

Christian persecution in the Book of Revelation



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Asher Vittorio Oskar Ricardo Fiordaliso Marthin Tauran

Drs European Studies (University of Amsterdam),
MBA Finance (University of Leicester)
MLitt in History (University of Aberdeen)

Student Nr. 1904355

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Abstract

As this dissertation will show, the early Christian persecution as alluded to in the Book of Revelation was not a myth. The imageries in the Apocalypse here examined, convincingly conveyed the *perception* of Christian persecution and a culture of anxiety and hatred during the apostolic age. For the early Christ followers, the harassments they were subjected to throughout the Roman empire, were real and should not be trivialized nor should they be considered an exaggeration. In support of this view, several key passages in the Book of Revelation will be examined in this study and placed within their historical context. In doing so, we may be able to better understand how the imageries of the Apocalypse have impacted early church tradition in the past and continues to influence public belief today about the oppression of the first century followers of Christ. Only this way a more balanced opinion about the veracity and impact of the early Christian persecution, as alluded to in the Apocalypse can be formed.

Introduction

It is generally assumed that the background to the visions of the Book of Revelation, is the Roman Empire's brutal persecution of Christians during the first century. The imageries and symbolism portrayed in the Apocalypse, in fact suggests an incessant culture of anxiety and hatred vis-à-vis the early Christians during the entire apostolic age. However, this tradition has been challenged lately by various biblical scholars and historians alike, claiming that the early biblical and historical sources do not support this perception. Popular belief about an excessively brutal, early Christian persecution was probably an exaggeration, the persecution of early Christ followers did *not* commence with the reign of Caesar Nero, *nor* was the Roman empire the initial and sole perpetrator.¹ However, as this dissertation will point out, there is a fine line between perception and reality about the early Christian persecution.

This dissertation using primarily biblical and secular sources, will show what the imageries in the Book of Revelation really tell us about the early Christian persecution. By examining various of the Book's key passages in their biblical and historical context, a better understanding can be achieved about the circumstances they allude to. To acquire such understanding, questions are asked in this dissertation about the perpetrators of the early Christian repression, but also when, where and under what circumstances the harassments occurred. Only as such a more balanced opinion about the veracity and impact of the early Christian persecution, as alluded to in the Apocalypse, can be formed.

Methodology

Before touching on the core of the topic, some observations should be made. This dissertation uses the New International Version (NIV) of the Holy Bible for its biblical citations and applies the terms 'Revelation', 'the Book of Revelation' and the 'Apocalypse' interchangeably. In this

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*, (2015) 1-28.

dissertation with 'Roman authorities' is meant the emperor, the senate, the central officials and the provincial governors.² Furthermore, the term 'persecution' is here defined as 'the unfair or cruel treatment over a long period of time because of race, religion or political beliefs'.³ However, as the use of this word often creates the misleading impression of a more widespread, organized and persistent system of repression, alternates as, 'harassment', 'abuse' and 'maltreatment' are applied to more accurately describe the actual nature of the persecution. It is also important to note that this dissertation takes a predominant preterist and amillennial approach to the allusions in the Apocalypse.⁴ This approach considers the events in the book of Revelation to have already largely been fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) and eschatologically its symbolism represents the spiritual conflict between heaven and earth, while the kingdom of Christ is already present since the descendance of the holy spirit on the Apostles. With this mind, the term 'early Christian persecution' primarily refers to the first century in this dissertation, even though the Roman authorities' oppression lasted until the 'edict of Milan' in 313 AD.⁵

In principle, passages that allude to the persecution of the early Christ followers can be found all throughout the Apocalypse, after all, the Apocalypse was written by the persecuted Christian author for the persecuted Christian communities.⁶ However, the imagery of the Apocalypse alluding to the Christian persecution covers two distinct periods during the first century with two separate main perpetrators. The period before the Great Fire at Rome (64 AD) is

² 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).

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

⁴ 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). pp.44-49. 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Daniel, Höf, 'Revelation For the Persecuted', *Theology of Suffering*, p.3.

characterized by the harassment of early Christians predominantly instigated by local Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities, while after the incident the oppression came primarily at the hands of the Roman establishment.⁷

Chapter one will focus first on several passages in the Book of Revelation that allude to the pre-64 AD persecution instigated by the Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities. Although some references made in the Apocalypse about the perpetrators are at times ambiguous, several other passages leave little doubt about their identity and their motives. The next chapter will highlight the distinctive imageries in chapters thirteen and seventeen of the Apocalypse which, using a preterist approach, strongly allude to the persecution during the reign of Caesar Nero. However, as this chapter shows, different approaches to the Apocalypse allow for different findings and as such, the tradition of a Neronian persecution based primarily on the imagery in these two sections, is considered by various scholars as still inconclusive. In the final chapter, references to an early Christian persecution, both by the Jewish-pagan (Greco-Roman) communities and the Roman authorities as examined in the previous two chapters, are further tested based on their historical authenticity. In doing so, the focus will be on biblical, secular and non-canonical Christian evidence, including some apocryphal and gnostic works to ultimately reach a more balanced opinion about the veracity of the early Christian persecution, as alluded to in the Book of Revelation.

⁷ Jewish and pagan persecution of Christians did not diminish after the Great Fire (64 AD), however Roman authorities became more aware of the Christian 'sect' and more receptive for the accusations against them for 'hatred against mankind'. See G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted', *Past & Present*, 26 (1963), 6-38 (p.6), 'the emperor, the senate, the central officials and the provincial governors' and William Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church. A study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), p.154. For further analysis, <https://id.scribd.com/document/534595516/Frend-W-H-C-Martyrdom-and-Persecution-in-the-Early-Church-1965>. [Accessed 2 July 2022]. See also Chapter three.

Chapter One

Allusions to the Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) persecution

This chapter examines several passages in the Book of Revelation that allude to the early persecutions at the hands of the Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities. The purpose is to show the distinctiveness of the early Christian persecution, which is sometimes overlooked by biblical scholars and historians. In doing so, we need to keep in mind the dissertation's preterist amillennial approach to get better understanding of the issue. As such, it interprets the passage in Rev. 1:19, '*Write, therefore what you have seen, what is now and what will take place*', primarily, yet not exclusively as the time before, during and soon after fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. It is within this historical context that the allusions in the Book of Revelation about the persecution of the early followers of Christ should be understood.

There is a distinction to be made though, from the perpetrators' point of view between Christian persecution *instigated* by the Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities and those prompted *directly* by the Roman public administration.⁸ This distinction according to George E. M. de Ste. Croix corresponds to the period *before* the Great Fire at Rome in 64 AD and the time thereafter.⁹ Although this classification seems plausible, the caesura between these two periods was not that clear cut, as common dislike between Jews, pagans and Christians did not end abruptly with the Great Fire nor with the fall of the Jerusalem temple (70 AD). Similarly, there is also not much evidence of an organized Christian persecution by the Roman authorities *after* Caesar Nero's outburst in 64 AD.¹⁰ The above division, from a perpetrator's perspective, however,

⁸ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, p.6, 'the emperor, the senate, the central officials and the provincial governors'; See also, William Frend, 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 Ibid., pp.6-9.

¹⁰ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, p.7, '[...] in so far as it took place at all, persecution was on a small scale and came about mainly a result of Jewish hostility, which tended to lead to public disturbance'. Numerous scholars rejecting the preterist approach, however, support a late first century date of composition of the Apocalypse and as such attribute Christian persecution, as alluded to in the Book of Revelation, to the reign of Caesar Domitian rather than Caesar Nero. For example, Robert Henry Charles, *A critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek text with an introduction, notes and indices*, 3rd Edn. (London: MacMillan and Co Limited, 1906) and Isbon Thaddeus Beckwith, *The*

are not reflected in the Book of Revelation except for a few distinct passages. It is *these* passages this chapter will focus on, as they directly and indirectly implicate local Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities to the early Christian sufferings.

Indirect references

A good example of such indirect reference we can find in Rev. 1:9, where the author claims that he shared in the persecution of 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 point out 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 presence on the island Patmos may have been for missionary purposes and it is even plausible that the author, reflecting on his past, referred in this passage to the sufferings caused by inciting Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities during the apostles' missionary activities, rather than by the Roman authorities.¹¹

Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary. (New York: MacMillan, 1919) and more recently Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1999). J. Christian Wilson, in 'The problem of the Domitianic date of Revelation', *New Testament Studies*, 39.4 (1993), 587-605 (p.588n10), he lists also several German scholars like W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1906), p.43; E. Lohmeyer, 'Die Offenbarung des Johannes', *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* 2nd edn (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr [Paul Siebeck],1953), p. 143 and H. Kraft 'Die Offenbarung des Johannes', *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr [Paul Siebeck],1974), pp.221-223. Wilson notes that overall, German scholars focused less on the book of Revelation but generally accepted the persecution of Christians under Domitian. Greg Bahnsen, p.5, cites Gary B. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), p.20 and William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, (GR: Baker Book House, 1939) as adherent of the late (Domitian) dating and also Alford, Godet, Hengstenberg, Lenski, Zahn, Lange, Holtzmann, Moffatt, Ramsey, Warfield, Barnes, Orr, Porter, Theissen, Hoyt, Harmack, Caird and Mounce.

¹¹ Such an event would be plausible as it already happened during the reign of Caesar Claudius, see Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4, '*Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus*' ('*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*').

Further, yet similar inconclusive evidence of pre-64 AD Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) persecution is alluded to in Rev. 12:1-4.¹² 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'.¹³ Boxall's interpretation is followed 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*'. The passage is a clear reference to Jesus' ministry, His ascension and His legacy on earth is further detailed in the next verse, Rev. 12:10. This passage essentially introduces 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 account does not necessarily point to a future kingdom, but instead ushers in the period immediately after Jesus' ascension and therefore, possibly refers to the early persecution of Christ followers by Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities during the early apostolic era.¹⁴

This assumption probably applies also to the account of St. Antipas' martyrdom mentioned in the Letter to the angel of the church in Perganum (Rev. 2:13), '*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*'. Ian Boxall interprets this passage as an early period and isolated case of Jewish mob persecution in Pergamum, similar to the 'lynching of the protomartyr St. Stephen' (Acts 7:54-8:1).¹⁵ This may contradict church tradition about St. Antipas' martyrdom as the bishop of Pergamum in 92 AD, conversely, hardly any sources are available to determine convincingly St. Antipas' identity.

