

Christian Persecution in the Book of Revelation



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Abstract

This dissertation will argue that the persecution of early Christ followers, as referenced in the Book of Revelation, was not a myth. The imagery in the Book of Revelation, as analyzed here, conveys a sense of Christian persecution and a culture of anxiety and animosity during the apostolic age. Early followers of Jesus endured genuine harassment across the Roman Empire, and these difficulties should not be minimized or dismissed as exaggerated. By adopting a predominant preterist a-millennial approach, this dissertation will demonstrate that the imagery in the Book of Revelation refers to Christian persecution before the fall of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. This era, as the sources here examined will demonstrate, can be divided into two main periods, starting with the early missions of the Apostles until the Great Fire of Rome, when early Christians faced harassments predominantly from Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities, followed by primarily Roman oppression under Caesar Nero's rule after 64 AD. This study will analyze several passages from the Book of Revelation that allude to Christian persecution during this era, by contextualizing these passages using New Testament, secular and non-canonical Christian sources. This approach will help us understand how references to persecution, conveyed through symbolic language in the Book of Revelation, influenced early church tradition and still influences current views about the hardships faced by first-century Christ followers, especially during Emperor Nero's reign. It will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the reality and importance of early Christian persecution as depicted in the Book of Revelation.

Introduction

It is generally assumed that the background to many of the visions of the Book of Revelation is the Roman Empire's brutal persecution of Christians during the first century. The imagery and symbolism portrayed in the Apocalypse in fact suggests an incessant culture of anxiety and hatred vis-à-vis the early Christians during the apostolic age. Nevertheless, this tradition has recently faced challenges from numerous biblical scholars and historians alike. They argue that both early Christian and secular sources fail to substantiate this perspective. Many contend that the persecution of early Christians might have been overstated, asserting that it did not necessarily start during Caesar Nero's reign, nor was the Roman Empire the sole and initial perpetrator. Candida Moss, for example, challenges the view that the history of Christianity is characterized by an unrelenting wave of persecution, which she labels as a 'Sunday School Myth'. Moss argues that the early Christian persecution was in fact sporadic, decentralized and mostly localized, suggesting that it should be understood more as *prosecution* than *persecution*.¹ However, as this dissertation will argue, there is a fine line between perception and reality about the origins and circumstances of early Christian persecution. To use Greg Carey's words, 'only a few instances of repression and only a very few martyrdoms are necessary to create a culture of (long-lasting) fear and resentment'.² As the dissertation will illustrate, this concept is evident in several verses throughout the Book of Revelation.

Bearing the above in mind, this dissertation analyzes the relevant imagery and language within the Book of Revelation, with support also drawn from New Testament texts, secular sources, and non-canonical writings. The purpose is to gain a profound understanding of early Christian persecution by exploring the revelations embedded in the symbolism as referenced in the Apocalypse. Through the examination of several key passages in their historical context, a

¹ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, EPub edn. (New York, USA: Harper Collins, 2014); Richard Carrier, 'The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44', *Vigilae Christianae* 68 (2014), 264-283; D. Shaw, 'The Myth of the Neronian Persecution', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 105 (2015) 1-28.

² Craig Carey, *Review of the Myth of Persecution*, in *The Christian Century*, 130 (2013): 39-41 (p.40), cited in Paul Hartog, 'The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response', *the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology (SJB)*, 18.1 (2014), 49-79, (p.57). Brackets are mine.

clearer understanding can be achieved regarding the circumstances to which they allude. In doing so, the dissertation probes the identity of the perpetrators of early Christian repression and asks the question when, where, and under what circumstances these harassments occurred. Only by adopting such an approach can a more balanced opinion on the accuracy and significance of the early Christian persecution, as symbolized in the Apocalypse, be formed.

Methodology

This thesis relies on the New International Version (NIV) of the Holy Bible for its biblical references. It applies the terms 'Revelation', 'the Book of Revelation' and the 'Apocalypse of John' interchangeably.³ When referring to 'Roman authorities' or 'Roman empire' the terms stand for the emperor, the senate, the central officials, and the provincial governors.⁴ The term 'persecution' is herein defined as 'the unfair or cruel treatment over a long period of time because of race, religion, or political beliefs'.⁵ However, as the use of this term often creates a misleading impression of a more widespread, organized, and persistent system of repression, alternative terms such as 'harassment,' 'oppression,' 'abuse,' and 'maltreatment' are adopted in this dissertation to describe more accurately the actual nature of the persecution. Furthermore, when utilizing the term 'early Christian persecution' the study refers to the period covering the harassments and oppression endured by early followers of Christ from the Pentecost to the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD, and this despite the Roman authorities' oppression persisting until the 'edict of Milan' in 313 AD.⁶

Most important to note, though, is the prevailing preterist and a-millennial approach to the allusions in the Apocalypse that this study adopts.⁷ This approach considers the events in the Book of Revelation to have already largely been fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD), and, and eschatologically, its symbolism represents the spiritual conflict between heaven and

³ *The Holy Bible*, International Version NIV, (New York: Biblica. Inc., 2011).

⁴ Here I follow the definition of G.E.M. de Ste Croix, 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?', *Past and Present*, 26 (1963), 6-38, (p.6).

⁵ Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶ Most historians consider the edict of Milan in 313 AD the moment Christian persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities officially ended. See, Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 10.5.

⁷ Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, revised edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), pp.26-28. Robert H. Mounce identifies 'four basic interpretative approaches to Revelation: the preterist or contemporary-historical ('zeitgeschichtlich') understanding, in which the historical setting of the first century takes center stage; the 'historicists', who interpret the book of Revelation as a forecast of the course of history leading up to his own time'; the 'futurists' who adopt a futuristic or eschatological view of 'God's ultimate victory over the forces of evil', which points to the end of the world; and the 'idealists' or followers of an 'idealistic or timeless symbolic understanding' in which the 'Apocalypse is an ageless, symbolic struggle between Christianity as the kingdom of light against the demonic forces of evil or the kingdom of darkness'. See also G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1999), p.4449. and David L. Barr, Introduction, Reading Revelation Today: Consensus and Innovation' in *Reading the Book of Revelation*, ed. by David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), p.5.

earth, while the kingdom of Christ is already present since the descent of the holy spirit on the Apostles (Acts 2:1-4). The dissertation also contends that the period before 70 AD, as portrayed by the imagery pertaining to Christian persecution in the Book of Revelation, can be categorized into two distinct periods, each characterized by its unique perpetrators.

Some passages suggest that the harassments were prompted by resentful Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities in and around Jerusalem before the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. Afterwards, the Roman authorities gradually replaced the local Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities as the primary perpetrators of Christian persecution. This transition is explored in chapter 2 of this study. Moreover, this chapter will also seek to establish that the imagery, particularly in chapters 13 and 17 of the Apocalypse, establishes a correlation between Christian oppression and the Roman authorities during the latter part of Caesar Nero's rule. The final chapter provides evidence supporting the representation of Christian persecution in the Apocalypse. This involves the examination of secular writings, New Testament texts and non-canonical Christian sources, placing them, as far as possible, within their historical context.

The dissertation concludes that the early Christian persecution referenced in the Book of Revelation was a historical reality, not a myth. For the early Christ followers, the hardships they endured across the Roman Empire were genuine and cannot be either downplayed or regarded as an exaggeration. The Apocalypse serves as compelling evidence of this reality, as demonstrated not only through its symbolism but also through relevant secular, New Testament and non-canonical sources.

Chapter One

Allusions to the Jewish and Pagan (Greco-Roman) Persecution

This chapter explores various passages from the Book of Revelation that allude to early Christian persecutions by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities, either directly or indirectly. In doing so, it is important to bear in mind the dissertation's predominantly preterist amillennial approach in order to gain a deeper insight into the matter. Thus, the study primarily interprets Revelation 1:19, 'Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place', as pertaining primarily, though not exclusively, to the era of the Apostolic missions leading up to the fall of the Jerusalem temple. It is within this historical context that the allusions in the Book of Revelation to the persecution of early followers of Christ should be understood.

However, it is important to note a distinction from the perspective of the perpetrators between Christian persecution initiated by the Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities and those directly prompted by the Roman public administration.⁸ Geoffrey Ernest Maurice de Ste. Croix divides early Christian persecution into three distinct periods. During the first period *before* the Great Fire at Rome in 64 AD, 'persecution was on a small scale, occasional and came about mainly as a result of Jewish hostility. [...]. Any Christians who were martyred, like Stephen and James "the Just" (the brother of Jesus), were victims of purely Jewish enmity, which would count for little outside Judaea itself'.⁹ During the second period (between 64-250 AD) Christian persecution was increasingly instigated by the Roman and Hellenized public, yet these occurrences were often isolated and rather short-lived. The third period started with the official

⁸ The Roman public administration follows Croix's definition including 'the emperor, the senate, the central officials and the provincial governors'. See further, G.E.M. de Ste Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted', *Past & Present*, 26 (1963), 6-38 (p.6). See also, William H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church. A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), p.154. <https://id.scribd.com/document/534595516/Frend-W-H-C-Martyrdom-and-Persecution-in-the-Early-Church-1965>. [Accessed 2 July 2022].

⁹ G.E.M. de Ste Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted', *Past & Present*, 26 (1963), p.6.

state persecution in the reign of Caesar Decius in 249-250 AD and ended with Caesar Constantine's sole reign in 324 AD.¹⁰

Although this classification seems plausible, the division between these periods is not entirely distinct, as Christian persecution carried out by Jewish and pagan communities did not cease with the Great Fire or the fall of the Jerusalem temple. For example, according to Eusebius the death of Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem (107 or 117 AD) was 'instigated by members of the Judean royal house'.¹¹ Also, during the Jewish revolt of 132 AD, as Justin Martyr asserts, it was Bar Kockba who commanded that *only* Christians should suffer persecution unless they would deny Jesus Christ and utter blasphemy (*1 Apol.* 31.6). James C. Webster also notes that a significant portion of what was perceived as persecution instigated by Jews and pagans against Christians, which took place after 64 AD, was primarily linked to *intra-religious* conflicts within the Jesus movement rather than *inter-religious* persecution. These internal disputes often arose from divergent teachings that began to emerge within various church communities, typically revolving around varying interpretations of Christian orthodoxy.¹² Similarly, there is limited evidence of systematic Christian persecution by the Roman authorities after Caesar Nero's outburst in 64 AD. Various sources suggest that the treatment of Christians by the Roman Empire varied over time and was influenced by factors such as location and individual circumstances.¹³ During the first three centuries, various instances of Christian persecution were chiefly driven by deep-seated resentment among certain Roman and Hellenized communities towards the non-conformist attitude of Christians and their religious idiosyncrasies.¹⁴ Sometimes, as Mikael

¹⁰ J.B. Rives, 'The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999), 135-154 (p.135). In 249 AD, the emperor Trajan Decius issued an edict requiring the inhabitants of the Roman empire to sacrifice to the gods. With this decree, thereafter, persecutions of Christians were largely instigated by emperors and took place on an imperial scale.

¹¹ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.32.

¹² James Corke Webster, 'By Whom Were Early Christians Persecuted?', *Past and Present*, gtac041, (2023), 1-45 (p.11).

¹³ Various secular sources describing Christian persecution by the Roman public administration during the patristic period are often related to the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD), Decius (249-251 AD), Valerian (253-260 AD) and the Great persecution under Diocletian (284-305 AD). However, the well-documented dialogue between Pliny the Younger and Caesar Trajan gives us also a clear understanding of Christian persecution in Bithynia, a province in Asia Minor around 112 AD. See Pliny the Younger, *Letters (Epistle)*, Volume II: Book 10, XCVI and Book 10, XCVII. See also, Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1-2, 7-8.

¹⁴ James Rives, 'The Persecution of Christians and Ideas of Community in the Roman Empire', *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2011), 199-217.

Tellbe argues, this aversion arose due to theological, socio-political, and economic factors.¹⁵ Moreover, imperial persecution was often not specifically aimed at Christians but rather resulted from the enforcement of imperial decrees or special laws.

Regardless of the underlying cause, the evidence provided by allusions in the Book of Revelation, and which indicate a degree of involvement on the part of Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities in the persecution of early Christians, is undeniable. As this chapter will demonstrate, the imagery depicted in certain sections of the Apocalypse, clearly suggests such involvement while in other parts this connection is implied indirectly. However, when adopting a predominant preterist a-millennial approach, the imagery in the Book of Revelation, involving Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) community harassment, all seems to refer to events predating the great fire during Caesar Nero's reign (64 AD).

