

The Roman Persecution of Christians and the Destruction of Jerusalem

from History of the Christian Church

Philip Schaff

Contents

Nero	2
The Conflagration in Rome	2
The Persecution of the Christians	3
The Probable Extent of the Persecution.	4
The Apocalypse on the Neronian Persecution	5
The Accounts of the Neronian Persecution from Heathen Historians	6
Nero's Return	7
The Approaching Doom	8
The Jewish Rebellion	8
The Roman Invasion	9
The Destruction of the City and the Temple	10
The Fate of the Survivors, and the Triumph in Rome	11
Effects of the Destruction of Jerusalem on the Christian Church.	12

The preaching of Paul and Peter in Rome was an epoch in the history of the church. It gave an impulse to the growth of Christianity. Their martyrdom was even more effective in the end: it cemented the bond of union between the Jewish and

Gentile converts, and consecrated the soil of the heathen metropolis. Jerusalem crucified the Lord, Rome beheaded and crucified his chief apostles and plunged the whole Roman church into a baptism of blood. Rome became, for good and for evil, the

Jerusalem of Christendom, and the Vatican hill the Golgotha of the West. Peter and Paul, like a new Romulus and Remus, laid the foundation of a spiritual empire vaster and more enduring than that of the Caesars. The cross was substituted for the sword as the symbol of conquest and power.¹

But the change was effected at the sacrifice of precious blood. The Roman empire was at first, by its laws of justice, the protector of Christianity, without knowing its true character, and came to the rescue of Paul on several critical occasions, as in Corinth through the Proconsul Annaeus Gallio, in Jerusalem through the Captain Lysias, and in Caesarea through the Procurator Festus. But now it rushed into deadly conflict with the new religion, and opened, in the name of idolatry and patriotism, a series of intermittent persecutions, which ended at last in the triumph of the banner of the cross at the Milvian bridge. Formerly a restraining power that kept back for a while the outbreak of Antichrist,² it now openly assumed the character of Antichrist with fire and sword.³

Nero

The first of these imperial persecutions with which the Martyrdom of Peter and Paul is connected by ecclesiastical tradition, took place in the tenth year of Nero's reign, a.d. 64, and by the instigation of that very emperor to whom Paul, as a Roman citizen, had appealed from the Jewish tribunal. It was, however, not a strictly religious persecution, like those under the later emperors; it originated in a public calamity which was wantonly charged upon the innocent Christians.

¹Lange on Romans, p. 29 (Am. ed.): "As the light and darkness of Judaism was centralized in Jerusalem, the theocratic city of God (the holy city, the murderer of the prophets), so was heathen Rome, the humanitarian metropolis of the world, the centre of all the elements of light and darkness prevalent in the heathen world; and so did Christian Rome become the centre of all the elements of vital light, and of all the antichristian darkness in the Christian church. Hence Rome, like Jerusalem, not only possesses a unique historical significance, but is a universal picture operative through all ages. Christian Rome, especially, stands forth as a shining light of the nations, which is turned into an idol of magical strength to those who are subject to its rule."

²In 2 Thess. 2:6, 7, to; *katevcon* is the Roman empire, *oJ katevcwn* the emperor as its representative. This is the patristic interpretation to which some of the best modern commentators have returned. Mediaeval sects and many Protestant writers found the great apostasy in the Papacy and the restraining power in the German empire; while papal commentators took revenge by fastening the charge of apostasy on the Reformation which was restrained by the Papacy. I believe in a repeated and growing fulfilment of this and other prophecies on the historic basis of the apostolic age and the old Roman empire.

³It is so represented in Revelation 13–18 after the Neronian persecution.

⁴Comp. Renan's *portraiture* of Nero, l.c. ch. I. He thinks that there is no parallel to this monster, and calls him 'un esprit prodigieusement déclamatoire, une mauvaise nature, hypocrite, légère, vaniteuse; un composé incroyable d'intelligence fausse, de méchanceté profonde, d'égoïsme atroce et sournois, avec des raffinements inouïs de subtilité.'

⁵For a description of the Circus Maximus see Friedländer, III. 293 sqq. The amphitheatrical rows of seats were eight stadia long, with accommodation for 150,000 persons. After Nero's reconstruction the seats amounted to 250,000 under Vespasianum, and subsequent additions raised the number, in the fourth century to 385,000. It was surrounded by wooden buildings for shopkeepers (among whom were many Jews), astrologers, caterers, prostitutes, and all sorts of amusements. Nero was most

A greater contrast can hardly be imagined than that between Paul, one of the purest and noblest of men, and Nero, one of the basest and vilest of tyrants. The glorious first five years of Nero's reign (54–59) under the wise guidance of Seneca and Burrhus, make the other nine (59–68) only more hideous by contrast. We read his life with mingled feelings of contempt for his folly, and horror of his wickedness. The world was to him a comedy and a tragedy, in which he was to be the chief actor. He had an insane passion for popular applause; he played on the lyre; he sung his odes at supper; he drove his chariots in the circus; he appeared as a mimic on the stage, and compelled men of the highest rank to represent in dramas or in tableaux the obscenest of the Greek myths. But the comedian was surpassed by the tragedian. He heaped crime upon crime until he became a proverbial monster of iniquity. The murder of his brother (Britannicus), his mother (Agrippina), his wives (Octavia and Poppaea), his teacher (Seneca), and many eminent Romans, was fitly followed by his suicide in the thirty-second year of his age. With him the family of Julius Caesar ignominiously perished, and the empire became the prize of successful soldiers and adventurers.⁴

The Conflagration in Rome

For such a demon in human shape, the murder of a crowd of innocent Christians was pleasant sport. The occasion of the hellish spectacle was a fearful conflagration of Rome, the most destructive and disastrous that ever occurred in history. It broke out in the night between the 18th and 19th of July, among the wooden shops in the south-eastern

end of the Great Circus, near the Palatine hill.⁵ Lashed by the wind, it defied all exertions of the firemen and soldiers, and raged with unabated fury for seven nights and six days. Then it burst out again in another part, near the field of Mars, and in three days more laid waste two other districts of the city.⁶

The calamity was incalculable. Only four of the fourteen regions into which the city was divided, remained uninjured; three, including the whole interior city from the Circus to the Esquiline hill, were a shapeless mass of ruins; the remaining seven were more or less destroyed; venerable temples, monumental buildings of the royal, republican, and imperial times, the richest creations of Greek art which had been collected for centuries, were turned into dust and ashes; men and beasts perished in the flames, and the metropolis of the world assumed the aspect of a graveyard with a million of mourners over the loss of irreparable treasures.