The same reservation applies to Rev. 7:13-14. The setting is a future heavenly vision where one of the twenty-four elders fulfilling the role 'angelus interpres' asks a rhetorical question *these*

¹² 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 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.

¹³ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), p.178.

¹⁴ See chapter three.

¹⁵ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p.59.

*in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?*¹⁶ The answer, provided by the elder himself may indicate, if applied in an ‘amillennial preterist’ sense, of the time just before, or soon after 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.* It is likely that the *great tribulation* refers either to the persecution of the early Christ followers at the instigation of Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities (before 64 AD) or by the Roman establishments but more probably, by both.

This possible dual explanation is also reflected in several other passages like, 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. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been*’ and in Rev. 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*’.

Direct references

Stronger 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 the Roman authorities, we find in the letters to the cities of Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-10) and Philadelphia (Rev. 3:9-10).

¹⁶ Ibid., p.127; 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.

“To the Angel of the Church in Smyrna write: These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who dies and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! 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. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown. (Rev. 2:8-10).

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. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. (Rev. 3:9-10).

In Acts 19:10, it is strongly suggested that Smyrna and Philadelphia, although not specifically mentioned in the Bible outside the Book of Revelation, fell under St. Paul’s ministry’s spheres of influence.¹⁷ As such, it is very likely that both cities already had early Christian communities during the composition of the Apocalypse. Agreeing with Mikael Tellbe, *‘those who claim to be Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan’*, probably refers to a group of non-Christian ethnic Jews in both these cities, who rejected Jesus Christ and therefore in the eyes of the author were not ‘followers of the true kind of Judaism’.¹⁸ For this reason the Jews of Smyrna and Philadelphia may have shunned them from their synagogues, while labeling and instigated the persecution of them as heretics (see chapter three).

¹⁷ 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’***.

¹⁸ 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).

Chapter two

Allusions to the Neronian persecution

In the previous chapter the several passages examined allude to the persecution of the early Christians, predominantly instigated by local Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities. As we have seen, following 'grosso modo' G.E.M. de Ste. Croix and William Frend's periodization of Christian persecution in the pre-Nicaean period, these episodes happened mostly before the Great Fire at Rome of 64 AD.

In this chapter, following a preterist approach, the focus is on the period soon after this incident, as referred to in two key chapters of the Apocalypse, chapters thirteen and seventeen. As we will see, the distinctive symbolism in these two chapters strongly allude to the persecution of the early Christians during the reign of Caesar Nero. Not only did the distinct imagery in these two chapters leave its mark on our collective understanding of Church tradition about the Roman empire's persecution of early Christians, but it also influenced our modern-day perception of the forces of good defeating evil, the concept of Armageddon, the end of the world and more commonly, our perception of divine prophecy and justice.

Revelation 13: 1-10.

"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.³ One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast.⁴ People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?"⁵ The beast was given a mouth to utter proud

words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. ⁷ It was given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. ⁸ All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear. ¹⁰ "If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people".

The imagery in Rev. 13:1-4 was most likely instantly recognized by the congregations of the seven churches in Asia Minor, the early hearers of the Apocalypse, as an allusion to the vision in the book of Daniel (Dan 7). Satan (the fallen angel cf. Rev. 12:7-8.) is depicted in the form of a dragon in this passage, who had 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*"), as the evil antagonist of God and its people.¹⁹ Many scholars and biblical commentators believe the imagery in Rev. 13:3, "*On one of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed*", shows the author's awareness of the 'Nero redivivus myth' which circulated soon after Caesar Nero's death.²⁰ The myth tells the story of Caesar Nero, who committed suicide through a self-inflicted fatal stab wound to the throat, who

¹⁹ The imagery in Rev 1:2 allude to the Greek empire in the Book of Daniel (a *leopard*, Daniel 7:6), Medo-Persia (a *bear*, Daniel 7:5), and Babylon (a *lion*, Daniel 7:4). 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, p.185-190; Mounce, p.243-249; Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology, The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 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).

²⁰ Kenneth Gentry, p.303. 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 Chyrsostom, *Oratwru*, 21. Jewish sources: *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 4:2ff. Cristian 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.

would come back to life (*redivivus*) or after hiding would eventually resurface (*Nero redux*).²¹ The vision of the Apocalypse as conveyed by the author was essentially a warning for the followers of Christ of the seven churches in Asia Minor to stand firm in the face of hardship as Jesus second coming was near (Rev. 1:7, 1:4, 3:11, 16:15, 22:7, 22:12, 22:20).²² Satan (the dragon), through the Roman empire and his emperor (the beast out of the sea), “*was given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them and it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.*” (Rev 13:7).²³ Within this context Nero’s ultimate death, was seen as ‘karma’ or retribution for his cruelty and for the slaying of many’.²⁴ Rev 13:10 reiterates this message as follows, “*If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed*”. It seems that this was the price Caesar Nero had to pay for having given authorization for the persecution of Christians after accusing them of setting fire to the city of Rome in 64 AD.²⁵

The above allusions should be understood against the backdrop of profound political turmoil during and immediately after Caesar Nero’s reign. It is commonly accepted among scholars that the Apocalypse ‘emerged out of a situation of crises’.²⁶ Just after Nero’s death, the Roman empire faced the prospect of civil war caused by the internal power struggle between the different commanders of various legions and their political backers.²⁷ As Robert B. Moberly noticed, the rapid successive fall of four Caesars between 8 June 68 AD - 20 December 1969 was ‘nothing of

²¹ 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*’, *Neotestamentica* 39.1 (2005) 163-193 (p.167), Mark Wilson makes it clear that many could not believe 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 (*Nero redux*). He also believes this myth, whether he wasn’t 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 he had died but would return to live, hence the ‘*Nero redivivus Myth*’. Various scholars supporting the late date of the Apocalypse believed 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 Albert A. Bell, p.98.

²² Ian Boxall, p.57, 63, 104-105; Leonard L Thompson, p.85.

²³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44; Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2; Clement. 1 *Clem.* 6.1 Clement reads: ‘To these men, who walked in holiness, there was gathered a great multitude of the elect, who, having suffered, through envy, many insults and tortures, became a most excellent example among us’.

²⁴ Suetonius, *Nero*, 49.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44

²⁶ Ian Boxall., p.12.

²⁷ Tacitus *Dial.* 17, *Hist.* 1-3; Suetonius, *Nero* 6- *Vitellius* 9.

the kind that had happened in the preceding 100 years' and nothing short of a time of "great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14).²⁸ This feeling of terror, according to Albert A. Bell permeates the entire Apocalypse and encompasses an overall feeling of repression, which the author clearly attempts to convey through the imagery of the Apocalypse. Following this line of thought, Richard Bauckham interprets the recovery of the fatal wound as the survival of the Roman empire rather than an individual emperor.²⁹ Early Roman sources, like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, compellingly portray a state of empire wide anxiety through the military campaigns and stand-offs of the first century Roman Emperors, especially during the period of the one-year period of the fall of four emperors.³⁰ As such, 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', which strongly suggests an early date for the Apocalypse's composition.³¹ In other words, the imagery laid out in Rev.13:1-10 makes only perfect sense when applied to a pre-70 AD historical setting.

Revelation 13: 11-18

Proponents of a late Domitian date for the composition of the Apocalypse, sometimes have interpreted chapter 13:3, 12, 14 and next in Rev 17:8 as a prediction by the author in retrospect ('vaticinium ex eventu prophecy'), while sticking to Emperor Domitian as the reincarnation of Caesar Nero.³² Robert H. Charles, Henry B. Swete, Henry M. Morris, Robert H. Mounce and Jerry

²⁸ Robert Moberly, p.p.384-385; Tacitus in *Hist.* 1.2.11 describes 69 AD a time full of disaster and tumultuous events. Leonard Thompson is not convinced that Asia Minor was much affected by the tribulations in Rome, 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.

²⁹ Richard Bauckham, p. 37.

³⁰ Chris Scarre, pp.1-83; Tacitus *Dial.* 17, *Hist.* 1-3; Suetonius, *Nero* 6- *Vitellius* 9. The first century Roman empire has been described extensively and are too many to quote them all. Nevertheless, most secondary sources, draw on the works of the most prominent historians of the antiquity like Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio, Pliny the younger (Roman) , Josephus (Jewish), Plutarch (Greek), Eusebius, Tertullian (Christian) amongst others.

³¹ Richard Bauckham, p.37. Clearly this state of confusion, besides the time of disarray during the Roman republic under Julius Caesar, is only akin to the period during and just after the reign of Caesar Nero.

³² G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1999). p.11; J. Christian Wilson pp. 602-603

Moffat, to name a few used this argument primarily as evidence for their late Domitian date position.³³ Their view rests primarily on the argument that the 'Nero redivivus myth' took time to develop, making it impossible to have emerged throughout Asia Minor before 70 AD. This argument, however, denies the fact that both Tacitus and Suetonius attest to the popularity of the 'Nero redivivus myth' and 'the terror it spread in Achaia and Asia' as early as 69 AD, just before Galba's death.³⁴ Also, with reference to what will be shown in Rev. 13:14-16, proponents of the late Domitian date point out that, contrary to plenty of historical evidence, the tradition of emperor worship or imperial cult essentially started to develop only at the end of the first century, during the reign of Domitian.³⁵ In other words, it seems hard *not* to attribute the imagery in chapter 13 to a time before 70 AD. In fact, as we will see next, much of the evidence, both from a historical and biblical perspective point to a composition of the Apocalypse before the fall of the Jerusalem temple.

"11 Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon.¹² 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. ¹³ And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. ¹⁴ Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵ The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be

³³ Kenneth Gentry, p.313.

³⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 8.

