

## REVIEW

### NERO AND THE CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSE

Shushma Malik, *The Nero-Antichrist: Founding and Fashioning a Paradigm*. Classics after Antiquity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xv + 228. Hardback, £75.00/\$99.99. ISBN 978-1-108-49149-5.

Shushma Malik's book discusses the origins and the modern revival of the idea that the apocalyptic 'beast' in Revelation 13 is to be identified with the Roman emperor Nero. Malik's theory (laid out in the introduction and subsequently corroborated in a detailed analysis of literary and material sources) is that the paradigm of 'Nero as Antichrist' was formed in late antiquity rather than, as has often been claimed in biblical scholarship, in the first century. Malik argues convincingly that 'the Bible's eschatological adversaries do not bear enough of a similarity to the historical Nero to warrant the assumption of intent on the part of its authors' (17). Many of the characteristic attributes of the Antichrist could just as well apply to other emperors of antiquity, and others (such as the mortal wound which the beast receives to its head in Rev. 13.3) do not match our sources on Nero's death (as he did not receive a head wound, but committed suicide by stabbing himself). In bringing together the traditions of biblical and classical scholarship, Malik also draws the reader's attention to the way in which the two disciplines have often existed alongside each other without taking appropriate notice of each other's research. It is her goal to bridge this gap between the neighbouring disciplines, and she succeeds by a combination of a detailed review of the scholarly debate and a careful development of her own theory.

The book falls into two distinct parts. The first (Chapters 1–3) is dedicated to the discussion of the Nero paradigm in antiquity, the second (Chapter 4) deals with its revival in the nineteenth century, with a focus on Britain and France. The works of Ernest Renan, Frederic William Farrar, and Oscar Wilde serve as examples for the new interest in Nero and his times.

Both parts are carefully researched and offer an abundance of learned details and sources that make an engaging read (with some repetitions in the first chapters where the main theory is restated several times). The Introduction (Chapter 1) defines the Nero Myths that evolved around the figure of the historical emperor, Chapter 2 ('Nero and the Bible') gives a thorough overview of Nero in Biblical Studies and perceptions of Nero in first-century pagan accounts. The result (namely, that for first- and second-century

Christians, the biblical Antichrist was not linked to the figure of Nero in any particular way) leads to the main question of Chapter 3 ('The Invention of the Nero-Antichrist'), which deals with the gradual equation of Nero and the biblical Antichrist, which Malik links particularly to the influence of the Millennialists. She also points out the importance of pagan models, which by late antiquity had established a conventional paradigm of 'good' and 'bad' emperors (including oppositions such as Nero as an 'Anti-Augustus') and could easily be used by Christian authors of the time, who were steeped in classical pagan literature and its traditions. A useful appendix with a list of early-Christian references to the Nero-Antichrist, a bibliography, and a concise yet detailed index complete the book.

Especially pleasing is the fact that the author often quotes her sources in the original languages, ancient and modern, accompanied by English translations so that the book is helpful to specialists and the general public alike. In following her topic through the centuries, she offers insights into literary history, politics, and social history. The discussion of the nineteenth-century debate is careful to give the broader picture of the political and religious background against which historical novels and books on Nero are situated.

The focus on antiquity and the nineteenth century, while well explained by the concept of the book, leaves the reader with the impression that the Nero-Antichrist paradigm was all but forgotten in the fifteen centuries that lay in between (a notion that is reinforced by the title of Chapter 4: 'Reviving the Nero-Antichrist'). While it is true that the nineteenth century saw a significant surge in the reception of the Nero-Antichrist story (and a surge in historical novels on ancient Rome in general), the paradigm as such had never been dead. The Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Early Modern times all took their interest in Nero's wickedness, including the blasphemous aspects that were attached to his legacy. Typically, the Middle Ages considered Nero a predecessor of the Antichrist, especially since the medieval *Legenda aurea*, among others, preserved the story of Peter's and Paul's deaths during his reign. Likewise, in Otto of Freising's view, Seneca's forced suicide made Nero a blasphemous figure: Seneca was believed to have exchanged several letters (now considered forgeries)<sup>1</sup> with the apostle Paul and to be therefore close to Christian beliefs.<sup>2</sup> A number of medieval legends associate Nero (and his tomb) with demons, and 'Nero' becomes a common slur for a wicked and potentially

<sup>1</sup> On the alleged correspondence between Seneca and Paul see A. Fürst et al., *Der apokryphe Briefwechsel zwischen Seneca und Paulus* (Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque Pertinentia 11; Tübingen, 2006) (not in Malik's extensive bibliography).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Otto of Freising, *Chronica sive historia de duabus civitatibus* 3.45, according to which Nero's execution of the Christians is the first of ten persecutions, analogous to the ten Egyptian plagues. The eleventh persecution will be the eschatological one by the Antichrist, which is parallel to the Egyptians persecuting the Israelites up to the Red Sea.

blasphemous ruler.<sup>3</sup> Boccaccio explicitly mentions Nero's sacrilegious nature, his execution of S. Peter and Paul and of Seneca, and compares Nero to a beast who allegedly offers humans to an Egyptian cannibal to be eaten alive (*De casibus illustrium virorum* 7.4). Taken together, these details might well echo the now traditional Nero-Antichrist paradigm. Erasmus in his *Institutio principis Christiani* lists Nero among the cruel emperors who are incarnations of the devil and bound to bring calamity and disaster on humankind.<sup>4</sup> In his *Encomium Neronis*, an eminently political work mostly directed at the senate of the city of Milan, Girolamo Cardano (1501–76) dedicates two substantial chapters (63–4) to the refutation of the well-known accusations that Nero was a blasphemous persecutor of the first Christians, including the apostles Peter and Paul.<sup>5</sup> Some of these threads of transmission may also play out in the modern reception that Malik links predominantly to ancient sources (mainly because the ancient sources are part of the traditional school curriculum and therefore well known to learned authors and readers at the time).

To sum up, the book is especially useful to show in an exemplary fashion how an ancient (or, as Malik argues successfully, a late antique) paradigm plays out in the political and religious debates of modern Europe. It will be most useful to scholars and the general public alike.

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<sup>3</sup> A very short chapter (unfortunately with only a few notes) on Nero's medieval afterlife can be found in S. Elbern, *Nero: Kaiser, Künstler, Antichrist* (Mainz, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam Inst. 1.40: *malus ac pestilens Princeps, mali Daemonis imaginem repraesentat, cui multum adsit potentiae cura summa malitia coniunctum. quidquid habet uirium, id omne consumit ad calamitatem humani generis. an non huiusmodi quidam orbis malus genius fuit Nero, an non Caligula, an non Heliogabalus?*

<sup>5</sup> On Cardano's *Encomium Neronis* see the commentary by N. Eberl, *Encomium Neronis: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Europäische Hochschulschriften: Reihe 15, Klassische Sprachen und Literaturen 66; Frankfurt, 1994).