This fearful catastrophe must have been before the mind of St. John in the Apocalypse when he wrote his funeral dirge of the downfall of imperial Rome (Apoc. 18).

The cause of the conflagration is involved in mystery. Public rumor traced it to Nero, who wished to enjoy the lurid spectacle of burning Troy, and to gratify his ambition to rebuild Rome on a more magnificent scale, and to call it Neropolis.⁷ When the fire broke out he was on the seashore at Antium, his birthplace; he returned when the devouring element reached his own palace, and made extraordinary efforts to stay and then to repair the disaster by a reconstruction which continued till after his death, not forgetting to replace his partially destroyed temporary residence (*domus transitoria*) by “the golden house” (*domus aurea*), as a standing wonder of architectural magnificence and extravagance.

extravagant in his expenditure for the circus and the theatre to gratify the people’s passion for *Panem et Circenses*, to use Juvenal’s words.

⁶The nine days’ duration is proved by an inscription (Gruter, 61. 3). The great fire in London in 1666 lasted only four days and swept an area of 436 acres. Comp. Lambert’s *Hist. of London*, II. 91, quoted by Merivale. The fire in Chicago lasted only thirty-six hours, October 8 and 9, 1871, but swept over nearly three and one-third square miles (2,114 square acres), and destroyed 17,450 buildings, the homes of 98,500 people.

⁷Tacitus XV. 39: “Pervaserat rumor ipso tempore flagrantis urbis inisse eum domesticam scenam et cecinisse Troianum excedium.” Sueton. c. 38: “Quasi offensus deformitate veterum aedificiorum et angustiis flexuris vicorum Nero incendit Urbem ... Hoc incendium e turre Maecenatiana prospectans, laetusque flammae, ut ajebat, ‘pulchritudine,’ a Iulio in illo suo scaenico habitu decantavit.” Robbers and ruffians were seen to thrust blazing brands into the buildings, and, when seized, they affirmed that they acted under higher orders. The elder Pliny, Xiphilinus, and the author of the tragedy, Octavia, likewise charge Nero with incendiarism. But Schiller, l.c. 425 sqq., labors to relieve him of it.

⁸We do not know the precise date of the massacre. Mosheim fixes it on November, Renan on August, a.d. 64. Several weeks or months at all events must have passed after the fire. If the traditional date of Peter’s crucifixion be correct there would be an interval of nearly a year between the conflagration, July 19, 64, and his martyrdom, June 29th.

The Persecution of the Christians

To divert from himself the general suspicion of incendiarism, and at the same time to furnish new entertainment for his diabolical cruelty, Nero wickedly cast the blame upon the hated Christians, who, meanwhile, especially since the public trial of Paul and his successful labors in Rome, had come to be distinguished from the Jews as a *genus tertium*, or as the most dangerous offshoot from that race. They were certainly despisers of the Roman gods and loyal subjects of a higher king than Caesar, and they were falsely suspected of secret crimes. The police and people, under the influence of the panic created by the awful calamity, were ready to believe the worst slanders, and demanded victims.

What could be expected of the ignorant multitude, when even such cultivated Romans as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, stigmatized Christianity as a vulgar and pestiferous superstition. It appeared to them even worse than Judaism, which was at least an ancient national religion, while Christianity was novel, detached from any particular nationality, and aiming at universal dominion. Some Christians were arrested, confessed their faith, and were “convicted not so much,” says Tacitus, “of the crime of incendiarism as of hating the human race.” Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an “*odium generis humani*,” and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty. An infuriated mob does not stop to reason, and is as apt to run mad as an individual.

Under this wanton charge of incendiarism, backed by the equally groundless charge of misanthropy and unnatural vice, there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since.⁸ It was the answer of the powers of hell

to the mighty preaching of the two chief apostles, which had shaken heathenism to its centre. A “vast multitude” of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner. Some were crucified, probably in mockery of the punishment of Christ,⁹ some sewed up in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to the voracity of mad dogs in the arena. The satanic tragedy reached its climax at night in the imperial gardens on the slope of the Vatican (which embraced, it is supposed, the present site of the place and church of St. Peter): Christian men and women, covered with pitch or oil or resin, and nailed to posts of pine, were lighted and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob; while Nero, in fantastical dress, figured in a horse race, and displayed his art as charioteer. Burning alive was the ordinary punishment of incendiaries; but only the cruel ingenuity of this imperial monster, under the inspiration of the devil, could invent such a horrible system of illumination.

This is the account of the greatest heathen historian, the fullest we have—as the best description of the destruction of Jerusalem is from the pen of the learned Jewish historian. Thus enemies bear witness to the truth of Christianity. Tacitus incidentally mentions in this connection the crucifixion of Christ under Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius. With all his haughty Roman contempt for the Christians whom he knew only from rumor and reading, he was convinced of their innocence of incendiarism, and notwithstanding his cold stoicism, he could not suppress a feeling of pity for them because they were sacrificed not to the public good, but to the ferocity of a wicked tyrant.

Some historians have doubted, not indeed the truth of this terrible persecution, but that the Christians, rather than the Jews, or the Christians alone, were the sufferers. It seems difficult to understand that the harmless and peaceful Christians, whom the contemporary writers, Seneca, Pliny, Lucan, Persius, ignore, while they notice the Jews, should so soon have become the subjects of popular indignation. It is supposed that Tacitus and Suetonius, writing some fifty years after the event, confounded the Christians with the Jews, who were

generally obnoxious to the Romans, and justified the suspicion of incendiarism by the escape of their transtiberine quarter from the injury of the fire.