³⁵ Contrary to what the adherents of the late Domitian date for the Apocalypse often suggest, Thomas B. Slater citing Simon Price, Dio Cassius, Pausanias argues that there is no evidence to suggest the imperial cult was a phenomenon that started or was practiced mainly during Domitian's reign, Thomas B. Slater, 'Dating the Apocalypse to John', *Biblica*, 84.2 (2003), 252-258 (p.254). The cult may have been well established and practiced during the Domitian era, though, but was most probably already practiced even before the reign of Nero, possibly since the reign of Caesar Augustus' deification or even earlier during Julius Caesar, see Richard S. Ascough in 'Greco-Roman Religions and the context of the Book of Revelation' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Craig R. Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 169-183, (pp. 175-177) and Kenneth L. Gentry, pp. 279-284.

killed.¹⁶ It also forced all people, great and small, rich, and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads,¹⁷ so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.¹⁸ This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666”.

Ian Boxall sets out three distinct interpretational categories regarding the imagery of this passage which fits most existing scholarly commentaries.³⁶ His first category commentators understand “*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.³⁷ Another way of interpreting the imagery of the second beast is to equate them to the ‘false prophet’ (cf. 16:13, 19:20). This view infers to the figures of Balaam and Jezebel as mentioned in the letters to the congregation of the seven churches and serves as a warning to them not to be deceived by these false prophets “*who had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon*” (Rev 13:11).³⁸ A third mode of interpretation is a combination of the above and is more general in nature, as it describes the second beast as ‘all who support, promote and are agents of the lamb like monster’.³⁹ The adherents of the latter view believe the lamb like-appearance of the second beast indicates ‘its ability to lead human beings astray’ by “*exercising all the authority of the first beast on its behalf*” (Rev.13:12).

Graig R. Koester seems to support the latter view, as he compares the beast from the land to ‘one of the demonic Trinity who functions as false prophet and together with the beast of the sea brings people to serve Satan’.⁴⁰ This in opposition to the holy trinity of God, the lamb who brings the people to worship God and the Spirit that speaks through the prophets. Graig K. Beale,

³⁶ Ian Boxall, p.193

³⁷ 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 view is also primarily the view of Adela Yarbro Collins.

³⁸ In the vision of the Apocalypse, 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. See also note 97.

³⁹ G.R. Beasley-Murray, David L. Barr and M Eugene Boring are proponents of this ‘all-inclusive and encompassing group’.

⁴⁰ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and The End of All Things*, (Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p.129.

meanwhile, interprets Rev.13:11-18 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 (Rev 13:15).⁴¹ J. Ramsey Michaels sees the beast from the land as a reference to idolatry of the state and its deception. Steven J. Friesen agrees with A. Yarbro Collins, who equates the beast of the land with the wealthy elite in Asian society and in all its manifestations.⁴² Collins on the other hand argues that Rev. 13:14-16 was not about institutionalized Roman persecution of Christians, but about John's attempt to instill a feeling among the followers of Christ of the seven churches of powerlessness and *perceived* oppression under Roman rule, and at the same time about hopes of expectations for God's rule to change this imperial world order.⁴³ Bauckham sees in Rev. 13:13-14 an attempt by the author of the Apocalypse 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'.⁴⁴ Simon R.F. Price rejects the compulsory nature of the imperial cult (Rev. 13:15-16) and describes it rather as a 'system of honors', implying symbolic and material rewards for participating in the spectacle of empire worship.⁴⁵

The emperor worship or imperial cult as alluded in Rev. 13:11-17, however, does not necessarily denote an early dating of the Apocalypse. In fact, many critics of the early dating view have often used the emperor worship phenomenon to support the late Domitian dating of the Apocalypse, arguing that it was only by the late first century that the imperial cult was well developed.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, even the scholars and commentators who have supported the late Domitian date seem hesitant in their conclusion.⁴⁷ As we will see next, their doubt is not

⁴¹ G.K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, ebook edn. (Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), p.3.

⁴² Steven J. Friesen, p.62; Yarbro Collins, 'What the Spirit Says to the Churches' Preaching the Apocalypse,' *QR* 4 (1984), p.82 and *Crisis and Catharsis: The power of the Apocalypse*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp.84-107.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Bauckham, p.17.

⁴⁵ Simon R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power, The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp. 9-22.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Gentry pp.271-276 offers various evidence of a well-established emperor worship cult during the reign of Caesar Nero.

⁴⁷ Keneth 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) p.263.

unwarranted as Rev.13:18 provides again strong evidence about the identity of the beast and at the same time answers the question about the date of the Apocalypse's composition.

Ever since the conception of the Apocalypse countless historians, commentators, scholars, critics all down to laymen have suggested numerous ways of computing the number of the beast in Rev.13:18, "*Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666*" (cf. 17:9).⁴⁸ The text assumes the congregations of the seven churches in first century Asia Minor, as addressed in the Apocalypse were familiar with the symbolism of the vision, including the gematria often used in Antiquity to identify the beast in Rev. 13:18 "[...] for it is the number of a man. That number is 666" (cf. 17:9).⁴⁹ Bauckham states, that the images of the Apocalypse do not portray a world of timeless symbols but rather a specific social, political, cultural, and religious world, which its first hearers and readers instantly recognized.⁵⁰ The gematria code assigns numbers to the letters of the text and the numerical outcome should fit the context. The gematria essentially uses Hebrew characters to decipher the name of Caesar Nero, which adds up to the number 666, whereas the Latin characters amount to 616. Both numbers have been associated with the literary forms of Caesar Nero.⁵¹ Craig Koester in a recent paper made a convincing case for the number 666, corresponding to Caesar Nero using this method in papyri, graffiti, and inscriptions found at different places like Smyrna, Pompei, Sardis, Dura Eropos, Murabba'at, Ketef Jericho.⁵²

In conclusion, the author's vision in Rev.13, as shown above strongly alludes to a time of "great tribulations" (Rev. 7:14), in which Satan through the Roman empire ("*The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority*") during Caesar Nero's reign ("*the number of the beast, 666*") and its provincial and local administration ("*the beast coming out of the earth*"), lured the Christ followers of the seven churches in Asia Minor in committing idolatry by partaking

⁴⁸ On the number of the beast in reference to Caesar Nero see amongst others: Albert Bell, p. 98., Suetonius, Nero. 39.2 (in Greek, he killed his own mother = 666); Iren. *Haer.* 5, 30;1 Mark Wilson, p.184; J.C. Wilson. p.598; Hans Josef Klauck, pp.692-693; Gonzalo Rojas-Flores, p.387; Kenneth L. Gentry, p.193-218; *Robert Henry Charles*, pp.350, 365-369; *Graig K. Beale*, pp. 603-598; *Robert H. Mounce*, p.20, 254, 261-262; *Donald Guthrie*, pp.959-960.

⁴⁹ Boxall., p.198.

⁵⁰ Bauckham, p.19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵² Graig 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.

in the practices of the imperial cult (*“exercising all the authority of the first beast on its behalf”*). This imagery essentially substantiates the ‘correlation theory’, which in chapter 17 will be further elaborated on.

Revelation 17: 1-6

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters.² With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.”³ Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.⁴ The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.⁵ The name written on her forehead was a mystery:

BABYLON THE GREAT

THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES

AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH

⁶I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.

Over the centuries, ‘Babylon has been associated with the fallen Jerusalem or imperial Rome or symbolically as the human tendency towards idolatry’.⁵³ It was often portrayed as ‘the antithesis to the city of God, the new Jerusalem’, “who sits by many waters” (Rev 17:1) suggesting ‘Rome’s dominance over many peoples and alluding to the Goddess Roma’, “who sits on seven hills”

⁵³ Boxall, p.239, 244.

(Rev.17:9).⁵⁴ As such the portrayal of, *“Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations sitting in the scarlet beast which was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns”* (Rev. 17:1-6), compares with *“the beast coming out of the sea, uttering blasphemies”* (Rev 13:1, 5), while *“drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus”* echoes *“It was given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.”* (Rev. 13:7). In other words, in this woman (Rome’s power), who was closely associated with Satan, *“was found the blood of prophets and saints and all who have been slain on earth”* (Rev. 18:24). These passages offer clear references to the Roman empire’s Christian persecution. Nevertheless, critics have pointed out that the term ‘Babylon’ to identify Rome started to occur only after and because of the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.⁵⁵ Donald Guthrie, however, points out that the Epistle of Peter (5:13), written well before the destruction of the temple, closes with a reference to Babylon which clearly refutes these claims.⁵⁶

7 Then the angel said to me: “Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns.⁸ The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come.⁹ “This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.¹⁰ They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for only a little while.¹¹ The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.¹²

Graig R. Koester identifies ‘the beast coming out of the earth’ as a collective figure rather than an individual, in contrast to e.g., Irenaeus (*Haer.* 5.28.20) and Hippolytus (*Hipp. De Antichristo*

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.244.

⁵⁵ Leonard L. Thompson, pp.793.794.

⁵⁶ Donald Guthrie, p.

49).⁵⁷ He correlates the imaginary of Rev 13: 11-18 with the Roman Empire (the Beast from the Sea) that, through local administration, aristocracy, and priesthood (the beast from the land), uses deception, political and economic coercion to force 'all inhabitants of the earth' (including the followers of Christ) either to submit to the Beast or suffer martyrdom. Ian Boxall believes the beast has a dual function, "*The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction*" (Rev.17:8, cf.13:3) depicts the restoration of the 'rebellious and arrogant empire manifest in imperial Rome and at the same time alludes to the Nero redivivus myth'.⁵⁸ Like Richard Bauckham, Robert Mounce and Philip Schaff interpret this passage as the recovery of the Roman empire rather than Nero's resurgence.⁵⁹ For Donald Guthrie, 'the beast does not represent Caesar Nero and his myth, but merely the embodiment of evil'.⁶⁰

Revelation 17: 7-18

The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast.¹³ They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast.¹⁴ They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."¹⁵ Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.¹⁶ The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire.¹⁷ For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by

⁵⁷ Craig R. Koester, 'The image of the beast from the land (Rev. 13, 11-18): A study in incongruity', *Faculty Publications*, 29 (2017), pp.18-19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.245.