Indirect References

One instance of such ambiguous or indirect reference is attested in Revelation 1:9, where the author affirms that, because of persecution, he shares in the sufferings endured by his fellow Christ followers: 'I, John your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus was on the Island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus'. Various scholars have considered this passage to highlight the author's personal experience of persecution as a follower of Christ and probably was exiled because of it (cf. Rev. 6:9-11; 20:4). However, it does not specify during whose reign the banishment (if indeed there was any) occurred. The author's stay on the island of Patmos might have been for missionary activities, and it is conceivable that, reflecting on his past experiences, the sufferings brought about by provocations from Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities, rather than

¹⁵ Mikael Tellbe, 'Relationships among Christ Believers and Jewish Communities in First-Century Asia Minor', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Craig R. Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.152-167.

the Roman empire. This scenario maybe realistic, given that similar events took place as early as the reign of Caesar Claudius.¹⁶

This perspective may also apply to the account of Antipas' martyrdom mentioned in the letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum (Rev. 2:13), where it says: 'I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives'. This passage suggests a period predating the visions of the Book of Revelation and referring to the martyrdom of Antipas, a seemingly well-known follower of Christ from the past.

In accordance with the prevailing preterist amillennial approach, the death of Antipas aligns most closely with the early Church tradition of successive proto-martyrs beginning in the mid-thirties onwards. During this era, the Jesus movement faced strong oppression primarily from Jewish or pagan adversaries rather than from the Roman authorities. Ian Boxall suggests that this passage could also be interpreted as an isolated instance of Jewish mob persecution in Pergamum, reflecting an early Christian period. However, this interpretation may conflict with church tradition regarding Antipas' martyrdom as the bishop of Pergamum during the reign of Caesar Domitian (around 92 AD).¹⁷ Nonetheless, the challenge remains that there are scarce sources available to accurately determine Antipas' identity accurately.

The same ambiguity applies to Rev. 7:13-14, where the scene is a future heavenly vision and one of the twenty-four elders, acting as an interpreter, poses a rhetorical question: 'These in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?' (Rev. 7:14).¹⁸ The elder himself provides the answer, which, when viewed from an amillennial predominant preterist standpoint, suggests a timeframe just before or shortly after the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD: 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:14). The term 'great tribulation' could refer to the persecution endured by early Christ followers at the hands of Jewish and

¹⁶ Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4, 'Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus' (*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*).

¹⁷ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p.59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.127. See also Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, revised edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), pp.161-162.

pagan (Greco-Roman) communities before 64 AD, or by the Roman authorities, particularly during the reign of Caesar Nero. However, the 'great tribulation' could also refer to Christian persecution in general ever since Jesus' ministry. The latter reasoning is based on the apparent old age of the author and visionary of the Book of Revelation.¹⁹ It is assumed that the author lived during Jesus' ministry until the end of the first century.²⁰ It is believed that the author lived from Jesus' ministry until the end of the first century, thus encompassing a historical understanding of Christian persecution spanning the first century, including the era of the proto-martyrs and the reign of Caesar Nero.

This possible dual explanation is also reflected in several other passages, for example in Rev. 20:4: '[...], And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God [...]' and in Rev. 6:9-11: 'When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained'. It is not clear whether this passage refers to assaults by Jewish or pagan (Greco-Roman) crowds or by the Roman authorities. However, systematic persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities for their faith began predominantly later, in the early second century. Nevertheless, there have been some contentious exceptions, such as the trial and execution of Jesus. Similarly, a dual interpretation can be applied to Revelation 18:24: 'In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth'. The passage appears to make references to the Old Testament

¹⁹ Many scholars today accept that the author of Revelation was John the Elder or simply a John of Patmos. However, from early on the Church Fathers all identified John the Apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of James as the author, based exclusively on the testimony of Irenaeus in *Adversus Haeresus* 5.30.3. See further Justin Martyr, in *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 81.4; Tertullian in *Adversus Marcionem* 3.14.3; Clement of Alexandria in *Paedagogus* 2.108; and Origen *De principiis* 1.2.10; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.20. It should be noted, though, that Irenaeus' historical reliability has often been questioned by various scholars like J. Christian Wilson, 'The problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation', p.598; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p.24; Bell Jr, 'The Date of John's Apocalypse', p.93. See further Thomas B. Slater, 'Dating the Apocalypse to John', *Biblica*, 84.2 (2003) 252-258; Robert B. Moberly, 'When was Revelation Conceived', *Biblica*, 73.3 (1992), 376-393 (p.382).

²⁰ For more contemporary analyses on the identity of the author of the Apocalypse see, Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, *Andrew of Caesarea and the Apocalypse in the Ancient Church of the East: Studies and Translation*, Thèse présentée à la Faculté des études supérieures de l'Université Laval dans le cadre du programme de doctorat en théologie pour l'obtention du grade de Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D.,2008), p.54; J. Christian Wilson, 'The problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation', p.598; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p.24; Bell Jr, 'The Date of John's Apocalypse' p.93. See also Thomas B. Slater, 'Dating the Apocalypse to John', *Biblica*, 84.2 (2003), 252-258; Robert B. Moberly, 'When was Revelation Conceived'. *Biblica*, 73.3 (1992), 376-393 (p.382).

prophets and the chosen people of Israel. However, the interpretation hinges on whether 'Babylon' is seen as a metaphor for Rome and its empire or for the city of Jerusalem. In the latter case, the passage likely pertains to the period of the proto-martyrs and the corresponding persecution of early Christ followers by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) opponents. Conversely, if 'Babylon' represents the Roman empire, the 'slaughtering' could also signify persecution by the Roman authorities, particularly during the reign of Caesar Nero.

Direct References

More explicit evidence of pre-64 AD Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) persecution can be found in Revelation 12:1-4.²¹ The account portrays the lurking menace by the dragon of the pure women that, in Ian Boxall's words, is 'a heavenly figure crowned with the tribes of Israel and that represents the community, which through a long and often turbulent history prepared the way for the Messiah's coming and now continues his witness'.²² Boxall's interpretation is supported by Rev. 12:5: 'she gave birth to a son, a male child', who 'will rule all the nation with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne'. There is no doubt that the passage offers a clear allusion to Jesus' ministry, his legacy on earth and his ascension to heaven. This is further resonated in Rev 12:10 when the visionary of the Apocalypse essentially declares the start of Jesus' kingdom on earth, 'Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of God, and the authority of his Messiah'. The narrative does not necessarily indicate a future kingdom; rather, it introduces the period immediately following Jesus' ascension, possibly referring to early persecution of Christ followers by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities during the early apostolic era.²³

²¹ The dissertation uses the term 'Greco-Roman' rather than 'Hellenist' to describe the pagan communities affected by the works of the apostles during the first century, as distinguished in Act 6:1. The reason for this is that the allusions in the Apocalypse as describe in this dissertation also refer to Christian converts of both Hellenist *and* Roman background besides the initial 'Palestinian' Jewish converts to Christianity.

²² Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), p.178.

²³ See chapter 3 below.

Reference to the early Church's martyrs is especially explicit in Rev. 12:17: 'Then the dragon was enraged at the women and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring – those who kept God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus'. The account fits well with the early proto martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:12-14), James (Acts 12:2) and later the killings of Peter and Paul. The account gives meaning to the dragon as '[...] the ancient serpent, called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray, He was hurled to the earth', after being 'chased out of heaven by Michael and his angels' (Rev. 12:7-9). Satan, through his works, manages to turn the Jewish community and the Sanhedrin under false pretexts against these increasingly influential early Christ followers and the early Church in general.

Strong evidence of the Apocalypse's allusion to a Christian persecution at the hands of Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities during the apostolic period, rather than by the Roman authorities, is furthermore found in the letters to the cities of Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-10): 'I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer', and also to the city of Philadelphia, 'I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you' (3:9-10). These passages describe the dynamics that existed in the early Church directly after Jesus' ascension. Acts 19:10 strongly implies that Smyrna and Philadelphia, though not specifically mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament outside the Book of Revelation, were within Paul's sphere of influence during his ministry.²⁴ Therefore, it is highly probable that both cities already had early Christian communities at the time of the composition of the Apocalypse. As Mikael Tellbe argues, the phrase 'those who claim to be Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan' (3.9) likely refers to a group of non-Christian ethnic Jews in both cities who rejected Jesus Christ. Consequently, in the eyes of the author, they did not adhere to the 'true kind of Judaism'.²⁵ For this reason the Jews of Smyrna and Philadelphia may have shunned the early

²⁴ Acts 19:10: 'This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of God'.

²⁵ Mikael Tellbe, 'Relationships among Christ-Believers and Jewish Communities in First-Century Asia Minor' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Craig R. Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.161. See also Youngmog Song, 'Before Nero's Death: Reconsidering the Date of the Book of Revelation', *Yonsei University Faculty of Theology Graduate School* 86 (2016), 35-61 (p.54).

Christ followers from their synagogues and possibly initiated persecution against them, thus labelling them as heretics (see further the discussion below).

The passages mentioned above have provided significant evidence from the Book of Revelation of the early persecution of Christ followers carried out by Jewish and pagan communities during the initial decades of the 'Jesus movement'. While some passages exhibit ambiguity regarding the identity of the perpetrators, others are more explicit. However, as we will explore further, other references to Christian persecution in the Apocalypse more explicitly involve the Roman authorities as the primary perpetrators.

Chapter Two

Allusions to the Neronian Persecution

The first chapter of this study has argued that the symbolism in various sections of the Apocalypse alludes to the persecution of early Christians. These passages suggest that the harassments were instigated primarily by local Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities and occurred during the early Apostolic era. Following the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, Christians became the focus of Caesar Nero's purge, marking the beginning of a period of escalating Christian oppression by the Roman authorities. As this chapter will show, the Neronian persecution is especially reverberates in the symbolism portrayed in chapters 13 and 17 of the Apocalypse.

When analyzing this phenomenon, scholars rely largely on the accounts of two prominent Roman historians: Tacitus and Suetonius. It is primarily from *their* writings that the abrupt change in Roman authorities' attitude toward early Christians in the first century is understood. Because of *them* we come to appreciate that the Apocalypse not only presents timeless symbols, but also unmistakably reflects the distinct social, political, cultural, and religious environment of first-century Asia Minor.²⁶

Revelation 13: 1-10.

The imagery in chapters 13 and 17, along with other parts of Revelation, is regarded by many scholars as a reflection of the persecution faced by early Christians under Roman rule. While scholarly consensus is lacking on the interpretation of the imagery in these chapters, this dissertation aligns with the more prevalent view. The initial section of chapter thirteen (Rev.

²⁶ Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.19.

13:1-10) portrays Christian persecution through the symbolism of the 'dragon' and 'the beast coming out of the sea'.²⁷

Biblical scholars have often associated the dragon with Old Testament (O.T.) traditions of Satan (the Serpent or the Devil), that was expelled from heaven and 'hurled to the earth where it wreaks havoc with his army of angels' (Rev. 12:9-17).²⁸ In Rev.13:1, 'the beast' represents the Roman empire 'coming from the sea', which may imply approaching, literally, from the Mediterranean or, symbolically from 'the source of all evil' (cf. 17:8) or, more tangibly, from 'disturbed and stormy social and political conditions, out of which tyrannies commonly arise'.²⁹ In this passage Satan is depicted as a dragon that has given its power ('ten horns') to the Roman emperors ('seven heads') of the Roman empire ('the beast from the sea'), bearing their divine titles ('on each head a blasphemous name').³⁰

Rev. 13:2 proceeds to describe the beast as 'resembling a leopard but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion'. The imagery was most likely instantly recognized by the congregations of the seven churches in Asia Minor, the primary audience of the Apocalypse, as an allusion to the vision in the book of Daniel. The description of the beast in Rev. 13:2 essentially combines the four great beasts ascending from the sea in one all-encompassing monster (Dan. 7:3), which suggests a mighty enemy of Christ and its followers. This conclusion is drawn from the portrayal of the four beasts in the Book of Daniel, which symbolizes the

²⁷ Rev. 13:1-2: 'The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.2 The beast I saw resembled a leopard but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority'.

²⁸ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, pp.182-183, see also Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text, with Introduction, Notes and Indices*, p.154, Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol 1, p.333.

²⁹ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, pp.186-187; Charles R. Erdman, *The Revelation of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1936) as cited in Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament. The Book of Revelation*, p.244; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text, with Introduction, Notes and Indices*, p.161.

