

Nero in the Sibylline Oracles*

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The image of Nero in Jewish memory, at least as reflected in the Sibylline Oracles, was strikingly discordant and paradoxical. In the variegated verses of those texts, he is a character of contradiction, inconsistency, and puzzlement. The negative vision stands out. Nero, for instance, is depicted in unseemly flight from Italy, like a fugitive slave, a self-exile, escaping after a plethora of misdeeds.¹ A most ignominious figure. Some characterizations of the miscreant have a familiar ring to those acquainted with the pagan sources on Nero. He is branded as matricide, the foul murder of his mother a prime ingredient in his representation.² Further he is a singer, artist, musical performer, and an enthusiast for theatrics, qualities that do not receive a positive spin.³ On such matters the Jewish authors of the Sibylline Oracles evidently tapped into the portrait of Nero well established by Roman aristocratic sources. The emperor emerges as both cruel and pathetic, even somewhat ridiculous. Yet there is a converse of this image that surfaces in the same Jewish texts. In that construct, Nero who has escaped the boundaries of the Roman empire and has taken himself to the realm of Parthia, Rome's great enemy, now leads large armies back to the west to rain vengeance and destruction upon his homeland.⁴ In this vision Nero has been transformed into a powerful ruler and military commander who heads the forces of the east in retaliation against the humbled Roman empire. How does one account for this schizophrenia?⁵ Can any sense be made of so dramatic a contradiction?

It would seem logical to seek an answer in the multiplicity of hands that framed the Sibylline Oracles. The composition of those fascinating but frustrating texts ranges over a period of centuries, some of them Jewish, some Christian, a few pagan. The Sibyl, of course, is a Greek invention, the inspired prophetess, usually a prophetess of doom, originally a single figure, gradually multiplied into a number of different seers in different parts of the Greek world, especially the expanded post-Alexander world. Erythrae was the most famous seat. But other Sibyls turn up in Samos, Cumae, Tibur and Delphi; still others serviced the Babylonians, Libyans, Persians, Phrygians, and even

* It is a great pleasure to dedicate this article to Hannah Cotton whom I have known for more than thirty years, whose work I have admired, and whose company I have immensely enjoyed. Her energy, effervescence, and eternal youthfulness are an inspiration to us all.

¹ Sib. Or. 4.119-124, 5.216, 5.363-364, 8.71-71, 12.93-94.

² Sib. Or. 4.120-121, 5. 30, 5.142, 5.363, 12.82.

³ Sib. Or. 5.31, 5.141-142, 12.83, 12.91-92.

⁴ Sib. Or. 4.137-148, 8.70-21, 13.122-124. See also 8.140-157. Van Henten (2000), 11-14, doubts that this passage refers to Nero, but it is hard to believe that the mention of cutting through the isthmus at 155 alludes to Xerxes rather than to Nero.

⁵ For the tensions between the positive and negative elements of the Neronian portrait in the Fifth Sibyl, see Jones (2011), 231-235, 242-243.

the Jews. Collections of the oracular pronouncements were made in Rome, and consulted when needed at the direction of the Roman senate by the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*. The Sibyls' words of wisdom, duly edited, shaped, and even fabricated, circulated or were, at least, discussed widely in the Greco-Roman world.⁶ If any authentic copies were ever available, they have long since vanished. What we possess now are re-creations, composed largely in Homeric hexameters by Jewish and Christian intellectuals who turned them to their own purposes. The earliest book, the third Sibylline Oracle, is predominantly Jewish and exemplifies Jewish cooptation of a pagan institution, turning it into an instrument to convey Jewish attitudes toward the Hellenic political, social, and cultural world.⁷ The Sibyls' declarations are characteristically dark, forecasting woe and destruction. They look ahead occasionally to the *eschaton*, but the references to a glorious conclusion are heavily outnumbered by projected scenes of carnage, bloodshed, and devastation.