⁵⁹ Robert H. Mounce, pp.249-249; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church & The Bible The Complete 8 Volume Edition of Schaff's Church History & American Standard Version of Holy Bible* vol 1. ebook edn, First Period, The Church under The Apostles From the Birth of Christ to the Death of St. John, A.D. 1-100, Chapter 12, §.101, The Apocalypse. p. 1168 out of 13.731. <https://id.scribd.com/read/412287452/History-of-the-Christian-Church-Including-the-Bible> [Accessed 12 January 2023].

⁶⁰ Donald Guthrie, *The New Testament Introduction*, Fourth edn. revised (Downers Grove, Illinois, UAS: InterVarsity Press) p.953.

agreeing to hand over to the beast their royal authority, until God's words are fulfilled.¹⁸ The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.

Many biblical scholars and commentators agree that Rev. 17:9, *"The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits"*, alludes to the seven hills on which the city of Rome was built.⁶¹ It is from this city that *"the mother of prostitutes"* exerts her power (the Roman imperial power). The next verse *"They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for only a little while"* (Rev. 17:10), has intrigued and kept many scholars wondering in search for the identity of the sixth King, as during his reign the Apocalypse was likely composed. In combination with the seven hills, it was generally assumed that the imagery in this passage refers to the Roman emperors, at least according to the predominant preterist amillennial view.⁶² Without going into detail on the numerous existing calculation variants, it suffices to note that most quoted early sources concerning the calculation as suggested in Rev 17:10, are those provided by Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus, the Sibylline Oracles and 4 Ezra.⁶³ Based on their calculation and together with supporting textual evidence, as we have seen in the analysis of the date and authorship, these sources generally suggest a pre 70 dating of the Apocalypse.⁶⁴

In conclusion, the symbolism and imagery in chapter thirteen and seventeen of the Book of Revelation in many ways provide substantial evidence for a Neronian persecution of the early followers of Christ. The assumption of a Neronian persecution following the imagery in chapter thirteen and seventeen of the Apocalypse, however, are not without its critics. Interestingly, the very same arguments used in support of a pre-70 AD dating of the Book's composition, have been

⁶¹ J. Christian Wilson, p.599. The legend of Romulus and Remus and the creation of the city of Rome on 21 April 753 BC was well known during the Antiquities through numerous sources. The association of seven hills (Aventine, Caelian, Capitoline, Palatine, Esquiline, Quirinal and Viminal) with the city of Rome's foundation was common knowledge. A remarkable detail, though, like the city of Rome, Jerusalem was also built one hill surrounded by six hills, (Antonia Fortress Hill, Mount Scopus, Mount Livet, Mount Ophel, Mount of Corruption, New Mount Zion, and mount Zion the original (see chapter three).

⁶² 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 look at ways symbols are used in scriptural prophetic literature.

⁶³ Mark Wilson, p.170, n7-12. 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 and 4 Ezra 11-12.

⁶⁴ Mark Wilson pp.164-189 provides a comprehensive summary of the evidence in support of a pre-70 AD composition of the Apocalypse.

used also by proponents of a later date composition while connecting it to the alleged Domitian persecution. As mentioned, this dissertation adopts a preterist approach and therefore its validity depends on various key assumptions. It is *these* assumptions the next chapter will examine in greater detail to form a more balanced opinion about the veracity of the early Christian persecution, as alluded to in the Apocalypse.

Chapter three

Allusions and their historical value

In the previous chapters, we have seen that the early Christian persecutions as alluded to in the Apocalypse using a preterist approach may be divided in the period before the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD and the following period until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. We have also seen that until then early Christian harassment, happened mostly at the instigation of resentful Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities throughout the Asian provinces of the Roman empire. Christian oppression after 64 AD, though became synonymous with the cruelty allegedly committed against the Christians by Caesar Nero during the second part of his reign. For these findings to hold, these allusions need to be based on historical facts.

This chapter examines the most prominent biblical, secular and non-canonical sources to determine the accuracy of both above assumptions. As we will see, biblical evidence in this chapter suggesting a pre-64 AD Christian persecution instigated by local Jewish and pagan (Greco-Roman) communities, besides the Book of Revelation as examined in chapter one, can be found amply in the Gospels, the Book of Acts, the epistle to the Hebrews and the Book of 1 Peter. The secular sources, on the other hand depend almost entirely and exclusively on the accounts of the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, who portrayed the persecution of Christ followers from an early second century 'Neronian' perspective. Both source traditions, however, are wanting, therefore later non-canonical Christian, secular and gnostic writings need also to be consulted for a broader historical perspective. The limits of the dissertation, however, will not allow for more in-depth analysis on these later sources, nonetheless they deserve better than only marginal consideration.

In conclusion, maltreatment of early Christians were apparently sporadic and infrequent as demonstrated by the sources in this chapter, yet they may have been truly felt and genuinely experienced by the victims.⁶⁵ And although the level of intensity and the extent of cruelty against the early Christians throughout much of the first century are difficult to determine, the *perception*

⁶⁵ Paul Hartog, 'The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response', *the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology (SJB)*, 18.1 (2014), pp.50-51

of religious persecution or culture of anxiety and hatred cannot be trivialized.⁶⁶ In other words, the evidence of a pre-70 AD oppression of early Christ followers as presented in this chapter was not as Candida Moss seems to suggest, largely a matter of ‘*prosecution*’ rather than ‘*persecution*’.⁶⁷ As Greg Carey 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.’⁶⁸ Therefore, as JuliAnne Rach’s fittingly summarizes, ‘when reading any history, one must be careful to not just consider the historical message they are trying to present but (also) the connotations which is governed by the society within which the author lived’.⁶⁹

Biblical sources

The earliest *Biblical sources* portray local Jewish communities and their (religious) leaders as the primary perpetrators of Christian oppression, harassment or discrimination between the period of Jesus’ early ministry (c. 27-29 AD) and the great fire of Rome (July 64 AD).⁷⁰ As we will see, most of this evidence besides the Book of Revelation as examined in the previous chapter, is found in the Gospels, Acts, Hebrews and the Book of 1 Peter.⁷¹ These biblical sources tell us about Christ being accused of blasphemy (Mt 25:65) and His followers of being disciples of a heretical sect that propagates sacrilegious teachings in defiance of the Jewish Mosaic Laws.⁷² In John 11:47-

⁶⁶ See Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The power of the Apocalypse*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p.84.

⁶⁷ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution, How early Christians invented a story of Martyrdom*, Epub edn. (New York, USA: Harper Collins, 2014), p.22.

⁶⁸ 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 (SBJT)*, 18.1 (2014), 49-79, (p.57). Brackets are mine.

⁶⁹ JuliAnne Rach, ‘The Burden of Proof: Examining the Reliability of Sources Regarding Neronian Persecution’, *HIST* 303, (2018). Brackets are mine.

⁷⁰ Mt 27:25, ‘All the people answered’, “His blood is on us and our children”.

⁷¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, ‘The Persecution of Christians in the first Century’, *JETS* 61.3 (2018), 525-547. In the Gospels we find references in Mk 14:1, Mt 25:66, 27:24, Lk 23:1-25, Jn 11:47-53, 57, 19:6). In Acts the references are (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). In the Book of 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).

⁷² The term sect is used here following the Church-Sect Model in Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* (New York: MacMillan, 1931), vol 1, 331-39, cited in Eyal Regev, ‘Were the early Christians sectarians?’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 130.4 (2011), 771-793 (p.772).

48, the Sanhedrin declares, 'here is this man performing many signs, if we let him go like this everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation'.

The most compelling biblical evidence of an early Christian persecution, however, is illustrated by Saul of Tarsus' (St. Paul) own confession after Jesus' crucifixion.⁷³ In Acts 7:57-58, as a young Pharisee Saul was said to be an eyewitness to the martyrdom of St. Stephan and he personally led '*the great persecution against the Church in Jerusalem*' (Acts 8:1, 3). In this city, a few years later, during the reign of Caesar Claudius and under the Jewish King Agrippa I (41-44 A.D.) of Judea, St. James, the brother of Jesus was slain (Acts 12:1-4, cf. *Ant.* 20.9.1). Further biblical testimony of Christian persecution is evident in Paul's missionary journeys throughout the Eastern Part of the Mediterranean, where he experienced hostility of various local Jewish communities and their leaders.⁷⁴ Mikael Tellbe attributes this animosity not only to theological factors though (Acts 13:45; 21:27-28; 1 Cor 1:23), but also to local socio-political and financial dynamics (Acts 19:33).⁷⁵

In the Letter of 1 Peter, the author numerous times recalls his audience, the gentile Christ followers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, of the agonies, trials and unjust sufferings they have had to endure for their recently adopted beliefs (1 Pet 1:1, 1:6, 3:14,17). The author essentially urges obedience to the Roman authorities to avoid sufferings (1 Pet 2:13-15, 17), but '*if you suffer for being good and you endure it, this is commendable before God*' (1 Pet 2:20). The nature of their sufferings suggests these to be predominantly of a social character and inflicted by the local pagan (Greco-Roman) or Jewish community, even though 1 Pet 3:15 may indicate a possible legal response involving the local authorities.⁷⁶

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

⁷⁴ 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).

⁷⁵ Mikael Tellbe, 'Relationships among Christ-Believers and Jewish Communities in First-Century Asia Minor', pp.156-159.

⁷⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, p.544 classifies various of these abuses as verbal attacks: slander: 1 Pet 2:12, disparage: 1 Pet 3:16, malign: 1 Pet 4:4, reproach: 1 Pet 4:14. In 1 Pet 3:15 'to give answer to' or *apologia* may imply a court hearing.