³⁰ On Satan, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and The End of All Things*, (Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 125-129. On the beast from the sea, see Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, pp.185-190; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, pp.243-249; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp.35-37. On the deification of the Roman emperors, see Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell. Dating the Book of Revelation. An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-AD 70 Composition* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), pp. 264-276; Chris Scarre, *Chronicle of the Roman Emperors. The Reign-by-Reign of the Rulers of Imperial Rome* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

succession of four kings representing four empires and historical foes of the Jewish God. The first beast, resembling a lion, symbolizes the Babylonian empire (Dan 7:4), succeeded by the bear representing the Medo-Persian empire (Dan 7:5), then the leopard symbolizing the Greek empire (Dan.7:6), and, finally, the beast unlike the others representing the Roman empire (Dan 7:7). As in Dan 7:7, the first two verses of Rev.13 associate the beast with the Roman empire, however, the imagery in Revelation 13:3 is what specifically ties it to the rule of Caesar Nero in this chapter. This passage shows the author's awareness of the 'Nero redivivus myth' which circulated soon after Caesar Nero's death: 'On one of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed'.³¹ The myth tells the story of Caesar Nero, who committed suicide through a self-inflicted fatal stab wound to the throat, and was believed to return to life (redivivus) or to reemerge from hiding (Nero redux).³² This specific association with Christian persecution helps interpret the preceding and subsequent passages in Revelation 13 as referring to the ruthless rule of Caesar Nero.³³

However, the identity of the beast in chapter 13 remains subject to different interpretations, which also extends to chapter 17, as we will explore later. This ambiguity affects the understanding of the beast in Revelation 13:7 (cf. 12:17), 'who was given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe,

³¹ Kenneth Gentry, *The New Testament Introduction*, p.303. For Roman sources: Tacitus, *Hist*, 1:2, 2:8-9; Suetonius, *Nero*, 40:57; *Domitian*; Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana*, 63:9.3, 66:19.3; Xiiphilinus, 64:9; Zonaras, *Annales*, 11:151-158; Dion Chrysostom, *Oratwru*, 21. Jewish sources: *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 4:2ff. Christian sources: Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorem*, 2; Sulpicius Severus, *Historia Sara*, 2:28; Jerome, *Daniel*, 11:28; Augustine, *De civitate Dei contra paganos*, 19:3. Various Christian, Jewish and Roman Sibylline Oracles: 3:63ff; 4:115ff; 8:68ff; 12:78; 13:89ff.

³² Tacitus, *Hist*. II, 8-9 narrates the story of a slave of Pontos which happened in 69 AD, who was mistaken for the historical Nero and subsequently killed and displayed in Ephesus before taken to Rome (A case of 'Nero redux' rather than 'Nero redivivus'). In 'The Early Christians in Ephesus and the Date of Revelation, Again', *Neotestamenica* 39.1 (2005) 163-193 (p.167), Mark Wilson makes it clear that many could not believe that Caesar Nero had died, but thought that his death was a ploy staged by his enemies and that he would return after escaping to the East (Neo redux). He also believes this myth, whether he was not really dead and resurfaced (Nero redux) or truly died and revived (Nero redivivus), spread quickly throughout Asia minor as it had a great impact on the public at large. Others believed that he had died but would return to live, hence the 'Nero redivivus Myth'. Various scholars supporting the late date of the Apocalypse argue that Caesar Domitian was the reincarnation of Caesar Nero. See also Hans Josef Klauck, 'Do They Never Come Back? "Nero Redivivus" and the Apocalypse of John', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 63.4 (2001), p.691 and Alberta A. Bell Jr., 'The Date of John's Apocalypse. The Evidence of Some Roman Historians Reconsidered', *New Testament Studies*, 25.1. (1978) p.98.

³³ We learn almost exclusively about Caesar Nero's brutality committed against the early Christians from Roman sources: Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44 and Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2.

people and nation'. In other words, the power and authority were given either to the emperor Nero, the Roman empire, or to both.³⁴

In line with this interpretation, Richard Bauckham views the healing of the fatal wound as symbolizing the survival of the Roman empire rather than the revival of a specific emperor. He argues that the primary purpose of the Apocalypse is to symbolically evoke the belief in the ultimate triumph of good (God's kingdom) over the forces of evil (Rome, the Beast, and Babylon), both earthly and cosmic. For Bauckham, the purpose of the vision in Revelation is to warn Christian congregations of the seven churches in Asia Minor not to be lured by the perks of the 'pax Romana', the deceitful illusion of peace, security, and prosperity'.³⁵ Pending divine judgement, John's prophecy urges them, to choose the side of God over Rome. Therefore, the question, 'Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?' (Rev.13:4), is fittingly interpreted by Bauckham as 'a lamentation of the whole world for the recovered imperial power from the brink of collapse yet was restored with the Flavian dynasty'.³⁶ Hence, this analysis places the composition of the Apocalypse potentially between 68-70 AD, indicating its close connection to the historical circumstances of its time of composition.³⁷

It is commonly accepted among scholars that the Apocalypse 'emerged out of a situation of crises'.³⁸ As such, the allusions in chapter 13 should be understood against the backdrop of profound political turmoil during and immediately after Caesar Nero's reign. In fact, just after Nero's death the Roman empire faced the prospect of civil war caused by an internal power

³⁴ See also Rev. 12:17: 'Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus'. Some scholars agree that the passage does not refer to the Virgin Birth of Jesus specifically, but to the true Old Testament Jewish 'Church' and its followers, in which Jerusalem is depicted in The Prophets as a travelling woman (Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p.148, Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol1, p.315, Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp.127-128.) On the other hand, Robert C. Mounce, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Revelation, Revised*, p.240, identifies the women with the 'New Israel' of the New Testament, who in Rev.12:5 has given birth to the Messiah.

³⁵ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana, War Peace and Conquest in the Roman World*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2017).

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology. The theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 37.

³⁷ The first century Roman empire has been described extensively and the studies are too many to quote them all. Nevertheless, most secondary sources, draw on the works of the most prominent early sources including historians of the antiquity like Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio, Pliny the younger (Roman), Josephus (Jewish), Plutarch (Greek), Eusebius and Tertullian (Christian) amongst others.

³⁸ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, p.12.

struggle between the different commanders of various legions and their political proxies, while the siege of Jerusalem was looming.³⁹

The apocalyptic vision as conveyed in Rev. 13:10 should therefore be interpreted within this context: 'If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go, if anyone is to be killed by the sword, with sword they will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people' (cf. Rev. 1:7, 1:4, 3:11, 16:15, 22:7, 22:12, 22:20).⁴⁰ This passage was essentially a warning for the congregation of the seven churches in Asia Minor to stand firm in the face of hardship as Jesus second coming was said to be near. This feeling of terror, according to Alberta A. Bell Jr., permeates the entire Apocalypse and encompasses an overall feeling of repression, which the author clearly attempts to convey through the imagery of the text. As Robert B. Moberly correctly contends, the rapid successive fall of four Caesars between 8 June 68 AD - 20 December 1969 was 'nothing of the kind that had happened in the preceding 100 years' and nothing short of a time of 'great tribulation' (Rev. 7:14).⁴¹ In other words, the imagery laid out in Rev. 13:1-10 only makes perfect sense when applied to a pre-70 AD historical setting.⁴²

³⁹ Tacitus *Dial.* 17, *Hist.* 1-3; Suetonius, *Nero* 6; *Vitellius* 9. On the siege of Jerusalem, see Josephus, *J.W.* 2.14.4 - 6.8.5 (§284-407).

⁴⁰ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), pp.57, 63, 104-105; Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation, Apocalypse and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.85.

⁴¹ Robert Moberly, 'When was Revelation Conceived', pp.384-385; Tacitus in *Hist.* 1.2.11 describes 69 AD a time full of disaster and tumultuous events. Leonard Thompson is not convinced, however, that Asia Minor was much affected by the tribulations in Rome. See further Leonard L. Thompson, *Reading the Book of Revelation, a Resource for Students* ed. by David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), p.35.

⁴² Among the most prominent adherents of the early or pre-70 dating of the Apocalypse were nineteenth century biblical scholars and commentators like Fenton John Anthony Hort, *Judaistic Christianity, A course of Lectures* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1894), p.160; Foss Westcott, *The Revelation of the Risen Lord*, (London: MacMillan and Co, 1881) and Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, part 1. (London: MacMillan and Co.1890), *The Apostolic Fathers*, part 2 (London: MacMillan and Co.1890). More recently we can add John A. T. Robinson, Alberta A. Bell, Christopher C. Rowland, Ian Boxall, J. C. Wilson, Mark Wilson, George H. van Kooten. For a longer list see, Greg Bahnsen, 'The Historical Setting of the Writing of Revelation' (unfinished manuscript). p.8.

Revelation 13: 11-18

In the second section of chapter 13 (vv. 11-18) the imagery of 'the second beast coming out of the earth' is central. In Rev. 13:11-12 this second beast is said to have 'two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed'. Once more, we encounter the same ambiguity as in Revelation 13:7: did 'the beast coming out of the earth' derive its authority from Emperor Nero, the Roman empire, or both? To gain a better understanding of this specific portrayal, it is crucial to understand its symbolic significance.

Ian Boxall sets out three distinct interpretative categories regarding the imagery of this passage that conform with most scholarly positions.⁴³ His first category understands 'the second beast coming out of the earth' (13:11) as representing the local lackeys, like the local priesthood and the wider local elite buttering up to the Roman empire for economic perks, honors and prestige.⁴⁴ An alternative way to understand the symbolism of the second beast is to identify it with the 'false prophet' (cf. Rev. 16:13, 19:20). This interpretation possibly connects the Nicolaitans with the figures of Balaam and Jezebel mentioned in the letters to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira (Rev. 2:14-15, 20; 13:11). It serves as a warning not to be deceived by these false prophets, who are described as having 'two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon' (Rev. 13:11).⁴⁵ A third mode of interpretation combines the previous ones and is more broadly defined, portraying the second beast as 'all who support, promote, and act as agents of the lamb-like monster'. Proponents of this view believe that the lamb-like appearance of the second beast signifies 'its ability to lead human beings astray' by 'exercising all the authority of the first beast on its behalf' (Rev.13:12).

⁴³ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p.193

⁴⁴ Isbon T. Beckwith, Henry B. Swete, Robert H. Charles and Elisabeth S. Fiorenza are among those who interpret the beast of the land as a symbol of the priesthood serving the imperial cult. This is also primarily the view of Adela Yarbro Collins.

⁴⁵ In the vision, the Seer tells the followers of Christ that Jesus warns them to stop having contact with false teachers, whom he calls Balaam in Pergamum and Jezebel in Thyatira.

A. Yarbro Collins, in line with the latter mode of interpretation, defines the second beast from the land broadly as representing the affluent elite in Asian society and all its forms.⁴⁶ Collins argues that Rev. 13:13-15 is about John's attempt to instill a feeling of powerlessness and *perceived* oppression under Roman rule among his audience and, at the same time, to warrant expectations for God's rule to change this imperial world order.⁴⁷ Bauckham interprets the verse as an attempt to counter the depiction of the Roman imperial power, as expressed through 'civic and religious architecture, iconography, statues, ritual and festivals and even cleverly engineered miracles', with 'Christian prophetic counter-images'.⁴⁸

A more plausible interpretation, though, is that the phrase 'the second beast coming out of the earth' underscores a combination of both political and socio-religious factors that lay at the core of Christian persecution during the reign of Caesar Nero. In this context, Satan empowers 'the beast of the sea', identified earlier in Chapter 13 as symbolic of both the Roman Empire and its emperors. Through this figure, Satan manipulates the congregations of the seven churches in Asia Minor, employing local proxies of the Roman Empire (the beast emerging from the earth) to enforce its will.

Later, in Revelation 13:13-17, we see how these proxies enforce Satan's agenda in Roman-occupied territories. Many scholars connect this passage to the imperial cult that was prevalent around the time when the Book of Revelation was written. This cult involved the worship of the emperor through prayers, sacrifices in his name, and the belief that he could intercede with the gods on behalf of the empire. It also included being 'marked' by the emperor (Rev. 13:16-17). These practices, such as sacrificing to the emperor and receiving his mark, likely evoked a sense of subjugation among Christians (and Jews alike). Refusal to participate in these rituals could have led to some form of punishment by the imperial authorities.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Yarbro Collins, 'What the Spirit Says to the Churches' Preaching the Apocalypse,' *QR* 4 (1984), p.82 and eadem, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp.84-107.

⁴⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins, 'Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 40.3. (1986), pp.240-241.

⁴⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and The Eyewitness: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2008), p.17.