The extant Sibylline Books consist of two main collections, encompassing thirteen books and assorted fragments. Dates vary widely, all the way from the mid second century BCE to the seventh century CE, and individual books themselves contain portions from different periods, nearly impossible to sort out or to find therein any systematic order.⁸ Nero flits in and out of the texts, never named as such (in proper oracular fashion), but readily identifiable, entering and departing the texts unexpectedly, his appearance only loosely, if at all, connected to what preceded or followed. The confused mish-mash, among other things, renders it impossible to explain the dual picture of Nero as stemming from two opposed visions associated with different Sibylline Books and different authors. The inconsistencies appear in the same books, even in the same paragraphs. The Jewish authors were evidently unperturbed by what we see as contradictions or irreconcilable portraits.⁹

Why did these authors return so frequently to the figure of Nero and visualize him in large part not so much as a wicked Roman emperor (though that is certainly not disguised) but as an avenging figure who would lead the forces of Parthia's empire against the waning power of Rome? Why Nero of all people?

One should note, first of all, that prophecies about eastern peoples rising up to deliver destruction upon the Roman colossus go well back in Hellenic literary tradition. A bizarre oracle pronounced some time in the early second century BCE spoke of a cavalry officer of Antiochus III, defeated by Romans in the Syrian War, arising from corpses on the battlefield to predict that Zeus would send an avenging force to Italy and

⁶ See, in general, Parke (1988), 1-50.

⁷ Cf. Gruen (1998), 268-290.

⁸ Geffcken (1902) remains the classic edition. Valuable introductions to the subject may be found in Collins (1974), 1-19; (1983), 317-324; Potter (1990), 95-140; Lightfoot (2007), 3-23.

⁹ Collins (1974), 80-87, does endeavor to find some gradual development of stages in the depiction of Nero in the Sibylline texts; see also Kreitzer (1988), 96-99. But the material does not lend itself readily to schematic divisions. The efforts of Kreitzer (1988), 92-115, to link Nero's portrait to that of Hadrian hold only for certain passages but by no means all. Van Henten (2000), 3-17, persuasively undermines the notion that the Sibylline Oracles present a *Nero redivivus*, i.e. one who returned to earth after death.

strip Rome of its empire. That prediction was echoed even by the Roman commander, 'Publius', who foresaw his own death as victim of a huge red wolf. The wolf duly materialized, devoured the body of Publius but spared the head, which went on to spew prophecy about eastern invaders who would reduce Italy to rubble.¹⁰ This vivid fantasy was a product of Greek circles that looked to a savior or saviors to smash Roman power and eradicate it. Comparable prognostications took on more virulent form a little later in the Sibylline Oracles themselves. The Third Sibyl, which contains some of the earliest material in the collection from the mid second or early first century BCE, includes the dramatic pronouncement that, through an eastern avenger, Asia will strip Italy of three times the wealth plundered from the east and twenty times the number of slaves, and will exact retribution a thousandfold.¹¹

Nero as avenger fits perfectly into that convention. The Fourth Sibyl, most of which was composed in the later first century CE, sets Nero in the role of avenger, coming from beyond the Euphrates, i.e. the Parthian realm, and leading vast numbers to wreak havoc. And the author largely duplicates the language of the Third Sibyl, asserting that Asia will plunder Rome itself, bringing back to its own land twice what the Romans stole from Asia.¹² The motif reappears in the Eighth Sibyl, probably from the later second century CE, which has Nero capture much of the western wealth to bring back to Asia.¹³

