

The Afterlife of Nero

1) SOURCES FOR NERO

a. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.154

“Many historians have written the story of Nero, of whom some, because they were well treated by him, have out of gratitude been careless of the truth, while others from hatred and enmity towards him have so shamelessly and recklessly reveled in falsehoods as to merit censure.”

2) FALSE NEROS x 3

a. Appeared in Greece in summer of 68; killed in 69

Tacitus, *Histories* 2.8-9:

“About this time Achaia and Asia were thrown into a groundless panic by a rumour that Nero was at hand. The accounts of his death being many and various, people were all the more inclined to believe that he was still alive. I shall mention in the course of this work the attempts and the fate of the other pretenders. This time it was a slave from Pontus, or, according to other traditions, a freedman from Italy. His skill as a singer and harpist, combined with his facial resemblance to Nero, gave him some credentials for imposture. He bribed some penniless and vagabond deserters by dazzling promises to join him, and they all set out to sea. A storm drove them on to the island of Cynthus, where he found some troops homeward bound on leave from the East. Some of these he enrolled, ordering all who resisted to be killed, and then he proceeded to plunder merchants and arm all the sturdiest of their slaves. Finding a centurion named Sisenna carrying home a pair of silver hands as a token of alliance from the army in Syria to the Guards, he tried by various devices to work upon him, until Sisenna took fright and escaped secretly from the

island in fear of violence. Thus the panic spread. The great name of Nero attracted many who pined for revolution and hated the existing state of things.

The rumours waxed daily, until a chance dispelled them. Galba had entrusted the government of the provinces of Galatia and Pamphylia to Calpurnius Asprenas, who had been granted an escort of two triremes from the fleet at Misenum. It so happened that with these he touched at Cynthus, where men were at hand to issue invitations to the ships’ captains in the name of Nero. The pretender, assuming an air of melancholy, appealed to ‘the loyalty of his former soldiers’, and begged them to convey him to Syria or Egypt. The captains, either from indecision or guile, asserted that they must talk to their men, and would come back when they had got their minds prepared. However, they faithfully made a full report to Asprenas, on whose instructions they boarded the ship and killed the imposter, whoever he was. The man’s eyes and hair and ferocious look were so remarkable that the body was carried into Asia and thence to Rome.” (trans. W.H. Fyfe, rev. D.S. Levene (1997))

b. Appeared in Asia in 79/81; revealed as Terentius Maximus Cassius Dio 66.19.3:

“In Titus’s reign also the False Nero appeared, who was an Asiatic named Terentius Maximus. He resembled Nero both in appearance and in voice (for he too sang to the accompaniment of the lyre). He gained a few followers in Asia, and in his advance to the Euphrates attached a far greater number, and finally sought refuge with Artabanus, the Parthian leader, who, because of his anger against Titus, both received him and set about making preparations to restore him to Rome.” (trans. E. Cary)

c. Unknown false Nero in 88/89

Suetonius, *Nero* 57:

“He met his end in his thirty-second year on the anniversary of Octavia’s death, thereby provoking such great public joy that the common people ran throughout the city dressed in liberty caps. Yet there were also some who for a long time would decorate his tomb with spring and summer flowers, and would sometimes display on the rostra statues of him dressed in a toga or post his edicts as if he

were still alive and would soon return to avenge himself on his enemies. Indeed, even Vologaesus, king of the Parthians, when he sent ambassadors to the senate to renew his alliance, also made an earnest appeal that the memory of Nero should be honoured. Moreover, twenty years later, when I was a young man, there was an individual of unknown origins who boasted that he was Nero, and the name was so popular with the Parthians that they gave him vigorous support and could scarcely be made to surrender him.” (trans. C. Edwards (2000))

3) NERO IN THE SYBILLINE ORACLES (trans. and notes by M.S. Terry (1899))

Book 4, lines 148-188 (112-152)

The Jewish compiler of this oracle, dating to a period soon after the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, looks forward to the end of the Roman empire.