In the Letter to Hebrews 10:32-34, the author addresses his audience, most likely a Jewish Christian group at Rome or Caesarea Maritima in the reign of Caesar Nero or Caesar Claudius before the fall of the Jerusalem temple.⁷⁷ He reminds them not to abandon their commitment to Christ, even in the face of sufferings and even '*impending not earlier experienced martyrdom*' as Christ followers had to endure in the past (Heb. 12:4).⁷⁸ This reference may allude to either a Jewish or Roman maltreatment or both as the abuse varied from publicly being exposed to insult and persecution, incarceration, confiscation of property and even exile (Heb. 13:12-14).⁷⁹

As we have seen, these Biblical sources, do not offer convincing evidence of an early Christian persecution by the *Roman authorities*, at least not until the great fire of Rome during the latter part of Nero's reign. In fact, the Gospels and Acts convey a Roman demeanor of tolerance towards Christ followers, rather than a policy of harassment until the Great Fire of Rome (64 AD).⁸⁰ The reluctance of Pontius Pilate, the prefect of Judea to pass judgement on Christ during his trial is telling (Luke 23:4, John 18:31, 38, 19:6).⁸¹ Some commentators, however, see Pilate's action as one of the earliest recordings of a form of Christian persecution by the Roman authorities, as crucifixion was a sentence only permitted under Roman Law. Following this line of thinking, Pilate could have simply dismissed the case or ordered a more lenient form of punishment, but he did not. Others, on the other hand, see Pilate's reluctance as an act of goodwill towards Jesus and his

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.536.

⁷⁸ Gareth Lee, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), pp.16-17

⁷⁹ Heb. 13:12-14 could be linked to Caesar Claudius' edict of 49 AD.

⁸⁰ Samuele Bacchiocchi, 'Rome and Christianity until A.D. 62', *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 21.1 (1983), 3-25.

⁸¹ Tertullian describes Pontius' Pilate and Tiberius' reactions to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Apol.5.2. If factually correct, the passage suggests that Caesar Tiberius requested for the consecration of Jesus Christ and for him to be admitted in the Pantheon of the Roman Gods based on Pontius Pilate's report (found in the Apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* or *Acts of Pilate*). Various scholars have rejected this passage, as a fabrication, however, more recent studies seem to confirm its historicity. Marta Sordi argues convincingly in favor of the historicity of Tertullian's account regarding Pilate's report and Tiberius' proposal to the senate. She views the negative decision of the senate as the juridical basis of the later persecution of Christians. See "I primi rapporti fra lo Stato romano e il Cristianesimo," *Rendiconti Accademia Nazionale Lincei* 12 (1957): 58-93; and "Sui primi rapporti dell'autorità romana con il Cristianesimo," *Studi Romani* 8 (1960): 393-409; and *Il Cristianesimo e Roma*, Institute di Studi Romani 19 (Bologna, 1965), pp. 21-31. Ilaria L.E. Ramelli in 'Constantine: the Legal Recognition of Christianity and its Antecedents', *Anuario De Historia De La Iglesia*, 22 (2013) 65-82, builds on this presupposition involving the concept of *Senatus Consultum*. Most recently however, Mattias Gassman in 'On an Alleged *Senatus Consultum* against Christians', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 75 (2021) 548-555, explains why he finds the evidence of Sordi and Ramelli 'wanting'.

followers, underlining the disturbance of public order that *could* have arisen had he not accommodated the Jewish crowd's request.⁸²

Either way, this episode tells us that contrary to common belief Roman authorities, especially in the eastern provinces of the empire, were from early on aware that Christians formed a distinct and despised sect within Judaism.⁸³ They were aware that the teachings of Jesus and his followers were considered deviant and for this reason they were targeted by the Jewish community and leadership, causing serious disturbances.⁸⁴ More concerned with keeping the peace, while at the same time unwilling to bow to Jewish popular demand for retribution, the Roman authorities often had to ascertain their authority and as such they seemed to be willfully 'protective' of the victimized Christians (Acts 21:30-35, 23:27-30, 25:15-17). The latter was of no real concern though, after all the Jesus' Messianic movement was not considered a political threat in the eyes of the Roman authorities. Jesus and his followers clearly were not considered a group of common bandits or an 'anti-Roman, nationalistic zealot movement', like Judas of Galilee, Simon, and Athronges a generation earlier.⁸⁵

Further evidence of the Roman authorities' neutrality or even tolerance towards the early Christ followers can also be seen by St. Paul's two-year relative freedom allowed during his confinement in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 24:23) for allegedly having 'tried to desecrate the temple' (Acts 24:5-6). During this period, the procurators Claudius Felix, his successor Porcius Festus and

⁸² Josephus *Ant. (Antiquitates Judaicae)* 3.1-2, and *J.W. (Bellum Judaicum)*, 2.2-3; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl. (Historia ecclesiastica)*, Pilate is described in these passages as a ruthless ruler who did not seem to be easily intimidated. In Philo, *Embassy, (Legatio ad Gaium)* 307, cited in Christian Gers-Uphaus, 'The Figure of Pontius Pilate in Josephus Compared with Philo and the Gospel of John', *Religions* 11.65 (2020), 1-24 (p.2), Pilate is described as 'a man of inflexible, stubborn and cruel disposition, but also firm and determined to keep the peace. A comprehensive portrayal of Pilate's character is hard to define and depends on the different commentator's perspectives, see Frank F. Judd Jr., 'Perspectives about Pontius Pilate in the Ante-Nicene Fathers', *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*, 8.9 (2016), 157-181.

⁸³ Samuele Bacchiocchi pp 12-23. Bacchiocchi makes a reasonable case for the broad awareness among the Roman elite of the teachings of Jesus Christ and its followers, as being distinct from mainstream Jewish traditions. As proof of this, Bacchiocchi cites Tertullian's account (*Apol.* 5.1-3) about the alleged report of Pilate to Caesar Tiberius about Christ, the Apocryphon *Anaphora Pilati*, as mentioned in the apocryphon *Gospel of Nicodemus (Acts of Pilate or Acta Pilati)* and the subsequent rejection of the 'Senatus Consultum' the imperial motion for recognition of Christ's deity as referred to by Eusebius, (*Hist. eccl.* 2.2.1-6), the conversion of the Proconsul Sergius Paulus in Cyprus (Acts 13:7), St. Paul's case before the Proconsul of Achaia, Junius Lucius Gallio, brother of Seneca (Acts 18:12) in c. 51 AD and several other indirect evidence in the 50s AD.

⁸⁴ Acts 4:17-18; 5:18; 7:57-60.

⁸⁵ Sources about the 'messianic-political Zealot movements' of Judas of Galilee, Simon, and Athronges are scarce. Josephus mentions them briefly in *Ant.* 17.10. 5-7 (§271-285) and *J.W.* 2.4. 2-3 (§57-60).

the Jewish King Agrippa II all took a lenient position towards St. Paul's incident. This was likely because of St. Paul's declared status as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-30, 25:10), but it was also because of their genuine belief in his innocence before the law. (Acts 23:28-29; 26:31-32). In other words, the Roman authorities' apparent tolerant stance on early Christianity was the result of their understanding of the group's innocence (18:12-17, 19:37-41, 23:23-24, 25,).

Secular sources

The *Antiquitates judaicae* (*Jewish Antiquities*, c. 93 AD), one of Josephus's major works, is probably the earliest secular source associated with the persecution of the early Christians.⁸⁶ In his oeuvre, the renowned first century Jewish historian provides two significant yet contested references of the troubled path the early Christians possibly had gone through. The first reference is provided in the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum*, which suggests that Christians had lived through a period of persecution as implied in the last sentence; '*And the tribe of Christians, so called after him (Jesus), has still to this day not disappeared*' (*Ant.* 18.3.3).⁸⁷ The second reference is found in *Ant.* 20.9.1, here Josephus gives a short account of an attack on the followers of Christ by the Jews and their religious leadership. This episode describes the Roman procurator Albinus' profound displeasure over the execution of St. James, the brother of Jesus and some of his

⁸⁶ Yosef bar Mattatyahu (in Aramic or ben Mattathias in Hebrew), better known by his Roman name, Titus Flavius Josephus (c. 37-97 AD) was a renowned Jewish-Roman historian, who was born in a priestly family and became a Pharisee at the age of 19. After fighting against the Roman army, he became a commander in Caesar Vespasian and Titus army during the siege of the temple of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He is known for his historical works during his time at the court of Caesar Vespasian in Rome, where he wrote amongst others, the *Jewish Wars* (*Bellum Judaicum* c. 76-79 AD), *Jewish Antiquities* (*Antiquitatis judaicae* c. 93-94 AD), *The life* (*Vita*, c.94-99) and *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem*, c.100 AD), Poole, Gary William. "Flavius Josephus". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 Feb. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Josephus>. [Accessed 1 January 2023]

⁸⁷ The entire passage in *Ant.* 18.3.3 reads as follow, '*About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared*'.

companions in Jerusalem, by the High Priest Ananus the younger (c.62 AD).⁸⁸ The description of these events shows that Josephus was likely aware of the profound animosity vis à vis the early Christ followers and the Jews frequent attempts to punish them since the birth of the Christian missionary era.⁸⁹

Another influential secular source suggesting an early Christian persecution is cited in Publius Cornelius Tacitus' *Annales* (c. 115 AD).⁹⁰ Tacitus, besides being a politician in the late first and early second century, is considered by many modern scholars to be the most influential and greatest Roman historian. In the renowned passage of the *Annales*, known as the *Testimonium Taciteum*, Tacitus describes how Caesar Nero accused and persecuted Christians at Rome for

⁸⁸ Ant. 20.9.1 (§197-200). Upon learning of the death of Festus, Caesar sent Albinus to Judaea as procurator. The king removed Joseph from the high priesthood, and bestowed the succession to this office upon the son of Ananus, who was likewise called Ananus. It is said that the elder Ananus was extremely fortunate. For he had five sons, all of whom, after he himself had previously enjoyed the office for a very long period, became high priests of God—a thing that had never happened to any other of our high priests. The younger Ananus, who, as we have said, had been appointed to the high priesthood, was rash in his temper and unusually daring. He followed the school of the Sadducees, who are indeed more heartless than any of the other Jews, as I have already explained,^a when they sit in judgement. **Possessed such a character, Ananus thought that he had a favourable 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.**

⁸⁹ Various scholars have disputed the passage Ant.18.3.3, claiming it to be either a partly or entirely Christian interpolation. Prominent proponents of the latter are Richard Carrier, 'The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, Annals 15:44', *Vigilae Christianae* 68. (2014), 264-283; Ken Olsen, 'A Eusebian Reading of the Testimonium Flavianum', in *Eusebius of Caesarea, Tradition and Innovation*, (Cambridge Massachusetts USA: Center for Hellenistic Studies, 2013), Paul Hopper, 'A narrative Anomaly in Josephus': Jewish Antiquities xviii: 63 in Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob, eds, *Linguistics and Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers*, de Gruyter, 31, (2014), 147-169. More recent studies, however, have suggested both the above passages, Ant 18:3.3 and 20.9.1 to have been largely Josephus' own words. Shlomo Pines, in *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and its Implications* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1971), p.16, argues that an authentic Arabic script of the 10th century (*Agapius of Heriapolis*) containing Josephus' statement about Christ, basically confirms for large parts the original Josephus text, free from Christian redaction and interpolation as the Church could probably not have censored it. This is partly refuted by Alice Whealey, 'The Testimonium Flavianum in Syriac and Arabic', *New Testament Studies*, 54 (2008) 573-590, (p.588). Whealey connects the *Agapius of Heriapolis* and the *Michael the Syrian's* versions with those of the Eusebius Syriac translation in *Hist.eccl.* and Jerome's earlier translation of the *Testimonium*. Basically, it concludes, that the *Agapius* and the *Michael* version had a common source, Theophilus of Edessa, and the only alteration made to the original Josephus text of the *Testimonium Flavianum* is found in the sentence, 'he was *thought* to be the Messiah' rather than 'he *was* the Messiah'. Nonetheless, the debate about this topic is still ongoing between the proponents and opponents of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, with a majority view supporting a partial interpolation.