⁴⁹ See Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, pp. 271-276. Gentry offers various evidence of a well-established emperor worship cult during the reign of Caesar Nero, while Greg K. Beale interprets Rev. 13: 14-17 as an account of mandatory participation in the imperial cult during the first century in Roman occupied territories, when Christians, for their disobedience, were then persecuted. See further G.K. Beale and David H. Campbell,

However, Satan's influence is also strongly felt through the apparent weakening of faith within the seven churches of Asia Minor. It is through false teachings, such as those propagated in Smyrna by individuals claiming to be Jews but are described as 'a synagogue of Satan' (Rev. 2:9), that the congregations of these churches are being misled. Additionally, Satan's influence is evident through the teachings of the Nicolaitans and Balaam who led the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality in Pergamum (Rev. 2:14-15), as well as through the deception of the prophetess Jezebel in Thyatira (Rev. 2:20). This notion of intra-religious conflict is accentuated by Craig R. Koester, who compares the beast from the land to 'one of the demonic Trinity who functions as a false prophet and, together with the beast of the sea, leads people to serve Satan', contrasting it with the holy trinity of God, consisting of 'the lamb who leads the people to worship God and the Spirit that speaks through the prophets'.⁵⁰

In his recent work, James Corke Webster claims that the erosion of faith from *within* was in many cases driven by intra-community disagreements in relations to their shared faith in Christ, rather than by the accusations (*delatores* or *accusatores*) of local Jewish or pagan communities.⁵¹ Often these disputes were triggered by conflicting understandings of Christian doctrine about orthodoxy versus heresy. In support of this argument Webster points out several early second-century examples, like the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, the governor of the province of Bithynia, and Caesar Trajan (see below), in which he suggests that the denouncer (accusers) were intra-religious community members accusing each other of deviant teachings.⁵²

Revelation 13:18, is undoubtedly one of the most debated passages among scholars studying the Book of Revelation. The verse seems to disclose the identity of the beast emerging

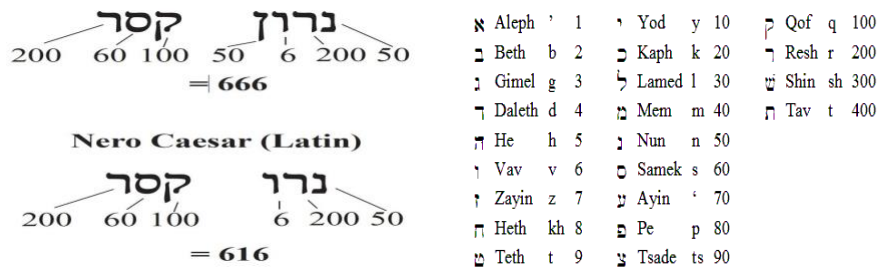
Revelation: A Shorter Commentary, ebook edn. (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), p.3. Simon R.F. Price rejects the compulsory nature of the imperial cult and describes the passage rather as a 'system of honors', implying symbolic and material rewards for participating in the spectacle of empire worship. See further Simon R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp.9-22.

⁵⁰ On Satan, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and The End of All Things*, (Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p.129.

⁵¹ James Cork-Webster, 'By Whom Were Early Christians Persecuted?', *Past & Present*, 261.1 (2023), 1-45.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.4. see also, 1 *Clem.* 5.2., *Ign. Eph.* 10:1-2 *Ign. Trall.* 8:1-2.

from the earth, urging those with insight to calculate the beast's number, which is said to be 666 (cf. 17:9). Since the composition of the Apocalypse, countless scholars have suggested various methods for calculating the number of the beast. The text assumes that the congregations of the seven churches in first-century Asia Minor were familiar with the symbolism of the Apocalypse, including the application of gematria, an alphabetic code often used in Antiquity to identify the beast. The gematria assigns numerical values to individual letters of the alphabet (Greek or Hebrew), and the resulting numerical value should be contextually relevant. In Revelation 13:18, the gematria is employed to decode the name of Caesar Nero by using the Hebrew translation of the Greek word for Nero, spelled as Nerōn, which adds up to the number 666. In contrast, the Latin characters translated into Hebrew, spelled as Nero without the N, amount to 616.⁵³



Source: google search

Craig Koester, in a recent paper, has presented a compelling argument for the number 666 corresponding to Caesar Nero, noting the use of this method in papyri, graffiti, and inscriptions found at various locations such as Smyrna, Pompeii, Sardis, Dura Europos, Murabba'at, and Ketef Jericho.⁵⁴ These arguments are just a few supporting the identification of Caesar Nero with the beast from the sea. The author likely intended to reference someone instantly recognizable, at least to his audience, and who likely lived not long before the composition of the Apocalypse. As this dissertation takes a predominantly preterist approach in the Book of Revelation, there is little doubt that the gematria fits the name of Caesar Nero.

⁵³ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p.10.

⁵⁴ Craig R. Koester, 'The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions', *Journal of Early Christian History* 6(3) (2016), 1-21.

Revelation 17: 1-6

As in chapter 13, the symbolism in chapter 17 of the Apocalypse alludes to the historical setting of emperor Nero's era. Central to the first section of chapter 17 (vv. 1-6) is the imagery of 'Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth'. The chapter opens with the angel of the plague bowls (cf. 21:9), who acts as a guide, an angelus interpres. Like Gabriel (Dan. 8:15-27), the angel invites the visionary to witness the condemnation of God that awaits the great prostitute of Babylon. In this chapter, the great prostitute symbolizes the second beast coming from the sea, as described in chapter 13, and represents the deceitful Roman empire, which, as Robert H. Mounce interprets it, leads the people into religious apostasy.⁵⁵ Richard Bauckham, however, draws a distinction between the beast in chapter 13, which represents the political manipulative nature of the Roman empire, and the prostitute of Babylon in chapters 17 and 18, who symbolizes Rome's economic exploitation.⁵⁶ Revelation 17:1 concludes with the imagery of the great prostitute, 'who sits by many waters', a phrase often associated with Babylon (cf. Jer. 51:13), signifying the multitude of nations (cf. Rev. 17:15).⁵⁷ When combined with Rev. 17:2: 'with her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries', the entire passage seems to refer to the 'rulers of territories which had been absorbed into the (Roman) Empire or allied to it'.⁵⁸ These nations and their leaders engaged in 'sexual immoralities', a metaphor often understood to denote idolatry.⁵⁹ As seen in Rev. 13:14-17, this idolatry manifested itself as local communities in Asia Minor yielded to the imperial cult. However, Rev. 17:2 might also encompass, as suggested by Henry B. Swete, a broader interpretation including hostile nations on the fringes of the Roman

⁵⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament. The Book of Revelation*, p.308

⁵⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p.36.

⁵⁷ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p.240, Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament. The Book of Revelation*, Revised, p.309.

⁵⁸ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek text with introduction, notes and indices*, p.213. On the historical context, see Adrien Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2017), and Bernard William Henderson, *The Life and Principate of eth Emperor Nero* (London: Forgotten Books & Company, 2018), pp. 151-228.

⁵⁹ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p.241. Robert H. Mounce interprets it as 'religious apostasy, in *The Book of Revelation*, p.238.

empire collaborating with it for mutual benefit, like the Parthians, Carthaginians, Macedonians, and Greeks, during Nero's rule.⁶⁰

Subsequently, the visionary is transported by the angel 'in the spirit', potentially indicating a trance-like state, 'into the wilderness' (Rev. 17:3).⁶¹ Some scholars do not consider the wilderness as a place of respite, security or for reflection, but as a fitting location to observe the enfolding divine judgement of Babylon.⁶² Throughout history, Babylon has been linked to the fallen Jerusalem, imperial Rome, or symbolically as representing humanity's tendency toward idolatry.⁶³ It is often depicted as the antithesis to the city of God, the new Jerusalem. The visionary then sees a woman seated on a scarlet beast covered with blasphemous names and having seven heads and ten horns. This beast is clearly the one from the sea described in chapter 13 it is portrayed with extravagant colors that serve to accentuate the splendor and magnificence of the Roman empire. Additional details about the woman are provided in Rev. 17:5-6: 'The name written on her forehead was a mystery: Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth', and 'Drunk with the Blood of God's Holy People, the Blood of those who bore Testimony to Jesus'. This description is echoed in Rev. 18:24: 'In her was found the Blood of the Prophets and Saints and all who have been slain on Earth'.

These passages undoubtedly point to the Christian persecution carried out by the Roman authorities and emperors, including Caesar Nero, against all who professed their faith. Bauckham fittingly summarizes John's visionary message as a warning to the seven churches against following the ways of Rome and to be prepared for the consequences: 'It is not just because Rome persecutes Christians that they oppose Rome. Rather, it is because Christians must distance themselves from the evil of the Roman system that they are likely to endure persecution'.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p.213. On the historical context, see Adrien Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana* and Bernard William Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, (London: Forgotten Books & Company, 2018), pp.151-228).

⁶¹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p.309.

⁶² Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p.214; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p.241. Swete and Boxall share the same interpretation: 'the vision of the New Jerusalem'.

⁶³ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, pp.239, 244.

⁶⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p.38.

Revelation 17: 7-18

Chapter 17 proceeds with the angel interpreting what the visionary (see verse 7). The angel explains the mystery of the woman and the beast that she rides, which has seven heads and ten horns. This description of the beast is a repetition of Rev. 17:3 and Rev. 13:1. Robert Henry Charles argues that the text is 'deranged and composite as it is based on two sources'.⁶⁵ He believes that 'the natural position of Rev. 17:18 is immediately after Rev. 17:7, as a logical continuation of the woman's description'. This 'two-source theory' may explain the constant shifting of the beast's symbolism in this chapter. The beast mentioned in the initial part of chapter 17 appears to symbolize the Roman Empire. However, the beast referenced in Revelation 17:8, drawing parallels with Revelation 13:3 and 17:11, likely alludes to the myth of Nero's return (Nero redivivus) and the resurgence of his tyrannical rule, which will culminate in his ultimate defeat. In Rev. 17:9, the focus again shifts back from Caesar Nero to the Roman Empire: '[...] the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings [...]'. The mentioning of the seven hills unmistakably refers to the goddess Roma and Rome's dominion over many peoples, rather than specifically to Caesar Nero. The imagery on Roman coins from the reign of Caesar Vespasian, for example, depicts goddess Roma seated on what are clearly seven hills.⁶⁶ Then again, in Rev. 17:10-11, the passage reverts to, presumably, the identity of Caesar Nero: 'five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, but when he does, he must remain for only a little while'. This verse has intrigued many scholars, leading them to search for the identity of the sixth king, as it is believed that the Apocalypse was likely composed during his reign. Unless this account portrays a possible case of prophecy vaticinium ex eventu, the imagery in this passage refers to the Roman emperors who ruled before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD.⁶⁷

Without delving into the numerous existing calculation variants, it is worth noting that the most frequently cited early sources regarding the calculation (as suggested in Rev 17:10) are

⁶⁵ Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol 1, p.58.

⁶⁶ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1847-0309-37.

⁶⁷ Criticism about this approach is found primarily among those scholars and commentators who interpret the Apocalypse allegorically (the idealists) and eschatologically (the futurists) or in general by those who look at the ways in which symbols are used in scriptural prophetic literature.

provided by Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus, the Sibylline Oracles, and 4 Ezra.⁶⁸ Suetonius begins his count of emperors before 70 AD with Julius Caesar, technically the last dictator (Imperator) of the Roman Republic. Tacitus, on the other hand, excludes Julius Caesar and starts his count with Caesar Augustus as the first Roman emperor. Therefore, the sixth king (the one who is) is either identified with Caesar Nero or Caesar Galba, respectively. If Nero is 'the one who is', the Nero redivivus theory in chapter seventeen would not hold and therefore the sixth' king must refer to Galba. This option would identify Nero as 'the beast who once was and now is not' (fatally wounded) as the fifth emperor. He would then return as the eighth' king after Caesar Otho, the seventh' king, who indeed only served for seven months. He (Nero) 'belongs to the seven (the group of seven past emperors from Augustus till Otho) and is going to his destruction'.⁶⁹

This latter option fits the adopted preterist approach of this dissertation. However, the large number of possible interpretations of Rev. 17:10-11 have pushed various scholars to opt for a more symbolic explanation.⁷⁰ The visionary, however, seems to challenge the hearer to seek an understanding of the riddle that is not based on symbolism but rather arithmetically. In other words, when the visionary calls for a mind of wisdom to approach this question (Rev. 17:9), he urges his audience to calculate, not simply to use their imagination.⁷¹ The passage may not give absolute certainty about the identity of the beast, but it *does* give testimony to the allusion of Christian persecution by the Roman empire and its rulers.

In the final section of chapter 17 (vv. 14-17), the angel foretells that there will be an internal battle between the beast and the prostitute, which according to various scholars alludes to the Caesar Nero's reappearance (Nero redivivus).⁷² In some versions of the myth, he will return

⁶⁸ Mark Wilson, 'The Early Christians in Ephesus and the Date of Revelation', p.170, nn. 7-12. Tacitus; *Hist.* 3.1, Suetonius, *de vita caesarum*; Josephus, *A.J.* 18.2.2; 18.6.10; 19.1.11; Sibylline Oracles 5.12-51; 4 Ezra 11-12.

⁶⁹ This sequence is adopted by Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (1975, p.243), Bell, 'The Date of John's Apocalypse' (1979, pp. 93-102) and Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (1982, pp.403-413), as quoted in Mark Wilson, 'The Early Christians in Ephesus, and the Date of Revelation Again', *Neotestamentica* 39.1 (2005), pp. 163-93 (p.170n8). In his paper, Wilson provides a comprehensive summary of the evidence in support of a pre-70 AD composition of the Apocalypse.