But why Nero as champion of Asia? An unsavory character, one might think, would tarnish rather than enhance the enterprise. The main reason surely is that his story, or the rumors generated by it, lent itself to this sort of scenario. During Nero's lifetime Romans unhappy with the regime consulted astrologers about his fate and received forecasts of his deposition. But the prognosticators saw more in store for him in the long term. Some at least declared that Nero, once deposed in Rome, would be ruler of the east and even, most strikingly, would set up a kingdom in Jerusalem!¹⁴ Such reports, however fantastical, were evidently in the air at the end of Nero's life. They may have helped to promote diverse and contradictory reports that circulated about the emperor's final days and the circumstances of his end. The prevailing tale has him commit suicide after hearing about revolts in the provinces and the proclamation of a new emperor, Galba. But other rumors flew about. Suetonius offers a version that has Nero summon his most loyal freedmen to prepare a fleet at Ostia and call upon officers of the Praetorian Guard to accompany him in flight from Italy. The distraught ruler, it was said, tossed a number of alternatives around in his mind, including escape to the realm of Parthia where he would appear as a suppliant.¹⁵ Tacitus confirms the widespread existence of such gossip, asserting that word reached both Greece and Asia about Nero's arrival in their parts, thus causing considerable consternation. Reports about his death were so varied and

¹⁰ Phlegon of Tralles, *FGH*, 2B, 257 F 36, III. See Gabba (1975), 3-17; Gauger (1980), 225-261.

¹¹ Sib. Or. 3.350-355; cf. 4.145-148.

¹² Sib. Or. 4.137-148. On the date of the Fifth Sibyl, see now Jones (2011), 178-181, with bibliography.

¹³ Sib. Or. 8.70-72.

¹⁴ Suet. *Ner.* 40.1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 47.2.

inconsistent, Tacitus says, that many people fabricated and actually believed stories that he was still alive.¹⁶ The most striking and pointed comment along these lines comes in a speech of Dio of Prusa, writing just a generation after Nero's death. He affirms that even in his day the facts of Nero's supposed suicide remain disputed. And, more significantly, says Dio, everybody wants Nero still to be alive — and most continue to believe that he is!¹⁷

What might have spawned such speculation? Jockeying for authority and influence between Rome and Parthia had taken place for many decades, much of it over control of the kingdom of Armenia and prestige around the Euphrates, the informal border between the two great powers. The competition had occasionally flared into armed conflict, but more often consisted of bluster and temporary displays of force. Early in his reign Nero or his advisers opted for a more aggressive policy, mobilizing client princes and sending the vigorous commander Corbulo to the east, with the result that hostilities were resumed and Romans reasserted control through an appointee in Armenia. Further ups and downs followed, but diplomacy eventually prevailed over confrontation.¹⁸ An amicable agreement was reached between representatives of the two realms at the Euphrates. The compromise fashioned under Nero was to give Roman recognition to Tiridates, the ruler of Armenia who was also the brother of the Parthian king, so long as he consented to come to Rome and receive his crown at the hands of the Roman emperor. This symbolic ceremony was played up for all it was worth. Tiridates, with the royal family, including sons of the Parthian monarch, and a vast entourage, paraded across the lands in all their finery and splendor like a triumphal procession, says the historian Dio Cassius. Cities and peoples throughout Italy had welcomed Tiridates on his journey, which consumed nine months in all. Rome itself was decorated with lights and garlands, the streets crowded with onlookers, and Roman soldiers were spruced up as rarely before, their armor and standards flashing like lightning. Tiridates was duly feted and roundly cheered by the vast assemblage. And, although he received due honor and respect for his elevated position, he deigned to pay obeisance to the emperor and received the diadem emblemizing his rule at Nero's hands amidst all the pomp and glory that could be mustered.¹⁹

The grand spectacle was indeed memorable, leaving a deep impression. Nero, it appeared, had solved the "Parthian question". Rome emerged as both powerful and magnanimous, with due regard and respect for the king of Armenia and the royal house of Parthia. This settlement endured throughout the era of the Flavians, about half a century after the death of Nero, until shattered by the aggressive ambitions of Trajan.²⁰ It is no wonder that the reputation of Nero ran high in Parthia and in the lands under its aegis. At some time after the emperor's death, Vologaeses, the king of Parthia, in sending envoys to the Roman senate to renew his alliance, also pressed earnestly to pay

¹⁶ Tac. *Hist.* 2.8.1.