⁹⁰ Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55-120 AD) was a Roman historian of high integrity, friend of Pliny the Younger, a former quaestor (81 AD), praetor (88 AD) and consul (97 AD), McDonald, Alexander Hugh. "Tacitus". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Mar. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian>. [Accessed 10 January 2023]. See also Gary R. Habermas, 'Ancient Non-Christian Sources', *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations*, 39 (1996), Chapter IX.

having instigated the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD (Ann. 15:44). Tacitus calls them ‘*a class hated for their abominations and mischievous superstition*’ (‘*vulgus Christianos Appellabat*’), that were ‘*convicted of hatred against mankind*’ (‘*odio humani generis*’).⁹¹ Tacitus’ second reference, to a possible early persecution of early Christ followers, is found in the lost part of Book V of *Historiae*, known as Tacitus’ fragment 2, preserved by Sulpicus Severus in his *Chronica* 30.6-7 (c. 403 AD).⁹² The account seemingly shows a similarity between the ‘Christiani’ as an alleged group of Jewish Zealots at the siege of Jerusalem and the ‘*followers of Chrestus*’ cited in Suetonius’ opus magnum, *De Vita XII Caesarum Divus Claudius*, 25.4 (c. 110 AD), as we will see below.⁹³ This, may indicate a possible, convergence between the two accounts of Tacitus and Suetonius concerning the Christian persecution. This is not surprising though, as they were both early second century Roman historians, and connected to each other, both professionally and as confrères.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Tacitus, Ann. 15.44, ‘*So far, the precautions taken were suggested by human prudence: now means were sought for appeasing deity, and application was made to the Sibylline books; at the injunction of which public prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpine, while Juno was propitiated by the matrons, first in the Capitol, then at the nearest point of the sea-shore, where water was drawn for sprinkling the temple and image of the goddess. Ritual banquets and all-night vigils were celebrated by women in the married state. But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, 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. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man’.*

⁹² *Chronica* Book II, 30.6-7 ‘*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*’. 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) 233-247, (p.237).

⁹³ Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4, ‘*Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus*’ (‘*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*’).

⁹⁴ Suetonius and Tacitus were both connected to Pliny the younger, for Suetonius Pliny was his patron and benefactor, Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 3.8, 10.94-95, 5.10, 9.34, 10.94.1 (see Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, Penguin Classics, transl. Robert Graves, revised edn. (London: Penguin Group, 2007), pp. xviii-xix. Tacitus and Pliny were close friends and one time colleagues, *Epistles* 1.20, 2.11, 4.13, 6.16, 5.20.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquilius (Suetonius) is generally considered, besides Josephus and Tacitus a third important secular source directly associated to a probable early Christian persecution.⁹⁵ Suetonius' earlier mentioned episode (*Claud.* 25.4) dates the probability of a Christian persecution back to the reign of Caesar Claudius and is associated with the latter's second edict, decreed probably around 42 AD or roughly between 42-49 AD. The passage does not clearly specify whether Suetonius made a distinction between "mainstream" Jews and what he calls, '*followers of a certain Chrestus*', which most scholars commonly presume to be Christians.⁹⁶ From St. Paul's letter to the Romans 1:6-7, it is likely that the term 'Christians' or 'Chrestiani' was not yet adopted to identify the community of early Christ followers.⁹⁷ In fact St. Paul calls them in his epistle to the Romans '*Gentiles belonging to Jesus Christ*' and '*God's holy people*'.⁹⁸ However, most scholars believe Caesar Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome was the result of the latter causing mayhem, while taking offence at the sacrilegious teachings of the early Christ followers. The passage seemingly fits well with the episode in Acts 18:2, 'There he (St. 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'.

The second incident alluding to an early Christian persecution is cited by Suetonius in *De Vita XII Caesarum, Divus Nero*. Here Suetonius confirms in part the actions taken by Caesar Nero as described above by Tacitus, his contemporary and acquaintance. The passage also indicates that

⁹⁵ Suetonius (c. 69-122 AD) was a Roman historian-biographer, protégé of Pliny the Younger and chief secretary of emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD), Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Suetonius". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Jan. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Suetonius>. [Accessed 1 January 2023]

⁹⁶ Orosius. *Hist. Adv. Paganos. Libri VII*, 6.15-16, '**no one can say whether emperor ordered the Jews to be restrained and repressed because they were creating disturbances against Christ or whether he wished the Christians to be expelled at the same time on the ground that they were members of an allied religion**'. Most scholars, however, have understood Suetonius's reference to *Chrestus* as a misspelling of the name *Christus*. This is further supported by the fact that the Greek word for "Christians" was spelled *Christianos*, *Chrestianos*, and *Chrēstianos*, the last of which corresponds precisely to Tacitus's spelling. Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth-century Christian edition of the Greek Bible, spells the word *Chrēstianos* in its three occurrences in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:8; 1 Peter 4:16), <https://bib.irr.org/tacitus-suetonius-and-historical-jesus> [Accessed 13 January 2023].

⁹⁷ Richard Carrier, 'The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, Annals 15:44', *Vigilae Christianae* 68.3 (2014), 264-283, (pp.271-273). Carrier believes that 'the followers of Chrestus' in Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4 referred to a sect of Jewish rebels led by and named the Jewish zealot 'Chrestus'. See for more on the term 'Chrestus' Brigit van der Lans and Jan N. Bremmer, 'Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians: An Invention of Tradition?', *Eirene, Studia Graeca et Latina*, LIII, (2017), 299-311 (Appendix, pp.317-322).

⁹⁸ Romans 1:6-7, '**And you are also among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people**'.

Suetonius assumes his readers to have a certain, presumably negative, knowledge about the Christians (spelled 'Christaini'). Judging from his tone in the passage, it seems to suggest Suetonius approved of the punishment inflicted by Caesar Nero on the Christians, which he describes with disdain as '*a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition*' (*genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*).⁹⁹ However, Suetonius does not seem to attribute the punishment of Christians to be related to the Great Fire.

Like Josephus' *Testimonium Flavianum*, the historicity of Tacitus' *Testimonium Taciteum* and Suetonius' account, as the most authoritative non-Christian extant sources attesting to an early Christian persecution, have since early on been disputed. As we will see, a few commanding sources composed from a late first - early second century perspective, seem to contest the authenticity of these two passages. The first source is provided by Pliny the Younger's letter to Caesar Trajan asking for guidance in dealing with court matters involving Christians.¹⁰⁰ In his tenth book of correspondence, written about fifty years after the reign of Caesar Nero (c. 112 AD), Pliny speaks about Christians in his province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, while serving there as the governor, seemingly unaware of any previous Christian persecution. The opening part of his letter to Caesar Trajan reveals his total unfamiliarity of Christians.¹⁰¹ Pliny's account suggests that

⁹⁹ Suetonius, *Nero*. 16.2, '*During his reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquets were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition. He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city.*' '*During his (Caesar Nero) reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquets were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. **Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition**. He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city.*'

¹⁰⁰ 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 to Bithynia where his extant letter to Caesar Trajan became the only genuine document describing Christian doctrine and practice in the early second century.

¹⁰¹ Pliny the Younger, *Letters (Epistolae)*, Volume II: Book 10, XCVI, '*It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance. I have never been present at an examination³ 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*'. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should

regardless of his curiosity, he *does* persecute the Christians merely based on their *admission* of being Christians, which Caesar Trajan approves of.¹⁰² Considering Pliny's early childhood during Caesar Nero's reign, his apprenticeship under Caesar Nero's former Commander of Germania Lucius Verginus Rufus, who quelled a revolt against Caesar Nero in 68 AD and served as a three-time Consul and considering Pliny's longstanding administrative-judicial career in Rome since 81 AD, his lack of knowledge about Christians is illustrating.¹⁰³ This tells us that it is unlikely an institutionalized persecution of Christians ever existed during the reign of Caesar Nero or even before, which essentially contests the earlier accounts of both Tacitus and Suetonius.

Like Pliny the Younger, Cassius Dio's *Roman History* (*Historia Romana*), written during the second half of the second century, is often quoted as an additional source skeptical of a Neronian or even pre Neronian Christian persecution.¹⁰⁴ According to JuliAnne Rach, Dio does not mention Christians or early Christ followers anywhere in his work, he *does* however, attempts to portray a negative image of Caesar Nero.¹⁰⁵ Rach argues that Dio's omission of Christians is telling considering that numerous historians have since long associated Caesar Nero's reign with extreme cruelty against Christians.¹⁰⁶

be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name. ***For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.***

¹⁰² Book 10, XCVII, '***You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age.***' [Letters, Volume II: Book 10, XCVII]

¹⁰³ Bernard William Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, Classic (London: Forgotten Books Publishing, 2018), p.399-405.