But the atrocious act was too public to leave room for such a mistake. Both Tacitus and Suetonius distinguish the two sects, although they knew very little of either; and the former expressly derives the name Christians from Christ, as the founder of the new religion. Moreover Nero, as previously remarked, was not averse to the Jews, and his second wife, Poppaea Sabina, a year before the conflagration, had shown special favor to Josephus, and loaded him with presents. Josephus speaks of the crimes of Nero, but says not a word of any persecution of his fellow-religionists. This alone seems to be conclusive. It is not unlikely that in this (as in all previous persecutions, and often afterwards) the fanatical Jews, enraged by the rapid progress of Christianity, and anxious to avert suspicion from themselves, stirred up the people against the hated Galilaeans, and that the heathen Romans fell with double fury on these supposed half Jews, disowned by their own strange brethren.

The Probable Extent of the Persecution.

The heathen historians, if we are to judge from their silence, seem to confine the persecution to the city of Rome, but later Christian writers extend it to the provinces. The example set by the emperor in the capital could hardly be without influence in the provinces, and would justify the outbreak of popular hatred. If the Apocalypse was written under Nero, or shortly after his death, John’s exile to Patmos must be connected with this persecution. It mentions imprisonments in Smyrna, the martyrdom of Antipas in Pergamus, and speaks of the murder of prophets and saints and all that have been slain on the earth. The Epistle to the Hebrews 10:32–34, which was written in Italy, probably in the year 64, likewise alludes to bloody persecutions, and to the release of Timothy from prison,

⁹“Crucibus affixi,” says Tacitus. This would well apply to Peter, to whom our Lord had prophesied such a death, John 21:18, 19. Tertullian says: “Romae Petrus passioni Dominicae adaequatur” (De Praescript. Haeret., c. 36; comp. Adv. Marc., IV. 5; Scorpiace, 15). According to a later tradition he was, at his own request, crucified with his head downwards, deeming himself unworthy to be crucified as was his Lord. This is first mentioned in the Acta Pauli, c. 81, by Origen (in Euseb. H. E., III. 1) and more clearly by Jerome (Catal. 1); but is doubtful, although such cruelties were occasionally practised (see Josephus, Bell. Jud., V. 11, 1). Tradition mentions also the martyrdom of Peter’s wife, who was cheered by the apostle on her way to the place of execution and exhorted to remember the Lord on the cross (μεμνησο του’ Κυριου). Clement of Alexandria, Strom. VII. 11, quoted by Eusebius, H. E., III. 30. The orderly execution of Paul by the sword indicates a regular legal process before, or more probably at least a year after, the Neronian persecution in which his Roman citizenship would scarcely have been respected.

13:23. And Peter, in his first Epistle, which may be assigned to the same year, immediately after the outbreak of the persecution, and shortly before his death, warns the Christians in Asia Minor of a fiery trial which is to try them, and of sufferings already endured or to be endured, not for any crime, but for the name of “Christians.” The name “Babylon” for Rome is most easily explained by the time and circumstances of composition.

Christianity, which had just reached the age of its founder, seemed annihilated in Rome. With Peter and Paul the first generation of Christians was buried. Darkness must have overshadowed the trembling disciples, and a despondency seized them almost as deep as on the evening of the crucifixion, thirty-four years before. But the morning of the resurrection was not far distant, and the very spot of the martyrdom of St. Peter was to become the site of the greatest church in Christendom and the palatial residence of his reputed successors.¹⁰

The Apocalypse on the Neronian Persecution

None of the leading apostles remained to record the horrible massacre, except John. He may have heard of it in Ephesus, or he may have accompanied Peter to Rome and escaped a fearful death in the Neronian gardens, if we are to credit the ancient tradition of his miraculous preservation from being burnt alive with his fellow-Christians in that hellish illumination on the Vatican hill.¹¹ At all events he was himself a victim of persecution for the name of Jesus, and depicted its horrors, as an exile on the lonely island of Patmos in the vision of the Apocalypse.

This mysterious book—whether written between 68

and 69, or under Domitian in 95—was undoubtedly intended for the church of that age as well as for future ages, and must have been sufficiently adapted to the actual condition and surroundings of its first readers to give them substantial aid and comfort in their fiery trials. Owing to the nearness of events alluded to, they must have understood it even better, for practical purposes, than readers of later generations. John looks, indeed, forward to the final consummation, but he sees the end in the beginning. He takes his standpoint on the historic foundation of the old Roman empire in which he lived, as the visions of the prophets of Israel took their departure from the kingdom of David or the age of the Babylonian captivity. He describes the heathen Rome of his day as “the beast that ascended out of the abyss,” as “a beast coming out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads” (or kings, emperors), as “the great harlot that sitteth among many waters,” as a “woman sitting upon a scarlet-colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns,” as “Babylon the great, the mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the earth.”⁵³⁴ The seer must have in view the Neronian persecution, the most cruel that ever occurred, when he calls the woman seated on seven hills, “drunken with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus,” (Rev. 17:6) and prophesied her downfall as a matter of rejoicing for the “saints and apostles and prophets.” (Rev. 18:2; compare Rev. 6:9-11.)

Recent commentators discover even a direct allusion to Nero, as expressing in Hebrew letters (Neron Kesar) the mysterious number 666, and as being the fifth of the seven heads of the beast which was slaughtered, but would return again from the abyss as Antichrist. But this interpretation is uncertain, and in no case can we attribute to John the belief that Nero would literally rise from the

¹⁰“Those who survey,” says Gibbon (ch. XVI.)“with a curious eye the revolutions of mankind, may observe that the gardens and circus of Nero on the Vatican, which were polluted with the blood of the first Christians, have been rendered still more famous by the triumph and by the abuse of the persecuted religion. On the same spot, a temple, which far surpasses the ancient glories of the capital, has been since erected by the Christian pontiffs, who, deriving their claim of universal dominion from a humble fisherman of Galilee, have succeeded to the throne of the Caesars, given laws to the barbarian conquerors of Rome, and extended their spiritual jurisdiction from the coast of the Baltic to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.” Comp. Renan, *L’Antechr.* p. 177: “L’orgie de Néron fut le grand baptême de sanq qui désigna Rome, comme la ville des martyrs, pour jouer un rôle à part dans l’histoire du christianisme, et en être la seconde ville sainte. Ce fut la prise de possession de la colline Vaticane par ces triomphateurs d’un genre inconnu jusque-là ... Rome, rendue responsable de tout le sang versé, devint comme Babylone une sorte de ville sacramentelle et symbolique.”

