**Document C: Professor Cassel’s Article**

Defending the Cannibals: How Christians Responded to the Sometimes Strange Accusations of Their Critics

The seeming lack of respect toward Roman authority seems to have angered Pliny more than anything. He likened this Christian attitude to a kind of contagious insanity or mental disorder that would inevitably result in crimes against the Roman state. As he closed his letter, he warned, "This contagious superstition is not confined to the cities alone but has spread its infection among the country villages." Trajan, incidentally, commended Pliny for his actions.

But what did the Romans mean by *superstition*? According to several prominent Roman authors, including Cicero and Plutarch, it was any offensive religious belief or practice that deviated from Roman norms. Certain groups were given to such "irrational" religions, in which they acted unpredictably—without regard for the rites, rituals, and traditions of Rome.

Plutarch, the famous biographer, suggested that superstition was even worse than atheism: "The atheist is unmoved regarding the Divinity, whereas the superstitious people are moved as they ought not to be, and their minds are perverted."

To Pliny the Younger, Christians were akin to *heraeria*, subversive political societies that lobbied for the interests of their group over the interests of the state: "If the people assemble for the common purpose," he wrote, "whatever name we give them and for whatever reasons, they soon turn into a political club."

Indeed, it was political suspicions, not necessarily religious ones, that concerned Roman elites. Romans incorporated many religions into their empire. As long as devotees continued to observe Roman religious rites, they were free to worship any god they wished.

Christians, however, refused to acknowledge any god but their own. For the Romans, that was bad enough, but Christians also refused to participate in any non-Christian religious rites, to serve in the army, or to accept public office. Their refusal to eat meat during Roman religious rites, for example, prompted the trial before Pliny in Bithynia.

A stranger complaint of critics was this: Christians were cannibals and practiced incest. They were thought to be involved in bizarre and abhorrent religious rituals such as Thyestian feasts and Oedipean sex—the most heinous acts in Greco-Roman myth and literature. In these two myths, Thyestes eats his own children, and Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother.

How could pagans associate these myths with Christianity? Most likely the critics misread the Christian Scriptures. New Testament writers referred to their fellow Christians as brothers and sisters (James 2:15) and encouraged them to greet one another with a "holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16). This could have been misunderstood as incestuous, especially if a married couple were referred to as a brother and sister in Christ. This perspective may have been intensified by the secrecy of early Eucharistic services, which were open only to baptized Christians.

The charge of cannibalism could also have arisen from a false understanding of the Christian Scripture and liturgy. The very words of the Eucharist, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you," could be misread in a literal, cannibalistic sense by a reader ignorant of the metaphor.

***Source:*** *“Defending Cannibals,” written by David Cassel in 1998.*

Analysis Questions:

1. Who wrote this document? When was it written?
2. According to the author, what are the “strange complaints” Roman critics had of Christians?
3. According to the author, what are some of the reasons why the Romans thought these things about Christians?
4. How does this document’s description of what Romans thought of Christians compare to Tacitus’s account?
5. Do you think this is a trustworthy document for trying to figure out why the Roman Empire persecuted Christians? Why or why not?