¹⁰⁴ 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).

¹⁰⁵ Dio Cassius, Book 62.

¹⁰⁶ JuliAnne Rach, p.22.

Following the ‘argumentum ex silentio’ in both Pliny and Dio’s account, some prominent critics like the mythicist Richard Carrier argue that the authenticity of the so-called *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.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, he concludes in his paper that part of the key passage in *Ann.* 15.44 was most likely subject to a ‘fourth century or later (Christian) interpolation’.¹⁰⁸ In a similar way, Brent D. Shaw questioned the ‘conventional certainty’ of the persecution of Christians in the time of Caesar Nero and possibly even before.¹⁰⁹ 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’.¹¹⁰ According to him, all related sources (the same as examined by Richard Carrier), connecting Christian persecution to the Great Fire during Nero’s reign in Rome depend exclusively on Tacitus’ account.¹¹¹ However, the lack of engagement by Carrier and Shaw with biblical sources discussed earlier in this chapter and some key religious literature, which will be discussed next, leaves their assessment wanting.

Non-canonical Christian writings

As we have seen, the biblical and secular sources examined in this dissertation so far provide no certainty about the validity of the ‘correlation theory’. Whereas the biblical sources have indicated the manifestation of a Christian persecution before 70 AD, primarily at the hands of the Jewish communities and their (religious) leadership (the Gospels, Acts), most secular accounts on the other hand attribute this belief largely to the cruelty of the Roman authorities during the reign

¹⁰⁷ Richard Carrier, ‘The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, Annals 15:44’, *Vigilae Christianae* 68.3 (2014), 264-283, (p.283). A similar argument is made by Brent D Shaw.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Carrier, p.265. The key line here disputed reads as follows, ‘*auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio, imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio affectus erat*’, ‘*The originator of this name, Christus [Chrestus?], was suffered (capital) punishment in the reign of Tiberius through the agency of the procurator Pontius Pilatus*’ (brackets mine).

¹⁰⁹ D. Shaw, ‘The Myth of the Neronian Persecution’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, (2015) 1-28.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.13.

of Caesar Nero (Tacitus, Suetonius). It is therefore indispensable to further examine some influential sources outside these conventional source traditions to further unwrap the historical perspective of the early Christian persecution.

Probably the earliest of these outside source is the non-canonical *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*.¹¹² 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'.¹¹³ It was not written in St. Clement's name but 'said to have been written by or sent by' St. Clement, the third successor of St. Peter as Bishop of Rome. Reference to a Christian persecution is often assumed from the very first sentence which reads, '*Because of the sudden and repeated misfortunes and setbacks we have experienced*'.¹¹⁴ This description is commonly assumed by biblical scholars to allude to the Christian persecution in the reign of Caesar Domitian, however, there is enough credible evidence to date the epistle before the fall of the temple in Jerusalem (70 AD), which could in fact tie the passage to a Neronian persecution instead.¹¹⁵ In *1 Clement* 5.2-6 Christian persecution is primarily portrayed through the sufferings of St. Paul and St. Peter during their ministries.¹¹⁶ Notably, the text identifies '*jealousy and envy*' as the cause for their persecution, which according to JuliAnne Rach refers to the Jewish leaders as mentioned in Acts 5:17-18 and 13:44-45.¹¹⁷ However, the same source of dispute, '*jealousy*', is also mentioned as central to the

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.

¹¹³ J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p.8. See also, *The Fathers of the Church: The Apostolic Fathers*, 1st paperback edn. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, Inc, 2008, pp.3-7, (translated by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.F. Marique, S.J., and Gerald G. Walsh S.J.), p.4. St. Clement's pontificate is estimated to have lasted between 88-97 AD (or 92-101 AD). It is commonly believed, St. Clement's predecessors were St. Linus and St. Anacletus, the successors of St. Peter, the first leader and Pope of the Church of Rome.

¹¹⁴ *1 Clement* 1:1.

¹¹⁵ Bernard William Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, Classic (London: Forgotten Books Publishing, 2018), p.443, 484; 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 Book of Hebrews share the same context and a similar reference, including the Jerusalem temple description as 'a structure still standing'.

¹¹⁶ *1 Clement* 5.2-6. '*Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most upright pillars were persecuted, and they struggled in the contest even to death. We should set before our eyes the good apostles. There is Peter, who because of unjust jealousy bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness he went to the place of glory that he deserved. Because of jealousy and strife Paul pointed the way to the prize for endurance. Seven times he bore chains; he was sent into exile and stoned; he served as a herald in both the East and the West; and he received the noble reputation for his faith*'.

¹¹⁷ Rach, p. 20.

persecution of women in *Corinth*.6.2-4, which has left various scholars puzzled regarding its correct understanding.¹¹⁸

Another authoritative non-canonical Christian body of text suggesting the early persecution of Christians for their faith, are the epistles written by the early eastern Church Father, St. Ignatius of Antioch on his journey to Rome to be executed.¹¹⁹ Various sources place St. Ignatius between c.35-c.117 AD and his *Letters* in the second half of the reign of Trajan, around 110 AD, which makes him a contemporary of St. Clement, St Polycarp and St. Papias.¹²⁰ In his epistle to the Church of Ephesus, St. Ignatius writes the following; *'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'*.¹²¹ The passage indicates that St. Ignatius was persecuted for his beliefs and that the modus of his impending execution was analogous to the practice adopted during the Neronian persecution as described in Tacitus's account.¹²² In *Magn*.8.2 St. Ignatius describes Christian persecution through the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul; *'For the most divine prophets lived according to*

¹¹⁸ In 1 Clement 6.2 it reads: *Women were persecuted as Danaids and Dircae and suffered terrifying and profane torments because of jealousy. But they confidently completed the race of faith, and though weak in body, they received a noble reward. Jealousy estranged wives from their husbands and nullified what was spoken by our father Adam, "This now is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. Jealousy and strife overturned great cities and uprooted great nations"*. Note that during the early second half of the second century the theme of jealousy and envy took prominence in the Apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* and was associated with women's sexual continence causing jealousy among their loving husbands. Their wrath caused persecution of the Apostles and finally their death, see Judith Perkins, 'The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and the Early Christian Martyrdom', *Arethusa*, 18.2. (1985), 211-230, (p.215). Brent Shaw, p.13, dismisses the passage for having no connection whatsoever to a the first (Neronian) Christian persecution.

¹¹⁹ What is known about St. 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 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 J.H. Srawley, *The 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.

¹²⁰ 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 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.

¹²¹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 1.2.

¹²² Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44, *'they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs'*. This road to martyrdom St. Ignatius seems to allude in his, *Letter to the Ephesians*, *Eph*.1.2, *Letter to the Romans*, *Rom*.4.1-2, 5.2-3, *Letter to the Trallians*, *Trall*.10.1 and *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, *Smyrn*.4.2.

Jesus Christ. For this reason, also they were persecuted' and in *Rom.* 4-5, he declares his readiness to be persecuted and face his martyrdom he longs for.¹²³

The main theme of the accounts in 1 Clement and the epistles of Ignatius were about restoration of ecclesiastical obedience and order. However, their historical value regarding an early Christian persecution lies in being manuscripts most probably belonging to the Apostolic era and located in the heart of early Christianity. Both St. Clement and St Ignatius experienced maltreatments as prominent Christians at Rome and Antioch, and as such both Church Fathers most likely may have had direct contact with the living Apostles.¹²⁴ For this reason, their account on the persecution of the early Christ followers, can be considered genuine as can be derived from their close familiarity with other influential primary sources.

Further 'would-be' canonical manuscripts mentioning the early Christian persecution are the *Letter to Diognetus* and the *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi (Martyrdom of St. Polycarp)*. The author of the *Letter to Diognetus* (given the name 'Mathetes' or disciple of the Apostles by many scholars), shows close connection to the Apostles using a 'Greek style filled with Pauline convictions'.¹²⁵ Although no context and certainty about the place and time of the epistle's composition is provided in the text, the author's religious stereotyping stressing the distinction between the Christian faith and that of the Jews and Greeks suggest a logical continuation of St. Paul's teachings.¹²⁶ As such, these convictions may indicate a first century composition of the epistle, possibly even before the fall of the Jewish temple, which is earlier than the broad periodization scholars generally have attributed to the text.¹²⁷ This possibility is further supported by the disposition of *The Letter to Diognetus*, that seems to reflect a Jewish and Greek rather than a Roman persecution of Christians.¹²⁸

¹²³ Ign. Rom. 4.2 ***Allow me to be bread for the wild beasts; through them I am able to attain to God***, 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.***

¹²⁴ St. Clement peter and paul, Ignatius John source XXX

¹²⁵ *The Fathers of the Church, The Apostolic Fathers*, p.355.

¹²⁶ Rom. 1:16, 3:9, 1 Cor.1:22-23. See Judith M. Lieu, 'Identity Games Early Christian Texts: The Letter of Diognetus', *Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*. Ed. Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell. (London: T&T Clark, 2018) 59-71, (p.63).

¹²⁷ The date of composition of the *Letter to Diognetes* is very broadly estimated by various scholars between the time of the Apostles up to the fourth century and sometime even later.

¹²⁸ Mathetes, *The Letter to Diognetus* 5.11-17, 6.5.

The *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi* (*Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*), the Bishop of Smyrna, was likely composed in the mid second century 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’.¹²⁹ The manuscript is a clear testimony of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp and unmistakably shows a continuance and intensification of Christian persecution for their faith during the course of the second century.¹³⁰ Its uniqueness lies in being the earliest eyewitness account of an early Christian persecution outside the biblical canon.¹³¹ Although the account does not confirm nor deny a pre-70 AD Christian persecution nor a specific Neronian one, it *does* allude to a possible evolution of Pliny’s loyalty test against Christians, which may have had its origins in the ‘imperial cult’, since the deification of Julius Caesar (42 BC).¹³²

The above late first - early second century manuscripts were the first of an era that would become known as the age of Christian martyrdom literature.¹³³ The authors of this genre would ‘idealize the (Christian) martyrs and their sacrifices, emphasizing their perseverance and faithful confessions’.¹³⁴ During the early part of the patristic period, between the second century until the reign of St. Constantine, Christian apologists and polemicists like Tertullian stood up against the Roman empire’s blatant injustices and persecution committed against Christians.¹³⁵ In his *Apologia*

¹²⁹ 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).