Also for thee, Armenia, there remains
 A slavish fate; and there shall also come
 To Solyma an evil blast of war 150
 From Italy, and God's great temple spoil.
 But when these, trusting folly, shall cast off
 Their piety and murders consummate
 Around the temple, then from Italy
 A mighty king shall like a runaway slave 155
 Flee over the Euphrates' stream unseen,
 Unknown, who shall some time dare loathsome guilt
 Of matricide, and many other things,
 Having confidence in his most wicked hands.
 And many for the throne will bloody 160
 Rome's soil while he flees over Parthian land.
 And out of Syria shall come Rome's foremost man,
 Who having burned the temple of Solyma,
 And having slaughtered many of the Jews,
 Shall bring destruction on their great broad land. 165
 And then too shall an earthquake overthrow

Both Salamis and Paphos, when dark water
 Shall dash o'er Cyprus washed by many a wave.
 But when from deep cleft of Italian land
 Fire shall come flashing forth in the broad heaven, 170
 And many cities burn and men destroy,
 And much black ashes shall fill the great sky,
 And small drops like red earth shall fall from heaven,
 Then know the anger of the God of heaven,
 For that they without reason shall destroy 175
 The nation of the pious. And then strife
 Awakened of war shall come to the West,
 Shall also come the fugitive of Rome,
 Bearing a great spear, having marched across
 Euphrates with his many myriads. 180
 O wretched Antioch, they shall call thee
 No more a city when around their spears
 Because of thine own follies thou shalt fall.
 And then on Scyros shall a pestilence
 And dreadful battle-din destruction bring. 185
 Alas, alas! O wretched Cyprus, thee
 Shall a broad wave of the sea cover, thee
 Tossed on high by the whirling stormy winds.

148. *Armenia*.--There was Armenia Major, the vast territory south of the Caucasus Mountains and between the Euxine and Caspian Seas; and Armenia Minor, a small section on the west of Armenia Major, and east of Cappadocia. All these lands were subject to Alexander, then to the Syrian princes, and were made a Roman province under Trajan.
 150. *Solyma*.--That is, Jerusalem.

155. *Mighty king*.--Nero, whose murder of his mother is notorious, and whose flight beyond the Euphrates and expected return as antichrist was a superstitious tradition long maintained.

162-165. This evidently refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the subjugation of all Palestine by the Romans under Vespasian and Titus.

167. *Salamis and Paphos*.--Famous cities, one at the east and the other at the west end of Cyprus. "How often," says Seneca (*Epist.* 91), "has this calamity (earthquake) laid Cyprus waste? How often has Paphos fallen into ruin?"

171-176. The great eruption of Vesuvius, which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum, A. D. 79, is construed by the Sibyl as a sign of God's anger against the Romans for the slaughter of the Jews.

178. Fugitive of Rome.--Nero, referred to in lines 154-159 above.

Book 5

The Fifth Oracle is a collection of several different oracles from an essentially Jewish perspective.

Lines 186-(137-154)

Hellas thrice wretched shall the poets weep,
 When one from Italy shall smite the neck
 Of the isthmus, mighty king of mighty Rome,
 A man made equal to God, whom, they say,
 Zeus himself and the august Hera bore 190
 He, courting by his voice all-musical
 Applause for his sweet Songs, shall put to death
 With his own wretched mother many men.
 From Babylon shall flee the fearful lord
 And shameless whom all mortals and best men 195
 Abhor; for he slew many and laid hands
 Upon the womb; against his wives he sinned
 And of men stained with blood had he been formed.
 And he shall come to monarchs of the Medes
 And Persians, first whom he loved and to whom 200
 He brought renown, while with those wicked men
 He lurked against a nation not desired
 And on the temple made by God he seized
 And citizens and people going in,
 Of whom I justly sang the praise, he burned; 205
 For when this man appeared the whole creation
 Was shaken and kings perished--and yet power
 Remained among them, and they quite destroyed
 The mighty city and the righteous people.
 But when the fourth year a great star shall shine, 210
 Which alone shall the whole earth overpower
 Because of honor, which was first assigned
 To lord Poseidon; then a great star shall come
 From heaven into the dreadful sea and burn
 The vasty deep, and Babylon itself, 215
 And the land of Italy, because, of which
 There perished many holy faithful men

Among the Hebrews and a people true.

187. *One from Italy*.--Another picture of Nero (comp. lines 39-49) who is here represented as the author of the Roman war which resulted in the overthrow of Jerusalem and the temple.

210. *Fourth year*.--Perhaps in allusion to the time, times, and dividing of time (three and a half years) in Dan. vii, 25, a symbolic number for a period of woe.

213. *To lord Poseidon*.--Reading doubtful. Some MSS. read, Poseidon who is in the sea. Mendelssohn proposes the Homeric phrase, {Greek *E?nuali'wj a?ndreifo'nth*} the man-slaying, warlike one.