¹¹Tertullian mentions it in connection with the crucifixion of Peter and the decapitation of Paul as apparently occurring at the same time; *De Praescript. Haer.*, c.36: “Ista quam felix ecclesia (the church of Rome) cui totam doctrinam apostoli sanguine suo profuderunt, ubi Petrus passioni Dominicae adaequatur, ubi Paulus Joannis exitu coronatur, ubi Apostolus Joannes, posteaquam in oleum igneum demersus nihil passus est, in insulam relegatur.” Comp. Jerome, *Adv. Jovin.*, 1, 26, and in *Matt.* 22: 23; and Euseb., *H. E.*, VI. 5. Renan (p. 196) conjectures that John was destined to shine in the illumination of the Neronian gardens, and was actually steeped in oil for the purpose, but saved by an accident or caprice. Thiersch (*Die Kirche im Apost. Zeitalter*, p. 227, third edition, 1879) likewise accepts the tradition of Tertullian, but assumes a miraculous deliverance.

dead as Antichrist. He meant only that Nero, the persecutor of the Christian church, was (like Antiochus Epiphanes) the forerunner of Antichrist, who would be inspired by the same bloody spirit from the infernal world. In a similar sense Rome was a second Babylon, and John the Baptist another Elijah.

The Accounts of the Neronian Persecution from Heathen Historians

We have chiefly two accounts of the first imperial persecution, from Tacitus, who was born about eight years before the event, and probably survived Trajan (d. 117), and from Suetonius, who wrote his XII. Caesares a little later, about a.d. 120. Dion Cassius (born circa a.d. 155), in his History of Rome (JRwmaikh; jIstoriva , preserved in fragments, and in the abridgment of the monk Xiphilinus), from the arrival of Aeneas to a.d. 229, mentions the conflagration of Rome, but ignores the persecutions of the Christians.

The description of Tacitus is in his terse, pregnant, and graphic style, and beyond suspicion of interpolation, but has some obscurities. We give it in full, from Annal., XV. 44

“But not all the relief of men, nor the bounties of the emperor, nor the propitiation of the gods, could relieve him Nero from the infamy of being believed to have ordered the conflagration. Therefore, in order to suppress the rumor, Nero falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, those persons who, hated for their crimes, were commonly called Christians (subdidit reos, et quaesitissimis poenis affecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus ‘Christianos’ appellabat). The founder of that name, Christus, had been put to death (supplicio affectus erat) by the procurator of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius; but the pernicious superstition (exitiabilis superstitio), repressed for a time,¹² broke out again, not only through Judaea, the source of this evil, but also through the city [of Rome], whither all things vile

¹²This refers either to the crucifixion, or more probably to the edict of Claudius, who banished the Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome.

¹³Confessed what? Probably the Christian religion, which was already regarded as a sort of crime. If they confessed to be guilty of incendiarism, they must have been either weak neophytes who could not stand the pain of the torture, or hired scoundrels.

¹⁴This is to be understood in the active sense of the reputed enmity to mankind, with which Tacitus charges the Jews also in almost the same terms (“Adversus omnes alios hostile odium,” Hist. V. 5). But Thiersch and others explain it of the hatred of mankind towards the Christians (comp. Matt. 10:22, “Ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake”).

and shameful flow from all quarters, and are encouraged (quo cuncta undique atrocia aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque). Accordingly, first, those only were arrested who confessed.¹³ Next, on their information, a vast multitude (multitudo ingens), were convicted, not so much of the crime of incendiarism as of hatred of the human race (odio humani generis).¹⁴ And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport; for they were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set on fire, and when day declined, were burned to serve for nocturnal lights (in usum nocturni luminis urerentur). Nero had offered his own gardens [on the Vatican] for this spectacle, and also exhibited a chariot race on the occasion, now mingling in the crowd in the dress of a charioteer, now actually holding the reins. Whence a feeling of compassion arose towards the sufferers, though justly held to be odious, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but as victims to the ferocity of one man.”

The account of Suetonius, Nero, c. 16, is very short and unsatisfactory: “Afflicti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae.” He does not connect the persecution with the conflagration, but with police regulations.

Juvenal, the satirical poet, alludes, probably as an eye-witness, to the persecution, like Tacitus, with mingled feelings of contempt and pity for the Christian sufferers (Sat. I. 155):

“Dar’st thou speak of Tigellinus’ guilt?
Thou too shalt shine like those we saw
Stand at the stake with throat trans-
fixed
Smoking and burning.”
From Christians.

Clement of Rome, near the close of the first century, must refer to the Neronian persecution when he writes of the “vast multitude of the elect” who suffered, many indignities and tortures, being the victims of jealousy; “and of Christian women who were made to personate” Danaides” and “Dirces,” Ad Corinth., c. 6. I have made no use of this passage in the text. Renan amplifies and weaves

it into his graphic description of the persecution (L'Antechrist, pp. 163 sqq., almost literally repeated in his Hibbert Lectures). According to the legend, Dirce was bound to a raging bull and dragged to death. The scene is represented in the famous marble group in the museum at Naples. But the Danaides can furnish no suitable parallel to Christian martyrs, unless, as Renan suggests, Nero had the sufferings of the Tartarus represented. Lightfoot, following the bold emendation of Wordsworth (on Theocritus, XXVI. 1), rejects the reading *Danai>vde*" kai; *Divrkai* (which is retained in all editions, including that of Gebhardt and Har-nack), and substitutes for it *neanivde*", *paidivkai*, so that Clement would say: *Matrons (gunai'ke)*" maidens, slave-girls, being persecuted, after suffering cruel and unholy insults, safely reached the goal in the race of faith, and received a noble reward, feeble though they were in body."