¹⁷ Dio of Prusa, *Or.* 21.9-10.

¹⁸ On Roman-Parthian relations in the time of Nero, see Debevoise (1938), 179-196; Ziegler (1964), 67-78; Chaumont (1976), 91-123; Lerouge (2007), 129-149.

¹⁹ Dio Cass. 63.1-6; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 16.23-24; Suet. *Ner.* 13, 30.

²⁰ Cf. Dio Cass. 68.17.1.

public homage to Nero's memory.²¹ Just when this occurred, we do not know. But it had to come at a time when either those who overthrew Nero were contending for power or the Flavian regime had taken authority and had terminated the rule of the Julio-Claudians. Either way, Vologaeses' representatives came to Rome in an atmosphere of official hostility to Nero's memory. That he nonetheless insisted upon honoring that memory demonstrates the depth of feeling for Nero in the east.

That feeling took concrete form more than once in the two decades after Nero's death. A first instance of this occurred only a few months later. Alarm arose in the Roman provinces of Achaëa and Asia at reports that Nero was still alive and in their regions. Those reports, however, were welcomed by others there. As Tacitus tells it, an imposter who closely resembled Nero and who played the lyre and sang like Nero, though he was himself a slave or freedman, suddenly emerged, gathered a group of supporters, mostly unsavory ones, and set sail (it is not clear from where to where) before being shipwrecked on the Cycladic island of Cythnus. There the new governor of Galatia and Pamphylia, appointed by Galba and on the way to his provinces, captured and executed the pretender. But not before a large number of people had flocked to his banner, entranced by the name of Nero, and eager for a change of the present government.²²

He was not the last of the false Neros. Another popped up in the reign of Titus, i.e. 79-81 CE, in the Roman province of Asia, a certain Terentius Maximus, allegedly a native of the region, and once again a singer, lyre player, and a dead ringer for Nero. Here too enthusiasm soon materialized. Terentius gathered supporters in Asia Minor, then moved to the Euphrates where a far greater number joined his entourage, and eventually to the king of Parthia who jumped at the opportunity to promote a revived Nero and to place him back on the Roman throne. It is noteworthy that the imposter made his claim on Parthian backing by reference to his restoration of Armenia to Parthian suzerainty. Nero's repute on that score had strong resonance in the realm of the Parthians. The whole enterprise fizzled when the pretender's identity was revealed and he perished.²³ But it is plain that Nero's name and fame still had wide purchase in Parthia.

It retained that purchase even one decade later. In 88 or 89, according to Suetonius, yet another figure of obscure origins entered the scene and claimed to be Nero himself. Whether he had musical talent or bore a resemblance to the late emperor we are not told. What matters, however, is that this pseudo-Nero plainly stirred passions simply by associating himself with a name that still had magic in Parthian dominions. As Suetonius puts it, the name Nero possessed so much favor among the Parthians that they supported the pretender with great vigor and surrendered him only with great reluctance.²⁴

It causes no surprise, therefore, that visions of vengeance by east against west should focus upon Nero as a principal standard-bearer. The Parthian empire remained the sole

²¹ Suet. *Ner.* 57.2.

²² Tac. *Hist.* 2.8-9; cf. Zon. 11.15; Dio Cass. 64.9.3.

²³ Dio Cass. 66.19.3b-c; Joann. Antioch. fr. 104 M.

²⁴ Suet. *Ner.* 57.2. On the "false-Neros", see the extensive treatment by Tuplin (1989), 364-404. Cf. also Lawrence (1978), 54-66; Champlin (2003), 10-12.

great power that stood as a worthy rival to Rome and could serve as a potential launching pad for those resentful, hostile, or victimized by the western behemoth. And Nero, with great popularity in the east, widespread reputation among Parthians, and even grounds for significant fantasizing among the foes of Rome supplied the perfect symbol for such fanciful flights of imagination.