¹³⁰ Pol. *Martyrium*, 20:1-2. The events were summarized by a certain Marcion (Marcianus) and written by another called Everestus.

¹³¹ Pol. *Martyrdom*, 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’.

¹³² Demonstrating one’s loyalty to Caesar was closely related to the ‘imperial cult’, which already existed during the reign of Julius Caesar. In Pol. *Martyrdom*, 8-12; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.15. the passage, ‘Take the oath and I will set you free, Curse Christ’, ‘Swear by Caesar’s fortune’ describes the ‘Caesar is Lord loyalty test’, which therefore probably predates the era of Pliny the Younger in dealing with the legality of Christians in the Roman province of Asia Minor, Bithynia Pontus (see above). See also Henry Fairfield Burton, *The Worship of the Roman Emperors, The Biblical World*, 40.2 (1912), 80-91; Warren Carter, pp.138-141.

¹³³ 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*, Lactantius’ *De mortibus persecutorem*.

¹³⁴ Paul Hartog, ‘The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response’, p.62. Brackets are mine.

¹³⁵ 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 we get through 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. 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.

(*Apologetics*), he rants in defense of Christianity using sarcasm and even threats against the Roman authorities.¹³⁶ His confronting style reveals much of the issues related to the first and second century Christian persecution including a clear reference to Caesar Nero's reign, which gives support to the 'correlation theory'.¹³⁷ Rach believes that it is likely that Tertullian's reference to Caesar Nero, as quoted by Eusebius is based on Tacitus' account as the only extant source, yet his comment, '*Look at your records*' (plural) may suggest otherwise.¹³⁸

The most influential non-canonical Christian source during the later patristic period, attesting to an early Christian persecution is the *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*), by the highly influential fourth century Christian historian Eusebius.¹³⁹ Even though living distant from the time of the actual events, Eusebius' work quotes various non-extant manuscripts and as such is highly valuable as a primary source regarding the history of the Church from the ministry of Christ until the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).¹⁴⁰ In this historical account, Eusebius consistently accuses the Jews and Roman emperors of being the prime persecutors of the early Christians.¹⁴¹ 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 should*

¹³⁶ In *Ad Nationes*, to the Heathen (*Nations*), 1.17, Tertullian accuses the Roman Empire of double standard in the Christian refusal to swear by the Genius of Caesar.

¹³⁷ Tertullian. *Apologetica*, 5.3, '*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*', 21.25, '*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*'.

¹³⁸ JuliAnne Rach, p.25. *Hist. eccl.* 2.25. The entire passage reads, '*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*'.

¹³⁹ Eusebius (c.260-339 AD) was a Greek historian and Bishop of Caesarea Maritima. He was strongly influenced by the Christian Theologian Origen and his follower the presbyter Pamphilus, who founded a center of Christian learning in this Palestinian port city. He was heavily involved in the Arian controversy and an important participant in the Council of Nicaea. For more on his life and works, see Eusebius, *The Church History*, transl. Paul L. Maier, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2007), pp.10-17.

¹⁴⁰ *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'.

¹⁴¹ *Hist eccl.* 2.5.6; 2.6.3-5; 2.7.1.

have known better than to kill Christ and Christians'.¹⁴² Eusebius' direct reference to Caesar Nero's reign we find in *Hist eccl.* 2.24-25, where he states,

*When the rule of Nero was now gathering strength for unholy object' he began to take up arms against the worship of the God of the universe' and '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 [...]. In this way then was he the first to be heralded as above all a fighter against God and raised up to slaughter against the Apostles. It is related that in his time Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified [...].*¹⁴³

Concluding, as we have seen, the most influential biblical, secular and non-canonical Christian sources examined in this chapter, *do* seem to suggest the authenticity of an early persecution of Christians, which began as early as Jesus' ministry and gradually intensified, with highs and lows throughout the first three centuries until the Council of Nicaea. On the other hand, except for Tacitus' and Suetonius' accounts, the secular evidence for a Neronian persecution of Christians is too scarce and somewhat vague to accept it as a proven phenomenon. For better understanding the validity of the 'correlation theory', therefore, further study of later patristic works should be considered. These include manuscripts of various apologists, ancient historians and Christian authors of martyrdom literature, like Justin Martyr's *Apology*, Origen's *De principiis*, St. Jerome's *De Viris Illustrious*, *Commentarium in Daniele*, Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorem*, Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos*, Cyprian's *Letter*, Juvenal's *Satire*, Plutarch's *Live of the Caesars* and the *Sibylline Oracles*, which all hold some useful references concerning the early Christian persecution. Also, a vast body of Apocryphal works should be addressed in such a study including *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which was likely composed at Rome around the same time as

¹⁴² William Tabbernee, 'Eusebius' "Theology of Persecution": As seen in the Various Editions of the Church History', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 5(3) (1997), 319-334, (pp. 324-326). Eusebius lists 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).

¹⁴³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25.

the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, offers some valuable clues.¹⁴⁴ In it, a key passage alluding to the Christian and maybe even Neronian persecution reads as follows: *'What have they endured? I asked. Listen, she said, floggings, imprisonments, great afflictions, crucifixions, and wild beasts, for the sake of the name.'*¹⁴⁵ Various other apocryphal works worth analyzing are amongst other, the *Apocalypse of Peter* (c. 130 AD), of Egyptian or Syrian origin and the pseudepigrapha, *Ascension of Isaiah*, likely composed in Syria as they both reveal Caesar Nero's persecution of the Apostle Peter at Rome.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ The *Muratorian Canon* states that *The Shepherd of Hermas* was written when Hermes' brother, Pius was the Bishop of Rome (c. 140- c.154 AD). Origen identified Hermas as the person in Paul, *Rom.* 16:14, while in the text, reference is made to a Clement (8.2), the 'foreign correspondent for the Roman Church', which is associated with the author of 1 Clement, third bishop of Rome (see above and see Introduction to the Shepherd of Hermas, Loeb libraries, Harvard University Press, 2023).

¹⁴⁵ *Vision*, 10 (III.2).

¹⁴⁶ Reference to Caesar Nero's cruelty in *Apoc. Pet.* 14:4-6, ***'Behold, I have shown you, Peter, and explained everything. And go to the city that rules the west and drink the cup which I have promised you at the hand of the son of the one who is in Hades, so that his destruction might have a beginning, and you acceptable to the promise'***. See Eric J. Beck, *Perceiving the Mystery of the Merciful Son of God. An Analysis of the Purpose of the Apocalypse of Peter*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, UK (2018), p.129-130; Brigit van der Lans and Jan N. Bremmer, 'Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians: An Invention of Tradition?', *Eirene, Studia Graeca et Latina, LIII*, (2017), p.314. The Gnostic Society Library, Christian Apocrypha and Early Christian Literature, translation M.R. James, *The Apocalypse of Peter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), pp.246-257. *Ascension*, 4:4-1, ***And now Hezekiah and Josab my son, these are the days of the completion of the world. After it is consummated, Beliar the great ruler, the king of this world, will descend, who hath ruled it since it came into being; yea, he will descend from his firmament in the likeness of a man, a lawless king, the slayer of his mother: who himself (even) this king. Will persecute the plant which the Twelve Apostles of the Beloved have planted. Of the Twelve one will be delivered into his hands. This ruler in the form of that king will come and there will come and there will come with him all the powers of this world, and they will hearken unto him in all that he desires.***

Conclusion

This dissertation has shown that the Book of Revelation was indeed written *by* a persecuted Christian *for* the persecuted Christians. Its symbolism and imagery disclosed not only evidence about the perpetrators of the early Christian repression, but also about when, where and under what circumstances these harassments occurred. In probing the early Christian persecution as alluded to in the Apocalypse, we have also seen a distinction between the period before and after the Great Fire at Rome in 64 AD.

In chapter one, we have examined several passages in the Apocalypse that directly and indirectly alluded to the pre-64 AD Christian oppression. 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 the Christians of disseminating false teachings or behaving non-conformingly ('showing hatred of mankind'). However, these abuses were sporadic and were not limited to the provinces of Judea and Galilea but occurred throughout the entire Roman empire's eastern provinces.

Chapter two of this dissertation has offered an analysis on the passages in the Apocalypse that are connected to the reign of Caesar Nero and the Roman empire. Many scholars have argued that chapters thirteen and seventeen of the Apocalypse most likely allude to the emperor's brutality committed against the early Christians. However, these allusions are not as unambiguous as they may seem, especially when adopting a non-preterist approach to the Book of Revelation. Different interpretational approaches to the Apocalypse may create loopholes, that might be better rationalized using references to a Domitian persecution or by adopting a futuristic or idealistic interpretation of the Book of Revelation. In fact, if the unique imageries of the Apocalypse left its mark on our collective understanding of Church tradition about the Roman empire's persecution of early Christians, it also influenced our modern-day perception of the forces of good defeating evil, the concept of Armageddon, the end of the world or more commonly, our perception of divine prophecy and justice. If so, a preterist approach to the Apocalypse may not suffice.

The final chapter addresses the interpretational ambiguities as discussed in the previous chapters by putting the Apocalypse in a historical perspective. The chapter shows that the *allusions* were not merely *illusions* in support of the new religion of Christianity. They did not merely confirm the increasingly growing belief in the importance of Christian martyrdom. These allusions were essentially a reflection of the historical reality of the Christian persecution during the first century and are supported by biblical, secular and non-canonical Christian sources. However, the historical reality did *not* support the popular belief of a widespread and systematic persecution during the entire apostolic age, *not* by the Jewish and pagan communities *nor* by the Roman authorities. The harassments occurred occasionally and were far less brutal than often portrayed by Church tradition or by dissemination of popular belief. The allusions in the Apocalypse, however, certainly *did* convey the *perception* of religious persecution or culture of anxiety and hatred, that the Christ followers during the apostolic age were subjected to. Ultimately, such feelings even when spanning several generations cannot be trivialized, nor be called an exaggeration.

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