Tertullian (d. about 220) thus alludes to the Neronian persecution, *Ad Nationes*, I. ch. 7: "This name of ours took its rise in the reign of Augustus; under Tiberius it was taught with all clearness and publicity; under Nero it was ruthlessly condemned (sub Nerone damnatio invaluit), and you may weigh its worth and character even from the person of its persecutor. If that prince was a pious man, then the Christians are impious; if he was just, if he was pure, then the Christians are unjust and impure; if he was not a public enemy, we are enemies of our country: what sort of men we are, our persecutor himself shows, since he of course punished what produced hostility to himself. Now, although every other institution which existed under Nero has been destroyed, yet this of ours has firmly remained—righteous, it would seem, as being unlike the author [of its persecution]."

Sulpicius Severus, *Chron.* II. 28, 29, gives a pretty full account, but mostly from Tacitus. He and Orosius (*Hist.* VII. 7) first clearly assert that Nero extended the persecution to the provinces.

Nero's Return

Nero, owing to his youth, beauty, dash, and prodigality, and the startling novelty of his wickedness (Tacitus calls him "*incredibilium cupitor*," *Ann.* XV. 42), enjoyed a certain popularity with the vulgar democracy of Rome. Hence, after his suicide, a rumor spread among the heathen that he was not actually dead, but had fled to the Parthians, and would return to Rome with an army and destroy

the city. Three impostors under his name used this belief and found support during the reigns of Otho, Titus, and Domitian. Even thirty years later Domitian trembled at the name of Nero. *Tacit.*, *Hist.* I. 2; II. 8, 9; *Sueton.*, *Ner.* 57; *Dio Cassius*, LXIV. 9; *Schiller*, *l.c.*, p. 288.

Among the Christians the rumor assumed a form hostile to Nero. Lactantius (*De Mort. Persecut.*, c. 2) mentions the Sibylline saying that, as Nero was the first persecutor, he would also be the last, and precede the advent of Antichrist. Augustin (*De Civil. Dei*, XX. 19) mentions that at his time two opinions were still current in the church about Nero: some supposed that he would rise from the dead as Antichrist, others that he was not dead, but concealed, and would live until he should be revealed and restored to his kingdom. The former is the Christian, the latter the heathen belief. Augustin rejects both. Sulpicius Severus (*Chron.*, II. 29) also mentions the belief (*unde creditur*) that Nero, whose deadly wound was healed, would return at the end of the world to work out "the mystery of lawlessness" predicted by Paul (2 *Thess.* 2:7).

Some commentators make the Apocalypse responsible for this absurd rumor and false belief, while others hold that the writer shared it with his heathen contemporaries. The passages adduced are *Apoc.* 17:8: "The beast was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go into perdition" ... "the beast was, and is not, and shall be present" (*kai; pavrestai*, not *kaivper ejstivn*, "and yet is," as the E. V. reads with the text. *ec.*); 17:11: "And the beast that was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is of the seven; and he goeth into perdition;" and 13:3: "And I saw one of his heads as though it had been smitten unto death; and his death-stroke was healed: and the whole world wondered after the beast."

But this is said of the beast, i.e., the Roman empire, which is throughout clearly distinguished from the seven heads, i.e., the emperors. In Daniel, too, the beast is collective. Moreover, a distinction must be made between the death of one ruler (Nero) and the deadly wound which thereby was inflicted on the beast or the empire, but from which it recovered (under Vespasian).

§ 38. The Jewish War and the Destruction of Jerusalem. a.d. 70.

"And as He went forth out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto Him, Master, behold, what manner of stones and what manner of buildings!

And Jesus said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left here one stone upon another, which shall not be thrown down.”—Mark 13:1,2.

There is scarcely another period in history so full of vice, corruption, and disaster as the six years between the Neronian persecution and the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophetic description of the last days by our Lord began to be fulfilled before the generation to which he spoke had passed away, and the day of judgment seemed to be close at hand. So the Christians believed and had good reason to believe. Even to earnest heathen minds that period looked as dark as midnight. We have elsewhere quoted Seneca’s picture of the frightful moral depravity and decay under the reign of Nero, his pupil and murderer. Tacitus begins his history of Rome after the death of Nero with these words: “I proceed to a work rich in disasters, full of atrocious battles, of discord and rebellion, yea, horrible even in peace. Four princes [Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Domitian] killed by the sword; three civil wars, several foreign wars; and mostly raging at the same time. Favorable events in the East [the subjugation of the Jews], unfortunate ones in the West. Illyria disturbed, Gaul uneasy; Britain conquered and soon relinquished; the nations of Sarmatia and Suevia rising against us; the Parthians excited by the deception of a pseudo-Nero. Italy also weighed down by Dew or oft-repeated calamities; cities swallowed up or buried in ruins; Rome laid waste by conflagrations, the old temples burned up, even the capitol set on fire by citizens; sanctuaries desecrated; adultery rampant in high places. The sea filled with exiles; the rocky islands contaminated with murder. Still more horrible the fury in the city. Nobility, riches, places of honor, whether declined or occupied, counted as crimes, and virtue sure of destruction.

The Approaching Doom

The most unfortunate country in that period was Palestine, where an ancient and venerable nation brought upon itself unspeakable suffering and destruction. The tragedy of Jerusalem prefigures in miniature the final judgment, and in this light it is represented in the eschatological discourses of Christ, who foresaw the end from the beginning.

The forbearance of God with his covenant people,

¹⁵Matt. 24:1,2; Mark 13:1; Luke 19:43, 44; 21:6.

who had crucified their own Saviour, reached at last its limit. As many as could be saved in the usual way, were rescued. The mass of the people had obstinately set themselves against all improvement. James the Just, the man who was fitted, if any could be, to reconcile the Jews to the Christian religion, had been stoned by his hardened brethren, for whom he daily interceded in the temple; and with him the Christian community in Jerusalem had lost its importance for that city. The hour of the “great tribulation” and fearful judgment drew near. The prophecy of the Lord approached its literal fulfilment: Jerusalem was razed to the ground, the temple burned, and not one stone was left upon another. ¹⁵