Nor is it a surprise that the Jews bought into this creative form of wish-fulfillment. They already had a tradition, as the Sibylline Oracles attest, of representing eastern extraction from Rome of its ill-gotten goods many times over.²⁵ For Jews writing after the destruction of the Temple at Roman hands, this vision of an eastern avenger who could bring retribution upon the pernicious power had understandable appeal — even if it were an illusory chimera. The memory or rather the constructed memory of Nero as champion of the east against the overweening dominance of the western empire could be exploited for Jewish ends. The sustaining power of that image in eastern lands made it particularly serviceable in the interests of the Jews.

So far, so good. But a problem persists. A closer look at the references to Nero in the Sibylline Oracles raises doubts. The emperor does not exactly appear as a noble defender of a worthy cause. The authors of those passages that bring Nero to the fore seem to go out of their way to depict the emperor in dark tones, reminding readers of his transgressions, his failings, and his crimes. They may have drawn on memories in the east of Nero as patron of Parthia and wronged victim of Rome, but they also drew on vivid Roman recollections of the emperor as cruel, hybristic, and tyrannical.

Nero's notorious murder of his mother (persisting in the attempt after previous failure until he succeeded in the heinous act) captured popular imagination. Allusions to Nero as matricide crop up frequently in the Sibylline Oracles. The repetition of that reference, almost as an identifying label, delivers a decidedly negative impression.²⁶ So does the common characterization of his departure for the east as an ignominious flight. This was no journey to take up the worthy cause of the east against the wicked west, but a desperate escape route for the deposed and frightened prince.²⁷ No Roman could forget the figure of Nero as an obsessive artist, an actor in tragedies, a singer on stage, a passionate player on the lyre, the organizer of a concert tour in Greece where he could exhibit his talents, and a competitor in contests for prizes — which, of course, he always won.²⁸ In the eyes of most Roman aristocrats, such indulgences sullied the dignity of the crown and severely compromised the majesty of the emperor. The behavior was not only demeaning but ludicrous. The mentions of this conduct in the Sibylline Oracles, prompted by Roman memories of Nero's misdeeds, were certainly not meant to be kind. Note, for instance, this pointed combination in the Fifth Sibyl: 'playing at theatricals with honey-sweet songs rendered with melodious voice, he will destroy many men — and his wretched mother'.²⁹ That is no innocent juxtaposition. And twice in different

²⁵ Sib. Or. 3.350-380.

²⁶ Sib. Or. 4.120-121, 5.30, 5.142, 5.363, 12.82.

²⁷ Sib. Or. 4.119-124, 5.216, 5.363-364, 8.71-72, 12.93-94, 13.122.

²⁸ On this aspect, see the fine study by Champlin (2003), 53-83.

²⁹ Sib. Or. 5.141-142. See also 12.91-92. For the date of the Fifth Sibyl, some time in the mid second century CE, see Jones (2011), 213-215, with reference to earlier literature.

oracles, the fifth and the twelfth, the Sibyl uses the same phraseology branding Nero as slayer of his own family and connects this with his performances as athlete and charioteer.³⁰ The authors hardly drew an edifying portrait of the emperor.

One can go further. Consider another ambitious and conspicuous act of Nero that stuck in the memory of Greeks and Romans alike, and was picked up by the Jews. The emperor determined to carry through to fruition a massive project once contemplated by Julius Caesar and by Gaius Caligula, the cutting of a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth. The emperor was there in person at the groundbreaking ceremonies, the first in fact to cart off a basket full of earth on his shoulders.³¹ This project too never saw completion. One could argue that it had a salutary and worthy aim: to stimulate commerce among the cities of Greece.³² In fact, however, it entrenched and reinforced Nero's reputation for *hybris*. The first man who conceived the idea of bisecting the Isthmus, after all, was the Corinthian tyrant Periander with whom Nero must have been compared for his tyranny and his overweening arrogance.³³ The Sibylline Oracles make reference to the cutting of the Isthmus on five different occasions. None accords any kudos to Nero for an admirable venture. Quite the contrary. The Sibyl describes slicing the mountain between two seas as defiling the waters with gore and connects the effort with raining destruction upon Corinth.³⁴ Nero gets no quarter.