⁷⁰ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, p.247; Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament. The Book of Revelation*, Revised, p.317.

⁷¹ Mark Wilson, 'The Early Christians in Ephesus, and the Date of Revelation Again', pp.164-189, provides a comprehensive summary of the evidence in support of a pre-70 AD composition of the Apocalypse.

⁷² Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, p.247; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p.319; Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol 1, p.71.

with the help of the Parthian army to strike against Rome. Yet, before doing so, the beast and the king who have not yet received a kingdom (Nero redivivus and his allies) will wage war against the Lamb (Christ and his followers). Some scholars have compared these kings with 'unknown powers', governors of senatorial province or 'Parthian satraps'. Ultimately, though, Nero redivivus turning on Rome will lead to their mutual destruction in 'fulfillment of God's words' (Rev.17:17).

In summary, the symbolism in chapters 13 and 17 of the Book of Revelation provide substantial evidence for a Neronian persecution of early Christians. However, this interpretation is not without its critics. Some scholars maintain that the arguments used to support a Neronian persecution can also be applied to advocate for a dating of the Apocalypse after 70 AD, specifically during the reign of Caesar Domitian. However, this dissertation takes a predominantly preterist approach, and its validity hinges not only on the textual evidence within the Apocalypse but also on various relevant external sources. The next chapter will therefore examine these sources in order to acquire a more nuanced perspective on the credibility of the early Christian persecution within its historical context as alluded to in the Book of Revelation.

Chapter Three

Source Criticism and the Question of Historicity

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation adopts a predominantly preterist and a-millennial interpretative stance towards the Book of Revelation. Consequently, the symbolism in the Apocalypse is understood to refer primarily to events widely held to have happened before, during, and shortly after the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. In the first chapter, we have proposed that early Christian oppression, as alluded to in various verses of the Apocalypse, was predominantly instigated by resentful Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities and occurred largely before the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. Soon thereafter, as outlined in chapter 2, attention shifted from these communities to the role of Roman authorities in Caesar Nero's reign, who thereby assumed the role of the main perpetrators of early Christian persecution. As demonstrated this Neronian persecution is particularly evident in chapters 13 and 17 of the Apocalypse. In other words, the imagery as conveyed in these particular sections of the Apocalypse is not timeless; instead, it portrays time-specific events, albeit clothed in mythological language, to which contemporary Christ followers could relate.⁷³

This chapter of the study aims to provide evidence supporting the persecution of Christians in the Apocalypse, using secular writings, New Testament texts and non-canonical Christian sources and placing them, as far as possible, within their historical context. As will be demonstrated, analysis of the secular works draws primarily on the prominent Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius.⁷⁴ New Testament writings that bear witness to the persecution of early followers of Christ include Paul's Epistles, the Gospels, the Book of Acts, Hebrew and 1 Peter. This chapter concludes with an assessment of non-canonical Christian accounts including 1 Clement, The Seven Epistles of St. Ignatius and Christian martyrdom literature like the Letter of Diognetus and the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, as well as the influential (and later) patristic writings of Tertullian and Eusebius.

⁷³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Tacitus *Ann (Annales)*, Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars (De Vita XII Caesarum)*, Josephus *Ant. (Antiquitates Judaicae)* 3.1-2, and *J.W. (Bellum Judaicum)*,

It will be argued that these sources demonstrate that the maltreatment of early Christians during the first century was sporadic but not widespread, even as it was genuinely felt and experienced by the victims.⁷⁵ Although the level of intensity and the extent of cruelty against early Christians throughout much of the first century is difficult to measure, the *perception* of religious persecution or culture of anxiety and hatred cannot be trivialized. As Greg Carey correctly asserts, 'only a few instances of repression and only a very few martyrdoms are necessary to create a culture of (long-lasting) fear and resentment'.⁷⁶ These concerns find profound expression in New Testament texts, secular sources and non-canonical Christian writings, thus contributing significantly to the understanding of Christian persecution as depicted in the Apocalypse.

It is therefore important to note, though, that depending solely on these sources might not suffice to substantiate the locating of the Christian persecution narrative during the reign of Caesar Nero, as referenced in the Apocalypse. As such, later non-canonical Christian, secular, and gnostic writings should be consulted to allow for a broader historical understanding of this phenomenon; such writings may contain remnants of historically authentic material that relate to earlier periods, including the first century AD. The limited space allowed for this dissertation, however, does not permit a further in-depth analysis of these latter sources, although they deserve greater attention than being marginalized due to their alleged incompatibility with early church orthodoxy.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Paul Hartog, 'The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response', *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 18.1 (2014), pp. 50-51

⁷⁶ Craig Carey, *Review of Myth of Persecution*, in *The Christian Century*, 130 (2013), pp. 39-41 (p.40), cited in Paul Hartog, 'The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response', *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 18.1 (2014), pp. 49-79, (p.57). Brackets are mine.

⁷⁷ Paula Frederiksen, 'Christians in the Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries CE', in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. by David Foster (Malden MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 586-606.

Secular Sources

Non-Christian sources attesting to early Christian oppression, as alluded to in the Apocalypse, rely predominantly on the writings of the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus in *Antiquitates Judaicae* and the Roman historians Tacitus in *Annales* and Suetonius in *De Vita XII Caesarum Divus*. These historical records suggest that, during the early second century, there was widespread awareness of a group known as Christians (Christiani or followers of Chrestus), who decades earlier were targeted, without making any distinction, as Jews by the Emperors Claudius and Nero.

Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae* (*Jewish Antiquities*, c.93 AD) stands as possibly the earliest non-Christian source alluding to the persecution of early Christians. Compelling evidence of this can be found in *Ant.* 20.9.1, where Josephus gives a short account of an assault on the followers of Christ by the Jews and their religious leadership. During this incident, Roman procurator Albinus, who succeeded Festus (c.62 AD), strongly disapproves of the execution of James, the brother of Jesus, and some of his companions in Jerusalem. The key reason for Albinus' disapproval seems to be the fact that the High Priest Ananus the Younger carried out the executions without the mandatory authorization from the procurator, taking advantage of his absence: 'Ananus thought that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus was dead, and Albinus was still on the way. And so, he convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned'.⁷⁸ The detailed account suggests that Josephus was aware of the profound hostility between early Christ followers and the Jews, with frequent attempts by the latter to punish them ever since the start of the Christian missionary era.

In Publius Cornelius Tacitus' *Annales* (c. 115 AD), we find further secular evidence alluding to early Christian persecution. In his renowned passage, known as the *Testimonium Taciteum*, Tacitus describes how Caesar Nero accused and persecuted Christians in Rome for having instigated the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. Tacitus describes them as 'a class of men, loathed for their vices' (*vulgus Christianos Appellabat*), and as being 'convicted of hatred against mankind'

⁷⁸ *Ant.* 20.9.1 (197-200).

(*odio humani generis*).⁷⁹ This account essentially reflects the alleged social status of Christ followers in the early second century, at the time of the composition of the *Annales*.

Tacitus, like his contemporaries Pliny the Younger and Suetonius, whom we will examine below, use the term *superstitio* to depict the primary basis of hostility towards the followers of Christ.⁸⁰ Tacitus calls the Jesus movement a pernicious superstition (*exitiabilis superstitio*), Suetonius describes them as followers of a new and mischievous superstition (*superstitionis novae ac maleficae*), and Pliny, labels them in his letter to Trajan, a degenerate sort of cult (*superstitionem pravam et immodicam*).⁸¹ The etymological similarity can be traced back to the relationships among Tacitus, Pliny the Younger and Suetonius; Pliny was Suetonius' patron and benefactor, while Tacitus and Pliny the Younger were close friends and one-time colleagues.⁸² However, it is unclear whether their association involved the utilization of each other as sources, or if they merely shared common contemporary language and rhetoric.⁸³

Tacitus' second reference to the persecution of early Christ followers is found in the non-extant section of Book V of *Historiae*, referred to as Tacitus' fragment 2 and preserved by Sulpicius Severus in his *Chronica* 30.6-7 (c. 403 AD).⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44: Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race.

⁸⁰ Gaius Pliny Caecilius Secundus (61 – c. 113 AD), known as Pliny the Younger was best known as the nephew of Pliny the Elder and the writer of letters to various contemporaries. Pliny was a former tribune in Syria, lawyer and later politician in Rome. Finally, he became governor of Bithynia where his extant letter to Caesar Trajan became the only genuine document describing Christian doctrine and practice in the early second century.

⁸¹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.32; Suetonius, *Divus Nero.* 26.6; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97

⁸² Pliny *Ep.* 3.8; 10.94-95; 5.10; 9.34; 10.94.1. See also Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, Penguin Classics, transl. Robert Graves, revised edn. (London: Penguin Group, 2007), pp. xviii-xix; Pliny, *Ep.* 1.20; 2.11; 4.13; 6.16; 5.20.

⁸³ For discussion on the use of terms of *religio* and *superstitio*, see Robert D. Heaton, 'Imperial Heresiology, *Religio* and *Superstitio* as Markers of an Emergent Roman Rhetoric of Difference', *SBL 2015 Annual Meeting*, Atlanta, GA, November 19, 2014.

⁸⁴ *Chronica* Book II, 30.6-7. Taken from <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/35052.htm>. [Accessed 20 January 2023]. See also Eric Laupot, 'Tacitus' Fragment 2: The Anti-Roman Movement of the 'Christiani' and the Nazoreans', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 54.3. (2000), pp. 233-247 (p.237).

But on the opposite side, others and Titus himself thought that the temple ought specially to be overthrown, in order that the religion of the Jews and of the Christians might more thoroughly be subverted; for that these religions, although contrary to each other, had nevertheless proceeded from the same authors; that the Christians had sprung up from among the Jews; and that, if the root were extirpated, the offshoot would speedily perish.

This episode suggests that, according to the leadership of the Roman legion in charge of putting down the Jewish revolt that ultimately resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the 'Christiani' were perceived as a significant faction of Jewish Zealots, acting in opposition to Rome and in defense of Israel.

Further non-Christian references to the persecution of the early Christ followers during the first century is offered by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus on two separate occasions. The first narrative appears in his opus magnum, *De Vita XII Caesarum, Divus Claudius* 25.4 (c. 110 AD). In this passage a key sentence states: 'Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome'.⁸⁵ This wording points to incidents of Christian persecution during the reign of Caesar Claudius, specifically connected to the edict he issued roughly between 42-49 AD.⁸⁶ Some scholars propose that Caesar Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome may have included Christians who were not explicitly identified as such by the Roman authorities. The expulsion likely resulted from disturbances and objections arising from the sacrilegious teachings of early Christ followers, which seemingly fits well with Acts 18:2: 'There he (Paul) met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome'.

Critics have argued that at the time of the composition of Paul's letter to the Romans (1:6-7), the term 'Christians' or *Chrestiani* was not yet adopted. In fact, in Acts the Jesus movement was called 'the Way' and, in Romans, Paul refers to them as 'Gentiles belonging to Jesus Christ' and 'God's holy people'.⁸⁷ However, during the early second century when Suetonius chronicled

⁸⁵ Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*. 25.4: 'Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit'.

⁸⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 19.5.2 (279).

⁸⁷ Acts 9:2; 19:9; 23; 22:4; 24:14,22; Rom. 1:6-7.

this incident, the term Christians had already gained widespread recognition.⁸⁸ Most scholars contend, therefore, that the term *Chrestus* is likely a misspelling by Suetonius of the name Christus. This is further backed by the fact that the Greek term for ‘Christians’ is spelled as *Christianos*, *Chreistianos*, and *Chrēstianos*, with the latter perfectly aligning with Tacitus' Latin translation in the *Testimonium Taciteum*. Adding further support to this argument, the Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth-century Christian edition of the Greek Bible, spells the term Chrēstianos in three instances within the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:8; 1 Peter 4:16).

In his work *De Vita XII Caesarum, Divus Nero*, Suetonius presents another example of early Christian persecution under Roman rule. In this text, Suetonius offers partial confirmation of the events previously recounted by Tacitus, specifically concerning brief references to of the overall coercive actions implemented by Caesar Nero during his rule. Moreover, the passages suggests that Suetonius approves of the punishment inflicted by the Emperor upon the Christians, whom he describes with disdain as ‘a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition’ (*genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*).⁸⁹ However, unlike Tacitus, Suetonius does not seem to attribute the punishment of Christians as related to the Great Fire. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether Suetonius drew in part from Tacitus as a source or vice versa or both. It is even unclear to what extent, if at all, the works of Josephus may have influenced both Tacitus and Suetonius. What *can* be ascertained, though, is that during the turn of the first century, these prominent secular sources uniformly acknowledge the persecution of Christ followers as a distinct sect within Judaism, particularly, though not exclusively, during the reign of Caesar Nero.