Not long before the outbreak of the Jewish war, seven years before the siege of Jerusalem (a.d. 63), a peasant by the name of Joshua, or Jesus, appeared in the city at the Feast of Tabernacles, and in a tone of prophetic ecstasy cried day and night on the street among the people; A voice from the morning, a voice from the evening! A voice from the four winds! A voice of rain against Jerusalem and the Temple! A voice against the bridegrooms and the brides! A voice against the whole people! Woe, woe to Jerusalem! “The magistrates, terrified by this woe, had the prophet of evil taken up and scourged. He offered no resistance, and continued to cry his”Woe.” Being brought before the procurator, Albinus, he was scourged till his bones could be seen, but interposed not a word for himself; uttered no curse on his enemies; simply exclaimed at every blow in a mournful tone: “Woe, woe to Jerusalem!” To the governor’s question, who and whence he was, He answered nothing. Finally they let him go, as a madman. But he continued for seven years and five months, till the outbreak of the war, especially at the three great feasts, to proclaim the approaching fall of Jerusalem. During the siege he was singing his dirge, for the last time, from the wall. Suddenly he added: “Woe, woe also to me!”—and a stone of the Romans hurled at his head put an end to his prophetic lamentation.

The Jewish Rebellion

Under the last governors, Felix, Festus, Albinus, and Florus, moral corruption and the dissolution of all social ties, but at the same time the oppressiveness of the Roman yoke, increased every year. After the accession of Felix, assassins, called “Sicarians”

(from *sica*, a dagger), armed with daggers and purchasable for any crime, endangering safety in city and country, roamed over Palestine. Besides this, the party spirit among the Jews themselves, and their hatred of their heathen oppressors, rose to the most insolent political and religious fanaticism, and was continually inflamed by false prophets and Messiahs, one of whom, for example, according to Josephus, drew after him thirty thousand men. Thus came to pass what our Lord had predicted: "There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall lead many astray."

At last, in the month of May, a.d. 66, under the last procurator, Gessius Florus (from 65 onward), a wicked and cruel tyrant who, as Josephus says, was placed as a hangman over evil-doers, an organized rebellion broke out against the Romans, but at the same time a terrible civil war also between different parties of the revolted themselves, especially between the Zealots, and the Moderates, or the Radicals and Conservatives. The ferocious party of the Zealots had all the fire and energy which religious and patriotic fanaticism could inspire; they have been justly compared with the Montagnards of the French Revolution. They gained the ascendancy in the progress of the war, took forcible possession of the city and the temple and introduced a reign of terror. They kept up the Messianic expectations of the people and hailed every step towards destruction as a step towards deliverance. Reports of comets, meteors, and all sorts of fearful omens and prodigies were interpreted as signs of the coming of the Messiah and his reign over the heathen. The Romans recognized the Messiah in Vespasian and Titus.

To defy Rome in that age, without a single ally, was to defy the world in arms; but religious fanaticism, inspired by the recollection of the heroic achievements of the Maccabees, blinded the Jews against the inevitable failure of this mad and desperate revolt.

The Roman Invasion

The emperor Nero, informed of the rebellion, sent his most famous general, Vespasian, with a large force to Palestine. Vespasian opened the campaign

in the year 67 from the Syrian port-town, Ptolemais (Acco), and against a stout resistance overran Galilee with an army of sixty thousand men. But events in Rome hindered him from completing the victory, and required him to return thither. Nero had killed himself. The emperors, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius followed one another in rapid succession. The latter was taken out of a dog's kennel in Rome while drunk, dragged through the streets, and shamefully put to death. Vespasian, in the year 69, was universally proclaimed emperor, and restored order and prosperity.

His son, Titus, who himself ten years after became emperor, and highly distinguished himself by his mildness and philanthropy,¹⁶ then undertook the prosecution of the Jewish war, and became the instrument in the hand of God of destroying the holy city and the temple. He had an army of not less than eighty thousand trained soldiers, and planted his camp on Mount Scopus and the adjoining Mount Olivet, in full view of the city and the temple, which from this height show to the best advantage. The valley of the Kedron divided the besiegers from the besieged.

In April, a.d. 70, immediately after the Passover, when Jerusalem was filled with strangers, the siege began. The zealots rejected, with sneering defiance, the repeated proposals of Titus and the prayers of Josephus, who accompanied him as interpreter and mediator; and they struck down every one who spoke of surrender. They made sorties down the valley of the Kedron and tip the mountain, and inflicted great loss on the Romans. As the difficulties multiplied their courage increased. The crucifixion of hundreds of prisoners (as many as five hundred a day) only enraged them the more. Even the famine which began to rage and sweep away thousands daily, and forced a woman to roast her own child, the cries of mothers and babes, the most pitiable scenes of misery around them, could not move the crazy fanatics. History records no other instance of such obstinate resistance, such desperate bravery and contempt of death. The Jews fought, not only for civil liberty, life, and their native land, but for that which constituted their national pride and glory, and gave their whole history its significance—for their religion, which, even in this state of horrible degeneracy, infused into them an almost superhuman power of endurance.

¹⁶The people called him *Amor et Deliciae generis humani*. He was born December 30, a.d. 40, and died September 13, 81. He ascended the throne 79, in the year when the towns of Herculaneum, Stabiae, and Pompeii were destroyed. His reign was marked by a series of terrible calamities, among which was a conflagration in Rome which lasted three days, and a plague which destroyed thousands of victims daily. He made earnest efforts to repair the injuries, and used to say, when a day passed without an act of philanthropy, "Amici, diem perdidit." See Suetonius, Titus.

The Destruction of the City and the Temple

At last, in July, the castle of Antonia was surprised and taken by night. This prepared the way for the destruction of the Temple in which the tragedy culminated. The daily sacrifices ceased July 17th, because the hands were all needed for defence. The last and the bloodiest sacrifice at the altar of burnt offerings was the slaughter of thousands of Jews who had crowded around it.