The emperor's *hybris* gains indirect notice on an even larger scale: pretensions to divinity. For a Jewish author, of course, this is especially intolerable. The Fifth Sibyl ascribes to some the claim that Nero was son of Zeus and Hera, a claim set beside a list of his misdemeanors and the disasters he produced.³⁵ This was hardly an endorsement of a divine makeup in his character. Elsewhere, the Sibyl predicts that even after Nero's demise he will return and declare himself equivalent to God; he will convince some, but the boast will prove empty and readily refuted.³⁶

The whole idea of Nero's portrayal in the Sibyllines as leading eastern peoples to exact vengeance upon Rome needs to be rethought. The vision of retaliation arising out of the east and promoted by those victimized by Rome can certainly be found in the texts, as we have seen. And the links between Nero and the Parthians who represented the solitary counterpoint to Roman power supplied a means for visionaries to imagine the emperor as leading Parthian forces to the west. But a closer look at the Sibylline texts shows that Nero emerges less as avenger than as destroyer.

The emperor, after vanishing, will return as a destructive force, so the Fifth Sibyl forecasts.³⁷ The destructions do target Rome and Italy. Nero's projected ravaging will eliminate the menace of Rome and eradicate Rome's empire in the words of the Eighth Sibyl, and reiterated in the Twelfth Sibyl.³⁸ But they are by no means the only targets. In

³⁰ Sib. Or. 5.31, 12.82-83.

³¹ Suet. *Ner.* 19.2; cf. *Iul.* 44.3; *Calig.* 21.

³² Ps. Lucian, *Ner.* 1.

³³ Cf. Plin., *NH* 4.10.

³⁴ Sib. Or. 5.32, 5.138-139, 5.214-219, 8.155-157, 12.84.

³⁵ Sib. Or. 5.140-154.

³⁶ Sib. Or. 5.33-35, 12.86.

³⁷ Sib. Or. 5.33.

³⁸ Sib. Or. 8.142-147, 8.151-155, 12.85.

the oracular forecasts, Nero will cut a wide swath of destruction from east to west. Corinth is singled out as a victim in one oracle, probably as symbol of Greece which will suffer rapine and devastation at the hands of the emperor returning from the east.³⁹ Nero is inserted into an oracle that foresees destruction in Syria, and singles out cities in Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia also as subject to carnage and ruin at the hands of the fugitive from across the Euphrates.⁴⁰ And the circle widens. The Sibyl minces no words in condemning Nero, the matricide who flees from the ends of the earth with dastardly schemes to destroy every land he encounters in his conquests, annihilate rulers and subjects alike, and set all ablaze as none before him had ever done.⁴¹ Indeed, among the peoples who will fall victim to his indiscriminate slaughter is none other than the nation of the Hebrews.⁴² Nero is far from a heroic champion of the eastern oppressed against the might of the west. Annihilation extends everywhere in the apocalyptic vision, and all of creation is shaken to its roots.⁴³ The perpetrator of devastation, however much it was merited by the victims, is not himself portrayed as a worthy agent of appropriate revenge. His flaws, monstrous acts, and base character receive repeated emphasis. No deed of destruction goes unaccompanied by reference to the destroyer's villainy.⁴⁴

The Jewish authors had a double template with which to work: Roman memory of the evils wrought by an unpopular ruler, and eastern memory of a popular exile from Roman injustice who was prepared to champion the causes of the east. That contradictory set of images was blended and adapted in the Sibylline Oracles, not altogether successfully, to provide a vehicle for anger against the nation that had destroyed the Temple and against a larger world that had allowed it to happen — and for whom calamity awaited at the hands of a vengeful God.⁴⁵

But a further question needs to be asked. The figure of Nero might be a suitable one for Jews to deploy in these literary contexts and for these historical purposes. But why the need to blacken him at every turn? What accounts for the impulse to label and re-label him as matricide, hybristic claimant on divinity, destroyer of cities and nations, and ludicrous lyricist? What had Nero ever done to the Jews?