Upon closer examination of Josephus’ *Testimonium Flavianum*, Tacitus’ *Testimonium Taciteum* and Suetonius’ *De Vita XII Caesarum*, all of which are considered the most authoritative non-Christian confirmation of early Christian persecution, certain questions may arise. The letter composed by Pliny the Younger to Caesar Trajan, as previously outlined, provides us with a

⁸⁸ First time the Gospel mentions the term Christians is in Acts 11:25-26. See also Richard Carrier, ‘The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44’, *Vigilae Christianae* 68.3 (2014), pp. 264-283 (pp.271-273). Carrier believes that ‘the followers of Chrestus’ in Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*. 25.4 refers to a sect of Jewish rebels led by and named after the Jewish zealot ‘Chrestus’. For more on the term ‘Chrestus’, see Brigit van der Lans and Jan N. Bremmer, ‘Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians: An Invention of Tradition?’, *Eirene, Studia Graeca et Latina*, 53, (2017), pp. 299-311 (Appendix, pp.317-22).

⁸⁹ Suetonius, *Divus Nero*. 16.2.

historical insight into how second-century Roman authorities perceived Christians. Found in his tenth book of correspondence, written about fifty years after Caesar Nero's rule (c. 112 AD), Pliny speaks about Christians in his capacity as the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. He demonstrates a lack of knowledge concerning the legal standing of Christ followers when presented before him, stating: 'I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed'.⁹⁰ Given Pliny's background, his statement is perplexing, especially considering Pliny's upbringing during Caesar Nero's reign and his apprenticeship under Caesar Nero's former Commander of Germania, Lucius Verginius Rufus, who suppressed a revolt against Caesar Nero in 68 AD. But most of all, his lack of knowledge regarding the legal status of Christians is intriguing given his longstanding administrative and judicial career in Rome since 81 AD.⁹¹

Cassius Dio's *Roman History (Historia Romana)*, authored in the latter half of the second century, is frequently cited as a corroborating text expressing doubt regarding Neronian or even pre-Neronian Christian persecution.⁹² JuliAnne Rach notes that Dio does not make any reference to Christians or early Christ followers in his writings. However, he *does* seek to portray a negative image of Caesar Nero.⁹³ Rach argues that Dio's decision to omit any mention of Christians is telling, especially given the long-standing historical association of Caesar Nero's reign with severe cruelty towards Christians by numerous historians.⁹⁴

Following the 'argumentum ex silentio' in both Pliny and Dio's account, some prominent modern critics, like the mythicist Richard Carrier, argue that the authenticity of the *Testimonium Taciteum* should be rejected, as not a single Christian or secular source, until the fourth century, corroborates the claim by Tacitus that Christians were persecuted by Caesar Nero as perpetrators of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. Therefore, he concludes in his paper that part of the key

⁹⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Letters (Epistolae)*, Volume II: Book 10, XCVI.

⁹¹ Bernard William Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, Classic (London: Forgotten Books Publishing, 2018), p.399-405.

⁹² Lucius Cassius Dio or Dio Cocceianus (c.510 – 235 AD) was the grandson of Dio Chrysostom. Although a high-ranking Roman administrator, which included positions as legate and three consulships, he was half Greek and wrote his 80 books *Romaika (Roman History or Historia Romana)* in Greek over a 22-year period (211-233 AD).

⁹³ Dio Cassius, Book 62.

⁹⁴ JuliAnne Rach, 'The Burden of Proof: Examining the Reliability of Sources Regarding Neronian Persecution', p.22.

passage in *Ant.* 15.44, *auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio, imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio affectus erat*, was most likely subject to a ‘fourth century or later (Christian) interpolation’.⁹⁵

Similarly, Brent D. Shaw questions the ‘conventional certainty’ of the persecution of Christians in the time of Caesar Nero and possibly even before.⁹⁶ Shaw, points out that ‘the degree of certainty in the Neronian persecution stands in almost inverse proportion to the quality and quantity of the data’.⁹⁷ Like Richard Carrier, Shaw argues that connecting Christian persecution to the Great Fire during Nero’s reign in Rome depend exclusively on Tacitus’ account and both consider Tacitus’ account questionable.⁹⁸ However, the failure of Carrier and Shaw to address New Testament sources and non-canonical Christian writings weakens their evaluation. As we will discover, it is mainly from these sources that a compelling indication arises, affirming that the Christian persecution mentioned in the Apocalypse indeed took place well before, during, and shortly after the fall of the Jerusalem temple.

New Testament Sources

Focusing on New Testament sources, it will be argued in this chapter that, beyond the Book of Revelation, instances of Christian persecution are documented in various texts, including the Gospels, Paul’s epistles, Luke-Acts, the Letter of 1 Peter and the Book of Hebrews.⁹⁹ These sources tell us, for example, about accusations of blasphemy levelled against Christ (Mt. 26:65) and against his followers for being disciples of a heretical sect propagating sacrilegious teachings in

⁹⁵ Richard Carrier, ‘The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44’, *Vigilae Christianae* 68.3 (2014), pp. 264-283 (p.283). A similar argument is made by Brent D Shaw. ‘The Myth of the Neronian Persecution’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 105 (2015), pp.1-28.

⁹⁶ Brent D. Shaw, ‘The Myth of the Neronian Persecution’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 105 (2015) 1-28.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁹⁹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, ‘The Persecution of Christians in the first Century’, *JETS* 61.3 (2018), pp. 525-547. In the Gospels Schnabel finds relevant references in Mk 14:1, Mt 26:66, 27:24, Lk 23:1-25, Jn 11:47-53, 57, 19:6). In Acts the references are as follows: (3:13; 8:1, 4-5; 8:3; 14, 9:1-2; 12:1, 2-4; 13:50; 14:5,19; 16:19-21, 22-24; 17:5-10; 18:12-13; 19:23-34; 20:3; 21:36; 22:5). See also 1 Peter (1:5-6; 3:9,14-16; 4:4,12-15), in Hebrews (10:32-34) and in the Book of Revelation (1:9, 2:9-10, 3:8-9, 2:13, 12:11).

defiance of Jewish Mosaic Laws.¹⁰⁰ The gravity of the offence is illustrated in Matthew 26:64, where Jesus' proclamation, 'From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven', prompts the High Priest Caiaphas to tear his clothes in utter horror. Using such language, Jesus essentially elevates himself to a divine status, constituting a clear case of blasphemy.

In John 11:47-48, members of the Sanhedrin, consisting of both Pharisees and Sadducees, express grave concern about the potential repercussions of the Jesus movement: 'Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?", they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation"'. While they do not dispute the reported miracles that Jesus allegedly performed, they were unsettled by the growing number of Jews drawn to this movement. The growing number of followers was seen as eroding the scribes' power base and that of the nation. Understandably, from the scribes' perspective, Jesus and his followers need to be silenced. These accounts underline the conflict between the teachings of Jesus and the established Laws of Moses as upheld by the scribes, which Jesus' seemingly challenged. This escalation eventually led to the intensified persecution of the early Christ followers in Jerusalem soon after Jesus' death.

The escalating mistreatment of the early Christ followers in Jerusalem eventually led to the death of Stephen, 'one of the seven men of an unblemished character, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom chosen by the apostles to attend to the care of tables' of the early Jesus movement.¹⁰¹ His steadfast commitment to spreading Christ's teachings resulted in accusations of blasphemy by members of the Synagogue of the Freedman (Acts 6:9-12), which ultimately leads to his stoning to death (Acts 6:58). Mounting intimidation is further evidenced in Acts 5:17-18: 'Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail'. Despite being freed by an angel of the Lord (Acts 5:19), the apostles continue preaching and are brought in

¹⁰⁰ The term sect is used here following the Church-Sect Model in Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* (New York: MacMillan, 1931), vol 1, 331-39, cited in Eyal Regev, 'Were the Early Christians Sectarrians?', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 130.4 (2011), pp. 771-793 (here p.772).

¹⁰¹ https://jesus-passion.com/saint_stephen_first_martyr.pdf, p.838.

again by the temple guards. The high priest then admonishes them: 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name' (Acts 5:28). A few years later in Jerusalem, under the reign of Caesar Claudius and under the rule of Jewish King Agrippa I (41-44 A.D.), James, the brother of Jesus is put to death (Acts 12:1-4, cf. *Ant.* 20.9.1).

Even more compelling New Testament evidence of early Christian persecution is conveyed through Paul's own acknowledgement following Jesus' crucifixion.¹⁰² In Acts 7:57-58, for example, as a young Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, as Paul was then known, is described as an eyewitness to the martyrdom of Stephen and he personally leads 'the great persecution against the Church in Jerusalem' (Acts 8:1, 3). In Acts 9:1-1 and 22:5 Paul's objective of visiting Damascus, probably in the early thirties AD, was to persecute Christians by hunting them down and take them prisoners to Jerusalem for punishment. After Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, he sets out on his missionary journeys throughout the eastern part of the Mediterranean, where he experiences first-hand hostility from various local Jewish communities and their leaders across Asia Minor.¹⁰³ In Acts 17:4-9, for example, around 51 AD, 'some Jews in Thessalonica were persuaded by Paul and Silas' proclamation of Jesus to them as the Messiah, others were jealous and accused them of defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus'. In Tess 2:13-16, Paul recalls this incident while praising them for being steadfast in their beliefs: '[...] You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews.' In 2 Cor 11:23-26, Paul tells his congregation in Corinth, presumably during the early reign of Caesar Nero (53-54 AD), about the trials he faced and the persecution he endured for his faith in Christ:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from

¹⁰² 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:5-6; Gal. 1:13-14; Acts 22:3-4; 26:9-11.

¹⁰³ Paul's Epistles testify abundantly to the animosity from the local Jewish communities against the early Christ believers during his missionary journeys to the provinces of Judea, Nabataea/Arabia, Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, Asia Minor, Pontus-Bithynia, Cappadocia, Rome (Rom. 8:35; 12:14; 1 Cor 1:23; 4:12; 2 Cor. 4:9, 32; 2 Thess. 1:4; 4:12-15; 2 Tim. 3:12; Heb. 10:32, 12:4, 13:12).

bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

Mikael Tellbe ascribes the Jewish hostilities not only to theological factors, such as the challenge posed by the proclamation of the crucified Messiah to the Jewish community (1 Cor 1:23), but also to the impact of local socio-political and economic factors.¹⁰⁴ Within the Roman Empire, Jews held a privileged socio-political status, a position that traced its origins back to the Hasmonean – Roman peace treaty of 161 BC.¹⁰⁵ Once Jewish cities gradually came under Roman rule, Jewish communities were determined to protect their special standing.¹⁰⁶ This sparked envy among Greek communities who viewed Jews as barbarians and saw this as a stark reminder of their own subjugated status. Economically, conflict arose between Jews and the Christ followers concerning the temple tax. Conversion of Jews caused by Christian missionary activities led to a decline in income since diaspora Jews would traditionally send to support the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁷

Various passages in the Book of Acts (chapters 4-5; 8:1, 11:19-21; 21) note that Christians, because of persecution in Jerusalem, sought refuge in various cities within and beyond Judea and Samaria. In some of these cities, Christians experienced adversity from local Jewish communities for various reasons, while in others, where early communities of Christ followers were reportedly established, such as Derbe (Acts 14:20-21), Perge (Acts 14:25), Troas (2 Cor 2:12), Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae (Col 4:13-14), the Gospel makes no mention of such incidents. This suggests that Christian maltreatment by Jewish communities was scattered across broad regions in Asia Minor but occurred infrequently.

¹⁰⁴ Mikael Tellbe, 'Relationships among Christ-Believers and Jewish Communities in First-Century Asia Minor', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Craig R. Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 153-167, (pp. 156-159).

¹⁰⁵ Duncan E. MacRae, 'Reading the Roman-Jewish treaty in 1 Maccabees 8', *Hermathena*, 200/201 (2016), pp.73-94, (pp.73-75).

¹⁰⁶ Norman Bentwich, 'The Rightfulness of the Jews in the Roman Empire', *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 6.2 (1915), pp. 325-336 (p.327).

¹⁰⁷ On Jewish social conflict with Greeks and on transport of temple tax, see also Josephus, *Ant.* 16.6.1-8 (16.160-178).