Titus (according to Josephus) intended at first to save that magnificent work of architecture, as a trophy of victory, and perhaps from some superstitious fear; and when the flames threatened to reach the Holy of Holies he forced his way through flame and smoke, over the dead and dying, to arrest the fire.¹⁷ But the destruction was determined by a higher decree. His own soldiers, roused to madness by the stubborn resistance, and greedy of the golden treasures, could not be restrained from the work of destruction. At first the halls around the temple were set on fire. Then a firebrand was hurled through the golden gate. When the flames arose the Jews raised a hideous yell and tried to put out the fire; while others, clinging with a last convulsive grasp to their Messianic hopes, rested in the declaration of a false prophet, that God in the midst of the conflagration of the Temple would give a signal for the deliverance of his people. The legions vied with each other in feeding the flames, and made the unhappy people feel the full force of their unchained rage. Soon the whole prodigious structure was in a blaze and illuminated the skies. It was burned on the tenth of August, a.d. 70, the same day of the year on which, according to tradition, the first temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. "No one," says Josephus, "can conceive a louder, more terrible shriek than arose from all sides during the burning of the temple. The shout of victory and the jubilee of the legions sounded through the wailings of the people, now surrounded with fire and sword, upon the mountain, and throughout the city. The echo from all the mountains around, even to Peraea (?), increased the deafening roar. Yet the misery itself was more terrible than this disorder. The hill

on which the temple stood was seething hot, and seemed enveloped to its base in one sheet of flame. The blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and those that were slain more in number than those that slew them. The ground was nowhere visible. All was covered with corpses; over these heaps the soldiers pursued the fugitives."

The Romans planted their eagles on the shapeless ruins, over against the eastern gate, offered their sacrifices to them, and proclaimed Titus Emperor with the greatest acclamations of joy. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place."

Jerusalem was razed to the ground; only three towers of the palace of Herod—Hippicus (still standing), Phasaël, and Mariamne—together with a portion of the western wall, were left as monuments of the strength of the conquered city, once the centre of the Jewish theocracy and the cradle of the Christian Church.

Even the heathen Titus is reported to have publicly declared that God, by a special providence, aided the Romans and drove the Jews from their impregnable strongholds. Josephus, who went through the war himself from beginning to end, at first as governor of Galilee and general of the Jewish army, then as a prisoner of Vespasian, finally as a companion of Titus and mediator between the Romans and Jews, recognized in this tragical event a divine judgment and admitted of his degenerate countrymen, to whom he was otherwise sincerely attached: "I will not hesitate to say what gives me pain: I believe that, had the Romans delayed their punishment of these villains, the city would have been swallowed up by the earth, or overwhelmed with a flood, or, like Sodom, consumed with fire from heaven. For the generation which was in it was far more ungodly than the men on whom these punishments had in former times fallen. By their madness the whole nation came to be ruined."

Thus, therefore, must one of the best Roman emperors execute the long threatened judgment of God, and the most learned Jew of his time describe it, and thereby, without willing or knowing it, bear testimony to the truth of the prophecy and the divinity of the mission of Jesus Christ, the rejection

¹⁷Josephus is, however, not quite consistent; he says first that Titus, perceiving that his endeavors to spare a foreign temple turned to the damage of his soldiers, commanded the gates to be set on fire (VI. 4, 1); and then, that on the next day he gave orders to extinguish it (§ 3, 6, and 37). Sulpicius Severus (II. 30) makes Titus responsible for the destruction, who thought that it would make an end both to the Jewish and the Christian religion. This is defended by Stange, *De Titi imperatoris vita*, P. I., 1870, pp. 39-43, but doubted by Schürer, l.c. p. 346. Renan (511 sqq.), following Bernays, *Ueber die Chronik des Sulpicius Sev.*, 1861, p. 48, believes that Sulpicius drew his account from the lost portion of the Histories of Tacitus, and that Titus neither ordered nor forbade the burning of the Temple, but left it to its fate, with a prudent reservation of his motives.

of whom brought all this and the subsequent misfortune upon the apostate race.

The destruction of Jerusalem would be a worthy theme for the genius of a Christian Homer. It has been called “the most soul-stirring struggle of all ancient history.” But there was no Jeremiah to sing the funeral dirge of the city of David and Solomon. The Apocalypse was already written, and had predicted that the heathen “shall tread the holy city under foot forty and two months.” One of the master artists of modern times, Kaulbach, has made it the subject of one of his greatest paintings in the museum at Berlin. It represents the burning temple: in the foreground, the high-priest burying his sword in his breast; around him, the scenes of heart-rending suffering; above, the ancient prophets beholding the fulfilment of their oracles; beneath them, Titus with the Roman army as the unconscious executor of the Divine wrath; below, to the left, Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew of the mediaeval legend, driven by furies into the undying future; and to the right the group of Christians departing in peace from the scene of destruction, and Jewish children imploring their protection.

The Fate of the Survivors, and the Triumph in Rome

After a siege of five months the entire city was in the hands of the victors. The number of the Jews slain during the siege, including all those who had crowded into the city from the country, is stated by Josephus at the enormous and probably exaggerated figure of one million and one hundred thousand. Eleven thousand perished from starvation shortly after the close of the siege. Ninety-seven thousand were carried captive and sold into slavery, or sent to the mines, or sacrificed in the gladiatorial shows at Caesarea, Berytus, Antioch, and other cities. The strongest and handsomest men were selected for the triumphal procession in Rome, among them the chief defenders and leaders of the revolt, Simon Bar-Giora and John of Gischala.¹⁸

Vespasian and Titus celebrated the dearly bought victory together (71). No expense was spared for

the pageant. Crowned with laurel, and clothed in purple garments, the two conquerors rode slowly in separate chariots, Domitian on a splendid charger, to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, amid the shouts of the people and the aristocracy. They were preceded by the soldiers in festive attire and seven hundred Jewish captives. The images of the gods, and the sacred furniture of the temple—the table of show-bread, the seven-armed candlestick, the trumpets which announced the year of jubilee, the vessel of incense, and the rolls of the Law—were borne along in the procession and deposited in the newly built Temple of Peace,¹⁹ except the Law and the purple veils of the holy place, which Vespasian reserved for his palace. Simon Bar-Giora was thrown down from the Tarpeian Rock; John of Gischala doomed to perpetual imprisonment. Coins were cast with the legend *Judaea capta, Judaea devicta*. But neither Vespasian nor Titus assumed the victorious epithet *Judaeus*; they despised a people which had lost its fatherland.