One might be tempted to suggest that he was held to blame for the destruction of the Temple. The Fifth Sibyl states baldly on one occasion, but one only, that Nero seized the

³⁹ Sib. Or. 5.214-224.

⁴⁰ Sib. Or. 13.119-130.

⁴¹ Sib. Or. 5.363-369.

⁴² Sib. Or. 8.140-141.

⁴³ Cf. Sib. Or. 5.152-154, 5.225-227. Jones (2011), 229-230, tentatively proposes an assimilation of Nero to Antiochus IV.

⁴⁴ The one possible exception is a single obscure reference to Nero as exterminating tyrants and raising up those who are frightened; Sib. Or. 5.368-370. For Jones (2011), 233-235, this alludes to the Jews, a highly speculative suggestion. And even this comes in the midst of predictions of vast carnage and bloodshed by the 'matricide', hardly a positive assessment. In early Christian writings Nero became the prototype of the Antichrist; see McGinn (1994), 45-54; Champlin (2003), 19-22. See further the excellent survey of representations of Nero from the early Roman Empire to the Reformation by Maier (2013), 385-404.

⁴⁵ See, especially, Sib. Or. 5.225-227.

Temple and produced the conflagration that victimized those who entered it.⁴⁶ Of course, he had nothing to do with it in fact. The fall of Jerusalem came at the hands of the general Titus two years after the death of Nero. Credit went to, indeed was trumpeted by, the new Flavian regime, who usurped the throne after the demise of the hated Julio-Claudian dynasty, terminated by Nero's death. But, one might surmise, memory of specifics could have dimmed in subsequent years. The Great Jewish Revolt did, after all, commence in 66 CE, in the reign of Nero, and the emperor did appoint Vespasian to take command of Roman forces in Judaea in 67 to repress the rebels. Even though he may never have contemplated eradication of the Temple and did not live to see it, he could in retrospect be held indirectly responsible. It was under his regime also that a series of prefects held office in Judaea (Felix, Festus, Albinus, and Florus), who, in Josephus' presentation at least, progressively aggravated the situation and eventually triggered the fatal rebellion, a development for which Nero might be considered indirectly culpable.⁴⁷ All this may well have played a role in Jewish coloration of Nero's memory.

But another element deserves consideration. An event of high notoriety occurred in Rome during the reign of Nero: the great fire of 64 CE that spread through much of the city. Nero was blamed by many for setting the fire himself and, as Tacitus' famous account tells us, the emperor shifted the blame to Christians in order to get himself off the hook, and ordered a grisly persecution of that sect, the first of its kind.⁴⁸ The punishments were dramatic and dreadful: convicted Christians were covered in animal skins, torn apart by wild dogs, and nailed to crosses where they were burned to serve as human torches to light up the night.⁴⁹ Few who witnessed the scene could have failed to remember or pass it on to others as a memorable episode. The victims, we are told explicitly, were Christians. No mention is made of Jews.

This, of course, is not the place to examine the controversies surrounding that event, the possible motives of the emperor, or the complexities and ambiguities of Tacitus' account. Those matters have spawned a vast literature. And there is little purpose in adding to it here. With regard to the Jews, however, a couple of points might be worth pondering.

First, how easy would it have been for a Roman in 64 CE to distinguish a Christian from a Jew? And how much would they have cared to do so? Tacitus, to be sure, knew the difference. In his day the distinction was clear enough, and Christianity as a sect was readily identifiable. But Tacitus wrote his *Annals* about a half century after the great fire in Rome. The historian claims that a 'vast multitude' of Christians were punished as scapegoats for the fire. Was there really a vast multitude of Christians in Rome at so

⁴⁶ Sib. Or. 5.150-151; cf. 8.140-141.