Further proof of Christian persecution, attested in the New Testament writings, is evident in the Letter of 1 Peter. The author repeatedly recalls his audience, presumably all Christ followers including those of Jewish and Gentile origin (1 Pet. 5:14), dispersed across Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1), about the hardships, trials and unjust sufferings they endured for their recently adopted beliefs (1 Pet. 1:6, 2:12).¹⁰⁸ Reflecting a commonly held view by modern scholars, Peter wrote his epistle possibly with the help of Silvanus (Silas), 'whom he regards as his faithful brother' (1 Pet. 5:12) between 62-67 AD in Rome. However, evidence supporting this specific date and location remains inconclusive.¹⁰⁹

Through his warnings and words of encouragement, the author of 1 Peter paints a predominantly pagan milieu where early Christ followers, of Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) origin, lived in collective fear of mistreatment. This is evident, for example, in passages like 1 Pet. 2:12 and 1 Pet. 20, where the author urges his audience to 'Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God in the day he visits us. [...]. But if you suffer for being good and you endure it, this is commendable before God'. The text further describes these sufferings as verbal attacks, including slander (1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16), abuse (1 Pet. 4:4) or insults (1 Pet. 4:14).¹¹⁰ Such harassment is to be expected from local pagan (Greco-Roman) communities rather than Roman authorities. In fact, when the author pleads for obedience to the Roman authorities, the expectation is fair treatment from them rather than from the pagans: 'Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake of every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority or the governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those to do right' (1 Pet. 2:13-14).

Like the First Epistle of Peter, the author of Hebrews reminds his audience not to forsake their commitment to Christ even in the face of sufferings. The letter to the Hebrews provides a

¹⁰⁸ Scholarship on the origins of the audience addressed in 1 Peter remains divided. Arguments for both understandings appear to be equally valid.

¹⁰⁹ Gary H. Everett, *Introduction to the Holy Scriptures. Study Notes on the Holy Scriptures using a Theme-based Approach to identify Literary Structures. The Epistle 1 Peter*, August 2022 Edition, pp.29-30. <https://www.academia.edu/17082883/Introduction_to_the_Holy_Scriptures_2022_edition> [Accessed 30 December 2023].

¹¹⁰ Eckhard J. Schnabel, 'The Persecution of Christians in the First Century', *JETS* 61.3 (2018), p.544.

clear reference to the challenges faced by early Christ followers, particularly in verses 10:32-34: 'Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated'. The level of suffering can be further inferred from Heb. 12:4: 'In your struggle against sin, you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood'.¹¹¹ While the verbal abuses, as hinted at in 1 Peter and Hebrews, indicate a certain level of emotional distress and the perception of religious oppression among the Christ followers, the two passages appear to indicate the absence of Christian martyrdom within the community addressed by the respective authors. This suggests that both writers are unlikely to be addressing a community of early Christians located in Jerusalem, where the slayings of Stephan and James were widely-known incidents.

The passages cited from Luke-Acts, the First Epistle of Peter, and the Book of Hebrews collectively depict early Christ followers undergoing hardship because of their newfound faith. This occurred shortly after Jesus' death, though the severity of suffering varied from community to community. The next part of the study will examine the representation of the Christian oppression narrative in well-known non-canonical Christian texts and some later influential writings believed to have been composed at the turn of the first century.

Non-canonical Christian writings

As observed thus far, references to Christian persecution referenced in the Book of Revelation transcend mere biblical symbolism; they reflect specific historical events and unveils the Apocalypse's imagery in its historical context. New Testament sources examined thus far corroborate the view that the persecution of Christians prior to the Great Fire of Rome was mainly instigated by Jewish communities and their religious leaders. Conversely, secular accounts primarily attribute the oppression of Christians after 64 AD to the brutality of the Roman

¹¹¹ Gareth Lee, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), pp.16-17

authorities, especially in the latter period of Emperor Nero's reign. However, in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the historical context of early Christian persecution, as referenced in the Apocalypse, it is important to consider a broader range of influential sources.

Probably the earliest of the non-canonical sources is the *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*. The epistle, commonly known as *1 Clement* or *Pseudo Clement*, is generally dated around 95 AD and 'written in the name of the Roman Church to the Christian brotherhood in Corinth'.¹¹² It is unlikely that Clement himself authored the epistle; instead, it is claimed to have been written or sent by him, the third successor of Peter as Bishop of Rome. Scholars often interpret the opening statement, 'Because of the sudden and repeated misfortunes and setbacks we have experienced', as an allusion to the Domitianic persecution of early Christ followers. This supposition is complemented by 1 Clem. 7.1: 'For we are in the same arena and the same contest is set before us'.¹¹³ However, there is credible evidence in support of dating the epistle before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, potentially linking the passage to a Neronian persecution instead.¹¹⁴

For example, the use of the expression 'sudden and repeated' in 1 Clement 1.1 suggests an unforeseen, perhaps abrupt and impactful shift in the circumstances of Christ followers in Rome, which likely lasted for some period. This description fits the sudden eruption of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, followed by the rapid accusation and the ensuing purge of Christians, as portrayed by Tacitus in the earlier examined *Testimonium Taciteum*. Such an intense and sudden outburst of hostilities towards Christians in general is completely absent during Domitian's reign. In fact, Domitian's reputation in Asia Minor, covered by the Apocalypse, was far from oppressive. As

¹¹² J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers. The Early Christian Writings of Church Leaders Who Followed Soon After the Apostles of Jesus Christ*, (Cambridge, Ohio: Christian Publishing House, 2020), pp.8-10.

<http://www.churchinhistory.org/s3-gospels/dating-clement.htm>. [Accessed 24 August 2023]; Harry O. Maier, '1 Clement' in *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius*, (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2002).

¹¹³ Katja Kujanpää, 'Paul and the Author of 1 Clement as Entrepreneurs of Identity in Corinthian Crises of Leadership', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 44.2 (2022), pp. 368-389.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin Thomas, 'Christian Hope and Liturgical Order in 1 Clement 40-44', *Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift: Neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie*, 98.4 (2008), pp. 302-310; Michael Stover, *The Dating of 1 Clement*, Th.M. Thesis, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC, 2012), p.7. Stover argues that 1 Clement, the Book of Revelation and the letter to the Hebrews share the same context and a similar reference, including the Jerusalem temple description as 'a structure still standing'. Meaning that the main theme of the accounts in 1 Clement and the epistles of Ignatius are about restoration of ecclesiastical obedience and order.

Leonard L. Thompson asserts: 'Sources other than the Book of Revelation portray Christians, for the most part, as sharing peacefully in urban Asian life alongside their non-Christian neighbors. [...]. From this social backdrop (in the province of Asia Minor), one cannot assume widespread oppression and persecution of Asian Christians: nor can we assume that Asian Christians lived in an isolated ghetto as separatists from urban Greco-Roman life'.¹¹⁵

Aside from the content, the syntax adopted by the author in 1 Clement 41.2, using the present tense, suggests that the Jerusalem temple still stands at the time of writing the letter:

The sacrifices made daily, or for vows, or for sin and transgression are not offered everywhere, brothers, but in Jerusalem alone; and even there a sacrifice is not made in just any place, but before the sanctuary on the altar, after the sacrificial animal has been inspected for blemishes by both the high priest and the ministers mentioned earlier.

In other words, matching these facts with the notion of an early Christian persecution under the rule of Caesar Domitian poses challenges.

The early date for the composition of the Letter to the Romans is further corroborated in 1 Clement 5.2-6. Within this passage, reference is made to 'the good Apostles Peter and Paul' as 'noble examples of our own generation,' who, 'in quite recent times', faced persecution and struggled in the contest even unto death. These 'time markers' strongly reflect a Christian persecution during Caesar Nero's rule rather than any other period in the first century. But above all, in the excerpts examined above, the author also clearly conveys a pervasive sense of unease that was apparent in the Christian communities, which fits particularly well within this historical period.

A second compelling non-canonical Christian piece of evidence that refers to the early persecution of Christians for their faith is found in the epistles written by the early Eastern Church Father Ignatius of Antioch as he undertook his journey to Rome to be executed.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, pp.171-173 (brackets are mine).

¹¹⁶ What is known about Ignatius' life (? - c. 110 AD) can be primarily distilled from his epistles and circumstantial evidence. His name Ignatius, in combination with Theophorus, may indicate a Syrian background. Being chained, and martyred to the wild beast suggests that he was not a Roman citizen (although his mandatory journey to Rome may raise some doubt). Furthermore, some passages in his epistles (*Rom.* 9; *Eph.* 21; *Trall.* 13; *Smyrn.* 11) indicate his late conversion to Christianity. Origen and Eusebius list him as the second bishop of Antioch and tell us that his martyrdom took place during the reign of Caesar Trajan (98-117 AD). See further J.H. Srawley, *The*

Various sources place Ignatius between c.35-c.117 AD and his *Letters* in the second half of the reign of Trajan, around 110 AD, which would make him a contemporary of Clement, Polycarp and Papias.¹¹⁷ In his correspondence with the Church of Magnesia, Ignatius comments on Christian persecution by citing the martyrdom of Peter and Paul: ‘For the most divine prophets lived according to Jesus Christ. For this reason, also they were persecuted’ (*Magn.8.2*). According to Church tradition, their deaths are believed to have taken place during the reign of Caesar Nero. Considering that Ignatius was likely in his twenties during Nero’s reign, the passage may allude to his personal recollection of Nero’s brutal reputation. This assumption also finds support in his Letter to the Church of Ephesus, where Ignatius states: ‘For you were eager to see me, since you heard that I was being brought in chains from Syria because of the name and hope we share, and that I was hoping, through your prayer, to be allowed to fight the beasts in Rome, that by doing so I might be able to be a disciple’.¹¹⁸ The passage implies that Ignatius endured persecution simply for professing his beliefs, a circumstance similar as described in the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan regarding the legal standing of Christians in Bithynia during the same period.¹¹⁹

Furthermore, Ignatius' depiction of his impending death could be likened to, and viewed as, a continuation of the way executions were carried out during Nero’s reign half a century earlier, as described in Tacitus' account; Christians were 'covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs'.¹²⁰ This portrayal is also alluded to in Ign. *Rom* 4.2: 'Allow me to be bread for the wild beasts; through them, I am able to attain to God', and in Ign. *Rom* 5.3: 'Fire and cross and packs of wild beasts, cuttings and being torn apart, the scattering of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of the whole body, the evil torments of the devil—let them come upon me, only that I may attain to Jesus Christ’.

Epistles of St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, Translations of Christian Literature, Series I, Greek Texts, Re-issue 1919, (London: Forgotten Books Publishing and c Ltd, 2016), pp.20-21.

¹¹⁷ St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote seven epistles in the provinces of Asia Minor while on his journey to Rome to be executed. It is generally believed that four were written in Smyrna (to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, and Romans) and three in Alexandria Troas (Philadelphians, Smyrnaeans and to Polycarp). See further J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers. The Early Christian Writings of Church Leaders Who Followed Soon After the Apostles of Jesus Christ* (Cambridge, Ohio: Christian Publishing House, 2020), pp.44-50.

¹¹⁸ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 1.2.

¹¹⁹ Pliny the Younger, *Letters (Epistolae)*, Volume II: Book 10, XCVI.

¹²⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44.

In summary, the main theme of the accounts in 1 Clement and the epistles of Ignatius are about restoration of ecclesiastical obedience and order. However, the significance of their testimonies exists in their reference to a Neronian persecution. Clement and Ignatius were contemporaries, born in the early thirties and residing in the early Christian centers of Rome and Antioch. As such, according to Christian tradition, they were most likely witnesses to the accounts of the Apostles.¹²¹ This adds credibility to their descriptions of the persecution faced by early Christians during the reign of Nero, as witnessed during their own lives and as referenced in the Apocalypse.

Further non-canonical texts referring to early Christian persecution include the *Letter to Diognetus* and the *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi (Martyrdom of St. Polycarp)*. They are considered among the first writings of the so-called Christian martyrdom literary era.¹²² The authors of this genre 'idealize the martyrs and their sacrifices, emphasizing their perseverance and faithful confessions'.¹²³ The author of the *Letter to Diognetus*, commonly identified as 'Mathetes' or a disciple of the Apostles, exhibits a strong affinity to the Apostles using a 'Greek style filled with Pauline convictions'.¹²⁴ The religious differentiation emphasized by the author, which underscores the contrast between the Christian faith and that of the Jews and Greeks, appears to be a natural extension of Paul's teachings.¹²⁵

This may point to a first-century composition of the epistle, potentially predating the fall of the Jerusalem temple, which is earlier than the broad periodization commonly attributed to the

¹²¹ Ignatius does not claim to have received teachings directly from the Apostles, yet he often speaks with authority on matters of Christian doctrine and practice, suggesting a strong connection to apostolic teaching. On Clement: 'He, by direction of the blessed Peter, undertook the pontifical office of governing the church, even as Peter received the seat of authority from the Lord Jesus Christ' cited in Louse Ropes Loomis, 'The Book of The Popes' (Liber Pontificalis), *Records or Civilization: Sources and Studies*, ed. James T. Shotwell (Columbia University Press: New York 1916), p.7. In Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (Prescription against Heretics), 32, the following is stated: For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter.