Josephus saw the pompous spectacle of the humiliation and wholesale crucifixion of his nation, and described it without a tear.²⁰ The thoughtful Christian, looking at the representation of the temple furniture borne by captive Jews on the triumphal arch of Titus, still standing between the Colosseum and the Forum, is filled with awe at the fulfilment of divine prophecy.

The conquest of Palestine involved the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth. Vespasian retained the land as his private property or distributed it among his veterans. The people were by the five years' war reduced to extreme poverty, and left without a magistrate (in the Jewish sense), without a temple, without a country. The renewal of the revolt under the false Messiah, Bar-Cocheba, led only to a still more complete destruction of Jerusalem and devastation of Palestine by the army of Hadrian (132–135). But the Jews still had the law and the prophets and the sacred traditions, to which they cling to this day with indestructible tenacity and with the hope of a great future. Scattered over the earth, at home everywhere and nowhere; refusing to mingle their blood with any other race, dwelling in distinct communities, marked as a peculiar people in every feature of the countenance, in every rite of religion;

¹⁸Milman (II. 388) sums up the scattered statements of Josephus, and makes out the total number of killed, from the beginning to the close of the war, to be 1,356,460, and the total number of prisoners 101,700.

¹⁹The Temple of Peace was afterwards burned under Commodus, and it is not known what became of the sacred furniture.

²⁰Josephus was richly rewarded for his treachery. Vespasian gave him a house in Rome, an annual pension, the Roman citizenship, and large possessions in Judaea. Titus and Domitian continued the favors. But his countrymen embittered his life and cursed his memory. Jost and other Jewish historians speak of him with great contempt.

patient, sober, and industrious; successful in every enterprise, prosperous in spite of oppression, ridiculed yet feared, robbed yet wealthy, massacred yet springing up again, they have outlived the persecution of centuries and are likely to continue to live to the end of time: the object of the mingled contempt, admiration, and wonder of the world.

Effects of the Destruction of Jerusalem on the Christian Church.

The Christians of Jerusalem, remembering the Lord's admonition, forsook the doomed city in good time and fled to the town of Pella in the Decapolis, beyond the Jordan, in the north of Peraea, where king Herod Agrippa II., before whom Paul once stood, opened to them a safe asylum. An old tradition says that a divine voice or angel revealed to their leaders the duty of flight. There, in the midst of a population chiefly Gentile, the church of the circumcision was reconstructed. Unfortunately, its history is hidden from us. But it never recovered its former importance. When Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Christian city, its bishop was raised to the dignity of one of the four patriarchs of the East, but it was a patriarchate of honor, not of power, and sank to a mere shadow after the Mohammedan invasion.

The awful catastrophe of the destruction of the Jewish theocracy must have produced the profoundest sensation among the Christians, of which we now, in the absence of all particular information respecting it, can hardly form a true conception. It was the greatest calamity of Judaism and a great benefit to Christianity; a refutation of the one, a vindication and emancipation of the other. It not only gave a mighty impulse to faith, but at the same time formed a proper epoch in the history of the relation between the two religious bodies. It separated them forever. It is true the apostle Paul had before now inwardly completed this separation by the Christian universality of his whole system of doctrine; but outwardly he had in various ways accommodated himself to Judaism, and had more than once religiously visited the temple. He wished not to

appear as a revolutionist, nor to anticipate the natural course of history, the ways of Providence. But now the rupture was also outwardly consummated by the thunderbolt of divine omnipotence. God himself destroyed the house, in which he had thus far dwelt, in which Jesus had taught, in which the apostles had prayed; he rejected his peculiar people for their obstinate rejection of the Messiah; he demolished the whole fabric of the Mosaic theocracy, whose system of worship was, in its very nature, associated exclusively with the tabernacle at first and afterwards with the temple; but in so doing he cut the cords which had hitherto bound, and according to the law of organic development necessarily bound the infant church to the outward economy of the old covenant, and to Jerusalem as its centre. Henceforth the heathen could no longer look upon Christianity as a mere sect of Judaism, but must regard and treat it as a new, peculiar religion. The destruction of Jerusalem, therefore, marks that momentous crisis at which the Christian church as a whole burst forth forever from the chrysalis of Judaism, awoke to a sense of its maturity, and in government and worship at once took its independent stand before the world. ²¹

This breaking away from hardened Judaism and its religious forms, however, involved no departure from the spirit of the Old Testament revelation. The church, on the contrary, entered into the inheritance of Israel. The Christians appeared as genuine Jews, as spiritual children of Abraham, who, following the inward current of the Mosaic religion, had found Him, who was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets; the perfect fruit of the old covenant and the living germ of the new; the beginning and the principle of a new moral creation.

It now only remained to complete the consolidation of the church in this altered state of things; to combine the premises in their results; to take up the conservative tendency of Peter and the progressive tendency of Paul, as embodied respectively in the Jewish-Christian and the Gentile-Christian churches, and to fuse them into a third and higher tendency in a permanent organism; to set forth alike the unity of the two Testaments in diversity, and their diversity in unity; and in this way to wind up the history of the apostolic church.

This was the work of John, the apostle of comple-

²¹Dr. Richard Rothe (*Die Anfänge der Christl. Kirche*, p. 341 sqq.). Thiersch (p. 225), Ewald (VII. 26), Renan (*L'Antechr.*, p. 545), and Lightfoot (*Gal.*, p. 301) ascribe the same significance to the destruction of Jerusalem. Ewald says: "As by one great irrevocable stroke the Christian congregation was separated from the Jewish, to which it had heretofore clung as a new, vigorous offshoot to the root of the old tree and as the daughter to the mother." He also quotes the newly discovered letter of Serapion, written about 75, as showing the effect which the destruction of Jerusalem exerted on thoughtful minds.

tion

King Agrippa, the last of the Idumaeen sovereigns, lived and died an humble and contented vassal of Rome, in the third year of Trajan, a.d. 100. His licentious sister, Berenice, narrowly escaped the fate

of a second Cleopatra. The conquering Titus was conquered by her sensual charms, and desired to raise her to the imperial throne, but the public dissatisfaction forced him to dismiss her, “*invitus invitam.*” Suet., Tit. 7. Comp. Schürer, l. c. 321, 322.