⁴⁷ On the actions of these prefects, see the discussion of Schürer (1973), 455-470, largely following Josephus. For a more sceptical assessment of Josephus' account, see Eck (2011), 59-65. Jones (2011), 224-225, draws attention to Florus' massacre of Jews (Joseph. *BJ* 2.293-308), but rightly questions its relevance for Nero's role.

⁴⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.48-44; cf. Suet. *Ner.* 16, 38; Dio Cass. 62.16-17; Plin. *NH* 17.5.

⁴⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.

early a date?⁵⁰ And even if they could be identified as such, would Roman officials really know the difference between gentile Christians and Jewish Christians — and would they take the trouble to find out? Only a generation had passed since Jesus' crucifixion and much less time since Paul had begun his mission to the gentiles. Whatever the numbers of Christians in Rome, the large majority of them must have been Jews. One text, in fact, provides direct support. The pseudonymous correspondence between Seneca and St. Paul mentions explicitly that Jews, as well as Christians, were punished for their part in the fire.⁵¹ The letter, of course, is late and fabricated, not a source for confident historical reconstruction. But the association of Jews and Christians in this episode, even if invented, shows that at least one strand in the tradition found it to be plausible.

The idea that Jews suffered in the persecutions under Nero has never had any traction in the scholarship. A hefty argument from silence is set against it. The absence of mention in Josephus in particular would seem decisive. He could hardly have passed over a victimization of Jews. So it has been forcefully asserted.⁵² Perhaps so. But it is worth mentioning that Josephus has almost nothing to say about any events in Rome during the reign of Nero, nor that of Claudius before him, apart from the accession of the latter. That is particularly noteworthy with regard to Claudius because that emperor took action to expel Jews from the city, an event recorded (in confused fashion) by several sources — but not by Josephus.⁵³ So, the silence of the Jewish historian is not decisive. It is, in any case, readily explicable. There was no persecution of Jews as such. Christians were the official targets, explicitly and intentionally. Nero had no reason to torment Jews as a group. But the vast multitude of victims of whom Tacitus speaks must have included a substantial portion of Jewish Christians. The frightful deaths of individuals, even if not linked to Judaism itself, could hardly fail to leave a deep impression in the memories of some Jewish families and communities, passed on to subsequent generations. This could possibly have played a role in Jewish blackening of an emperor who had otherwise done them no wrong as a people. And an echo of this may still linger in the Sibyl's puzzling reference to Nero's determination to ravage various peoples, including the *ethnos* of the Hebrews.⁵⁴

To sum up. The memories of Nero in Jewish circles were anything but simple. Oracular pronouncements in the Sibyllines disclose an ingenious manipulation by Jewish intellectuals of the pagan Sibyl tailored to their ends. Scrutiny of particular prognostications shows that the Jewish authors had an impressive familiarity, on the one hand, with negative Roman perceptions of Nero's misconduct and transgressions and, on the other, with eastern traditions of Nero as an exile who escaped Roman injustice to become a standard-bearer for Parthian resistance to the western empire. And, quite apart

⁵⁰ There were certainly some, as is clear from Paul's epistle to the Romans in the late 50s, although Paul addressed Christians, Jews, and gentiles in various parts of that letter. And Christians in some numbers at least greeted Paul when he arrived in Rome; *Acts*, 28.14-15.

⁵¹ Ps. Seneca, *Letter to Paul*, 11.

⁵² Cf. Smallwood (1981), 217.

⁵³ Dio Cass. 60.6.6; Suet. *Claud.* 25.4; Oros. 7.6.15; *Acts*, 18.2. See the discussion in Gruen (2002), 36-41.

⁵⁴ Sib. Or. 8.140-141

from the constructs and inventions, a deeper memory of undeserved suffering by Jews may have contributed, in the Jewish consciousness, to the adverse image of the emperor.

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