213, 214. *Star . . . into the . . . sea*.--Comp. Rev. viii, 8; xvi, 3. This passage is an apocalyptic prophecy of judgment to come on Rome, and is so interpreted by Lactantius, *Div. Inst.*, vii, 15 [L., 6, 790].

215. *Babylon*.--Here used as a symbolic name for Rome.

219. *Thou*.--Direct address to Rome.

Lines 292-308 (214-227)

And weep thou, Corinth, the destruction sad
 Which is ill thee; for when with pliant threads
 The Fates three sisters, spinning shall aloft
 Lead him who flees by guile against the voice 295
 Of the isthmus, until all shall look at him
 Who once cut out the rock with ductile brass,
 He also shall destroy and smite thy land,
 As it hath been appointed. For to him
 God gave strength to accomplish that which could 300
 No earlier of all the kings together.
 And first with sickle cleaving off the roots
 From three heads he shall give food in excess
 To others, so that kings unclean shall eat
 The flesh of parents. For unto all men 305
 Slaughter and terrors are laid up in store
 because of the great city and just people
 Saved through all time, whom Providence held high.

294. *Fates*.--These, according to popular mythology, were three sisters, named Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who are continually spinning out the destiny of mortals. Clotho, it was said, held the distaff, Lachesis spun out the thread of existence, and Atropos cut it off.

295. *Him who sees*.--The reference seems to be to Nero and his cleaving the isthmus (comp. lines 45 and 188). His return from the East

as antichrist was a superstitious apprehension prevalent for some time after his death.

303. *Three heads*.--Comp. Dan. vii, 8, 24; 2 Esdras xi, 23; xii, 22.

Hippolytus, de Christo et Antichristo, lii [G., 10, 772].

307. *City ... people*.--Jerusalem and the Jews.

209-334. A prophetic curse against Rome as the greatest source of misery to men.

Lines 485-505 (361-376)

In the last time, at the turning of the moon,
There shall be raging through the world a war
And carried on with cunning, and in guile.
And from the limits of the earth shall come
Fleeing and pondering sharp things in his mind,
A matricidal man who every land 490
Shall overpower and over all things rule,
And see all things more wisely than all men;
And that for whose sake he himself was slain
Shall he seize forthwith. And he shall destroy 495
Many men and great tyrants and shall burn
All of them, as none other ever did,
And he shall raise up them that are afraid
For emulation's sake. And from the West
Much war shall come to men, and blood shall flow
Down hill till it becomes deep-eddying streams. 500
And in the plains of Macedonia
Shall wrath distil and give help from the West,
But to the king destruction. And a wind
Of winter then shall blow upon the earth,
And the plain be filled with evil war again. 505

488-490. Reference to Nero, here conceived as returning from his flight beyond the Euphrates (see book iv, 156) and embodying the traits of the vile king described in Dan. viii, 23-25. This passage is quoted by Lactantius, *de Morte Persec.*, ii [L., 7, 197], and he says that some persons of his own time understood it of Nero, who was supposed to be still living in Nero distant region whither he had been secretly conveyed.

493. That for which he perished, and which the returning Nero would again seize, was the sovereignty.

501-503. The exact import of these lines is quite unintelligible, except that by various concurring forces the Nero antichrist is to be destroyed.

Book 8

Dating to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) and aggressively anti-Roman, the Eighth Oracle is Jewish in origin, with pagan and Christian insertions.

Lines 84-94 (62-72)

After him at the latest day of all
Shall three rule, filling out a name of God 85
The heavenly, of whom is the power both now
And to all ages. One of them being old
The scepter long shall wield, most piteous king,
Who in his houses shall shut up and guard
All the goods of the world, in order that, 90
When from the utmost limits of the earth
That man, the matricidal fugitive,
Shall come again, he may bestow these things
On all and furnish Asia with great wealth.

86. *Three*.--The Antonines. See book v, 72. Name.--Allusion probably to the Hebrew name *Adonai*, which it was thought to resemble.

87. *One of them . . . old*.--Antoninus Pius [actually Marcus Aurelius].

92. *Matricidal fugitive*.--Nero. Comp. book v, 490.