¹²² Most notable authors and texts among them are Justin Martyr's *Apology*, Origen's *De principiis*, St. Jerome's *De Viris Illustrious*, *Commentarium in Daniele* and Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorem*.

¹²³ Paul Hartog, 'The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 18.1 (2014), pp. 49-79 (pp.62-71).

¹²⁴ Diognetus 11.1: 'but as a disciple of the apostles, I am becoming a teacher of the nations'.

¹²⁵ Rom. 1:16, 3:9, 1 Cor.1:22-23. See further R.L Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018).

text by various scholars.¹²⁶ For example, the passage in *Ep. Diogn.* 1.1, '[...] and why this new race or way of life came into being now and not before [...]', could refer to the recent start of the early Christian missionary era. This assumption is further supported by the allegation in *Ep. Diogn.* 5.17: 'They are attacked by Jews as foreigners and persecuted by Greeks. And those who hate them cannot explain the cause of their enmity'. As we have seen earlier, especially in the New Testament sources, early Christ followers were harassed by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities mainly, though not exclusively, before Nero's reign. However, the *Letter to Diognetus* also makes reference to the Neronian persecution, for example in *Ep. Diogn.* 7.7: 'Do you not see how they are cast to the wild beasts that they might deny the Lord, and yet they are not overcome?'. Although the text lacks specific contextual details regarding the composition of the epistle, such as its place and time, it unmistakably suggests the reality of an early Christian persecution.

This applies also to the *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi (Martyrdom of Polycarp)*, which was likely composed in the mid-second century. The epistle was sent by 'the Church of God which sojourns at Smyrna to the Church of God sojourning in Philomelium, and to all the congregations of the Holy and Catholic Church in every place'.¹²⁷ The text represents an unique eyewitness account outside the biblical canon of the martyrdom of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna.¹²⁸ It unmistakably shows a continuance and intensification of the persecution of Christians for their faith, which started early in the first century and continued during the second century.¹²⁹ In *Hist. eccl.* 4.15, Eusebius refers to a passage from Polycarp's Martyrdom (9.2-3) in which the city's proconsul of Smyrna pressures Polycarp to express his allegiance to the divine fortune of Caesar: 'Swear by the genius of Caesar' and 'Take the oath and I will release you. Revile Christ'. These phrases allude to the 'imperial cult' adopted after the posthumous deification of Julius Caesar in

¹²⁶ The date of the composition of the *Letter to Diognetes* is broadly estimated by various scholars between the time of the Apostles up to the fourth century and sometime even later.

¹²⁷ Brian E. Fitzgerald, 'Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition', *St. Philip's Antiochian Orthodox Church*, Souderton, PA, 3, 10, 17 June & 1 July 2006, 1-29, (p.1). https://www.st-philip.net/files/Fitzgerald%20Patristic%20series/polycarp_of_smyrna.pdf [Accessed, 1 February 2023]. *St. Polycarp* (c. 69-c.156).

¹²⁸ *Pol. Martyrium*, 19:2, 'He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, as having been altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ'.

¹²⁹ *Pol. Martyrium*, 20:1-2. The events were summarized by a certain Marcion (Marcianus) and written by another called Everestus.

42 BC. This incident points to a tradition that was also rooted during Nero's reign as alluded to in the Book of Revelation.

For example, Rev. 13:4-8, as described earlier, is frequently understood as addressing the challenge confronted by early Christians in adhering to the expectations of the 'imperial cult'. This includes taking an oath by the divine Caesar as described in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* during the mid-second century and some four decades earlier as defined in Pliny's correspondence with Caesar Trajan.¹³⁰ Thus, this practice may indicate an ongoing evolution of forcing Christians to refute 'atheism' by acknowledging the existence and authority of the pagan gods. This may have contributed to Nero's decision to scapegoat Christians in relation to the Great Fire of Rome.¹³¹

Finally, during the later patristic period, two significant authors influence our understanding of early Christian persecution. The first, Tertullian (155-220 AD) from Carthage authored several classic works like *Ad Martyras* (To the Martyrs), *Ad Nationes* (To the Nations), and the *Apologeticum* (Apologetics). These influential writings belong to the age of Christian martyrdom literature, written during the early phase of the patristic period. From the second century until the reign of Caesar Constantine, Christian apologists like Tertullian opposed the Roman empire's blatant injustices and persecution committed against Christians.¹³² In *Ad nationes*, he rants in defense of Christianity accusing the Roman authorities of ignorance using sarcasm and even threats against them.¹³³ His confrontational style reveals much of the issues related to the first- and second-century Christian persecution, including a clear reference to Caesar Nero's reign: 'Caesar held to his opinion and threatened danger to accusers of the Christians. Consult your histories. There you will find that Nero was the first to rage with the imperial sword against this school in the very hour of its rise in Rome' (*Apol.5.3*). Some scholars

¹³⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Letters (Epistolae)*, Volume II: Book 10, XCVI: Pliny would consider dismissing anyone who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after Pliny a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to Caesar Trajan's statue.

¹³¹ Atheism in the sense of 'not conceding the existence and power of the pagan gods'.

¹³² Tertullian or Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (Carthage, d. 160 -c. 240 AD), a Christian theologian, known as the Father of Latin Christianity of the Western Church. Information about Tertullian is gleaned from his writings and later authors (most notably in St. Jerome's *Catalogus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*). Trained as a lawyer, he converted to Christianity in his early life. His most notable works are *Ad martyras*, *Ad nationes* and the *Apologeticum* and his influence on Christian doctrine is well noted. See for more details, Philip Schaff, *ANF03.Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, American edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006), pp. 4-18.

¹³³ Tertullian, *Ad nat.* 1.

have suggested that Tertullian's mention of Caesar Nero, as cited by Eusebius, probably draws from Tacitus' narrative, the sole surviving source.¹³⁴ However, Tertullian's directive to 'Consult your histories' is phrased in the plural form, suggesting that it might better correspond to the historical documents or accounts related to the actions and decisions of the Roman Senate during the time of Nero, known as the *Acta Senatus*.¹³⁵

Tertullian also touches on the pre-Neronian persecution of Christians instigated by the Jewish communities: 'His (Jesus') disciples, also, were scattered through the world, in obedience to the precept of God their teacher; they suffered much from Jewish persecution—but gladly enough because of their faith in the truth; finally at Rome, through the cruelty of Nero, they sowed the seed of Christian blood' (*Apol.*21.25). The two passages above essentially emphasize the core theme of this dissertation. They reinforce the historical importance of the Apocalypse's, illustration of Christian oppression as initiated by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities before 64 AD, as well as by the Roman authorities during the later period of Caesar Nero's rule.

Arguably the most impactful non-canonical chronicle of Christian persecution from the later patristic era is the *Historia Ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)* authored by the influential fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius. Despite being removed in time from the actual events, Eusebius' work draws upon numerous non-extant manuscripts, rendering it exceptionally valuable as a primary source concerning the history of the Church from the ministry of Christ to the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).¹³⁶ Throughout this historical narrative, Eusebius consistently points to the Jews and Roman emperors as the primary persecutors of early Christians.¹³⁷ Eusebius, furthermore, shows his eagerness to illustrate the divine judgement in his cited sources that would befall the perpetrators, particularly the Jewish leaders, 'who deserved it as they

¹³⁴ JuliAnne Rach, 'The Burden of Proof: Examining the Reliability of Sources Regarding Neronian Persecution', p.25. *Hist. eccl.* 2.25. Tertullian *Apol.* 5.3.

¹³⁵ On *Acta Senatus* see Suetonius, *Divus Julius*. 20, *Divus Augustus*. 36.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10. 'Eusebius writes of the fearless defenders of the faith who had the courage to face emperors and face down heretics, of bishops and elders who guided the church through horrendous adversity, and of writers whose crucial statements preserving orthodoxy would in many cases have been lost had Eusebius not reported them word for word'.

¹³⁷ *Hist eccl.* 2.5.6; 2.6.3-5; 2.7.1.

should have known better than to kill Christ and Christians'.¹³⁸ Eusebius' direct reference to Caesar Nero's reign we find, for example, in *Hist eccl.* 2.25, where he states,

When the rule of Nero was now gathering strength for unholy objects he began to take up arms against the worship of the God of the universe. It is not part of the present work to describe his depravity: many indeed have related his story in accurate narrative, and from them he who wishes can study the perversity of his degenerate madness, which made him compass the unreasonable destruction of so many thousands, until he reached that final guilt of sparing neither his nearest nor dearest, so that in various ways he did to death alike his mother, brothers, and wife, with thousands of others attached to his family, as though they were enemies and foes But with all this there was still lacking to him this—that it should be attributed to him that he was the first of the emperors to be pointed out as a foe of divine religion. This again the Latin writer Tertullian mentions in one place as follows: "Look at your records: there you will find that Nero was the first to persecute this belief when, having overcome the whole East, he was specially cruel in Rome against all. We boast that such a man was the author of our chastisement; for he who knows him can understand that nothing would have been condemned by Nero had it not been great and good [...].

In summary, the evidence presented in this chapter, drawn from various sources including secular, New Testament, writings, and non-canonical Christian texts, strongly supports the historical validity of early persecution against Christians, as symbolized in the Book of Revelation. However, beyond the records of Tacitus and Suetonius, secular evidence about the Neronian persecution of Christians tends to be somewhat ambiguous, leading to debates about its extent and severity. Evidence from the New Testament, on the other hand, unequivocally attest to the persecution of early Christ followers from the moment the Apostles started their missionary activities and was instigated primarily by both Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities. Lastly, the non-canonical Christian accounts examined in this chapter of the study suggest that the persecution of Christians escalated gradually to varying degrees during the first and second centuries. There is thus little doubt about the historical reality of the persecution of Christians as referenced in the Apocalypse. In other words, considering the prevailing preterist and a-millennial interpretation of the allusions in the Apocalypse, as embraced in this study, it is highly

¹³⁸ William Tabbernee, 'Eusebius' "Theology of Persecution": As seen in the Various Editions of the Church History', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 5(3) (1997), pp. 319-334, (pp. 324-326). Eusebius lists the later emperors Septimius Severus, Maximinus I, Decius, Gallus and Valerian as other 'persecuting emperors', with Caesar Domitian as the only other first century emperor. He further lists protecting and sympathetic emperors of Christianity like Caesars Vespasian, Antoninus Pius, Gallienus, Philip the Arabian and others (3.17.1; 4.12.1b-13.7; 7.15.1-16.1 and 6.34.1).

probable that the symbolism in the Apocalypse pertains to specific events that took place well before, during, and shortly after the fall of the Jerusalem temple.

Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to demonstrate that the symbolism in the Book of Revelation unmistakably reflects an historical environment of severe persecution. The extent of persecution, whether real or perceived, might be a topic for debate. However, the emotions of anxiety and hostility experienced by early Christians, particularly those in the province of Asia Minor during the first century, are clearly alluded to in the imagery of the Apocalypse.

In its analysis, the dissertation has adopted a predominantly preterist and a-millennial approach. It interprets the events described in the Apocalypse as largely fulfilled during the Apostolic age, that is, prior to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. Within this historical context, the imagery alluding to early Christianity can be divided into two distinct periods, each defined by its own perpetrator.

Chapter one examined several passages in the Apocalypse that directly and indirectly allude to a form of Christian oppression which occurred primarily before Caesar Nero's rule. During this period, harassment of the early Christ followers was often the result of provocations by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities, who typically accused Christians of disseminating false teachings or for upsetting the local community's social and political fabric. The instances of abuse, however, were mostly isolated and occurred sporadically throughout the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

During Caesar Nero's reign, following the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, there was a notable shift from a perpetrator's perspective, with Roman authorities increasingly assuming the role of the main oppressors of early Christians. As discussed in Chapter two, the symbolism in the Book of Revelation, however, notably in chapters 13 and 17, clearly refers to a Neronian persecution, but does not seem to allude to a time beyond the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

The final chapter of this study has addressed the interpretative ambiguities discussed in the previous chapters by putting the Apocalypse, as much as possible, within its historical context. The chapter argues that the *allusions* were not merely *illusions*; rather, they represented the historical reality of Christian persecution during the first century and, as Chapter three has illustrated, this interpretation is supported by non-Christian, New Testament, and non-canonical Christian sources.

Contrary to what the imagery in the Apocalypse suggests, the historical sources do not support the popular belief of a widespread and systematic persecution during the entire apostolic age, *neither* by the Jewish and pagan communities *nor* by the Roman authorities. The allusions in the Apocalypse certainly did, nevertheless, convey the *perception* of religious persecution or of a culture of anxiety and hatred, especially during the reign of Caesar Nero. These were genuine emotions experienced by the early followers of Christ, which should not be trivialized nor dismissed as exaggerations. The Book of Revelation provides compelling evidence of this reality.

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