁴ which was built on the relics of an ancient temple. Moreover, the ancient temples were demolished, their precincts were plundered and the idols were destroyed. Among a total of 96 churches built, the State commissioned 56 of them, while the remaining 41 were built with money collected by the local population. The newly baptised were offered their christening robes and a small amount of money (one *tremissis*, the one third of the golden *solidus*) by the Emperor. Several pagans, mostly sophists, grammarians and senators, were baptised by force. Some were whipped and even imprisoned.⁵ During his missions, John must have come to the Phrygian city of Pepouza, which the Montanists considered the New Jerusalem. He set fire to the holy places of their sect and destroyed their heirlooms. Finally, after the successful conclusion of the mission, John appointed his partner, Deuterios, responsible for the area and left for [Constantinople](#).

3. Activity in Constantinople

Around 546 the leader of the Monophysites offered again his services to the emperor, this time in the capital. This enterprise's target was the notable pagans – teachers, grammarians, sophists, scholastics and physicians. They were arrested, put to trial, tortured, imprisoned and sometimes executed. The events were described by John of Ephesus in the second part of his *Ecclesiastical History*.⁶ A typical example is the reference to *patrikios* Phokas, who was forced to drink poison and commit suicide by order of the emperor.

4. Consequences

Apart from the events directly connected with his mission, the work of John of Ephesus unveils two general parameters of the internal conditions of the empire in Justinian I's years (527-565). At first, the final unsuccessfulness of the emperor's anti-heretic policy is evident. The retreats and his partially favourable attitude towards representatives of the Monophysites worsened inter-Church relations, while the solution to the conflict between the Chalcedonians (Orthodox) and *anti-Chalcedonians* (Monophysites) was violently given by the heir to the throne, Justin II (565-578). The second parameter is directly connected with the wasteful and violent fight against pagans, which soon led ancient literature to oblivion. The chronicler Malalas provides an impressive description of the events that took place in 562. According to him, some heathens arrested in June were pilloried in Constantinople, while their books along with statues of gods were publicly set on fire at Kynegion. "There is no doubt", comments Paul Lemerle, "that higher secular education, and education in general, starts to decline in Justinian's years".⁷

1. *Cod. Just.* I 5, 12, 4.

2. Detailed descriptions of John's missionary activity are reported in the third part of the work titled *Ecclesiastical History* (Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία).

3. Cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, iii 36-7.

4. It is difficult to identify the place-name, as the original is in Syrian as well.

5. Stein, E., *Histoire du Bas-Empire II. De la disparition de l'empire d'Occident à la mort de Justinien (476-565)*, vol. 2 (Paris - Bruxelles - Amsterdam 1949), pp. 371-372.

6. Cf. Nau, Fr., "Analyse de la Seconde partie inédite de l'histoire ecclésiastique de Jean d'Asie", in *Revue de l'Orient Chretien*, II (Paris 1897), pp. 481-482. Cf. also Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, ed. and trans. J.B. Chabot (Paris 1899-1901), ch. 9.24.



7. See Lemerle, P., *Ο πρώτος βυζαντινός ουμανισμός*, trans. Μ. Νυσταζοπούλου-Πελεκίδου (Athens 1985), p. 68.

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	John of Ephesus http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/ephesus_1_book1.htm
	John of Ephesus http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08470c.htm

Glossary :

	anti-Chalcedonian An opponent of the doctrine of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (in 451) and a follower of Monophysitism in general.
	Chalcedonian A follower and supporter of the orthodox doctrine expounded at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 ("one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Single-Born, in two natures"), which condemned the heretical teachings of Eutyches (Eutychianism) and Nestorius (Nestorianism) and Monophysitism in general and recognised the Virgin Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God).



Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451)

The Fourth Ecumenical Council assembled in 451 at Chalcedon in order to retract the interpretation of the council of Ephesus (449) on the nature of Jesus Christe.

Manichaeism

A religious doctrine that appeared in the East during the 3rd cent. and combined elements of Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrism. It was named after Manes, legendary founder of the religion. Manicheans believe that the world is composed of two fundamental, equal and competitive principles, Good and Evil.

novel (novella)

Term meaning ad verbum "new decree" and used since around the 4th century in order to denote the provisions of the emperors as separate from the organized codes. They were written mainly in Greek and used extensively in the Middle Byzantine Era. Since the days of Komnenoi and after, they were replaced by other more specialized terms and they are very rare in the Late Byzantine era

patrikios

(from lat. *patricius*) Higher title of honour, placed, according to the "*Tactika*" of the 9th and the 10th centuries, between *anthypatos* and *protospatharios*. It was given to the most important governors and generals. Gradually, however, it fell into disuse and from the 12th century did not exist any more.

solidus

The standard Byzantine gold coin, weighing 24 carats or 4.55g, introduced by Constantine the Great.

Sources

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Quotations

The persecutions of the gentiles in 562

Μηνί ιουνίω, ινδικτιώνι τῇ αὐτῇ, συσχεθέντες Ἕλληνες περιεβωμίσθησαν καὶ τὰ βιβλία αὐτῶν κατεκαύθη ἐν τῷ Κυνηγίῳ καὶ εἰκόνες τῶν μυσερῶν θεῶν αὐτῶν καὶ ἀγάλματα...

Ioannis Malalae, *Chronographia*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn 1831), XVIII, p. 491.18-20.