Lines 183-207 (139-157)

Thereafter when the limit of the time
Of the Phenix shall come round, there shall a race
Of peoples come to plunder, tribes confused, 185
Enemy of the Hebrews. Then shall Ares
Go plundering Ares; and he shall himself
Destroy the haughty threatening of the Romans.
For Rome's power perished then while in its bloom;
An ancient queen with cities dwelling round, 190
No longer shall the land of fertile Rome
Prevail, when out of Asia one shall come
To rule with Ares. And when he has wrought
All these things, to the city afterwards
Shall he come. And three times three hundred 195

And eight and forty shalt thou make complete,
 When, taking thee by force, an ill-starred fate
 Shall come upon thee and complete thy name.
 Ah me, I the thrice wretched, shall I see
 Sometime that day to thee destructive, Rome, 200
 But to all Latins most? It honors him
 With counsels who goes, up on Trojan car
 With hidden children from the Asian land,
 Having a fiery soul. But when he shall
 Cut through the isthmus looking wistfully, 205
 Moving against all, passing o'er the sea,
 Then shall dark blood pursue the mighty beast.

184. Phenix.--Fabulous Egyptian bird, said to appear once in, five hundred years. See Herod., ii, 73; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, x, 2; Clem. Rom., 1 *Cor.*, xxv [G., 1, 261-276], According to Tacitus (*Annal.*, vi, 28), the fourth appearance, of the Phenix occurred in the reign of Tiberius.

193. *To rule with Ares.*--The matricidal fugitive of line 92, returning as antichrist. This whole passage is apocalyptic, and no exact conformity to history need be sought.

195. The number 948 is the numerical value of the Greek letters in the name Rome ({Greek *r*}=100, {Greek *w*}=800, {Greek *m*}=40, {Greek *h*}=8, = {Greek *Rw'mh*}). Nine hundred and forty-eight years after the founding of Rome extends to about 196 of our era, and the reign of Septimius Severus.

199. *Wretched.*--Comp. book v, 74, and the close of book vii.

203. *From the Asian land.*--Another allusion to Nero. His ascending the Trojan car is metaphorical of his supposed coming with war chariots from the east, and all the force and fury of Ares.

the Twelve one will be delivered into his hands. 4. This ruler in the form of that king 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. 5. And at his word the sun will rise at night and he will make the moon to appear at the sixth hour. 6. And all that he hath desired he will do in the world: he will do and speak like the Beloved and he will say: "I am God and before me there has been none." 7. And all the people in the world will believe in him. 8. And they will sacrifice to him and they will serve him saying: "This is God and beside him there is no other." 9. And the greater number of those who shall have been associated together in order to receive the Beloved, he will turn aside after him. 10. And there will be the power of his miracles in every city and region. 11. And he will set up his image before him in every city. 12. And he shall bear sway three years and seven months and twenty-seven days. 13. And many believers and saints having seen Him for whom they were hoping, who was crucified, Jesus the Lord Christ, [after that I, Isaiah, had seen Him who was crucified and ascended] and those also who were believers in Him - of these few in those days will be left as His servants, while they flee from desert to desert, awaiting the coming of the Beloved. 14. And after (one thousand) three hundred and thirty-two days the Lord will come with His angels and with the armies of the holy ones from the seventh heaven with the glory of the seventh heaven, and He will drag Beliar into Gehenna and also his armies.

4) NERO THE ANTICHRIST

a) *The Ascension of Isaiah, 4.2-14* (trans. R.H. Charles)

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. 3. will persecute the plant which the Twelve Apostles of the Beloved have planted. Of

b) *The Revelation of John, 13.1-18; 17.1-18* (Standard English Version)

Chapter 13

The First Beast

1And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. 2And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth

was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. **3**One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. **4**And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

5And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. **6**It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. **7**Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, **8**and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. **9** If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

10 If anyone is to be taken captive,
to captivity he goes;
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.
Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

The Second Beast

11Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. **12**It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. **13** It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, **14**and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. **15**And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and

might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. **16**Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, **17**so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. **18** This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

Chapter 17

The Great Prostitute and the Beast

1Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, **2** with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk." **3**And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. **4**The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. **5**And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." **6**And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. **7**But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. **8**The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. **9** This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; **10**they are also seven kings, five of whom have

fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. **11**As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. **12**And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. **13**These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. **14**They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

15And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. **16**And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, **17**for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. **18**And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

Credits

Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.154

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Cassius Dio 66.19.3

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Suetonius, *Nero* 57

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The Ascension of Isaiah, 4.2–14.

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The Revelation of John, 13.1–18; 17.1–18.

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