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The Neronian Persecution

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May 15, 1926.

THE NERONIAN PERSECUTION.

(Theme for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity).

*A thesis offered to the faculty of
Concordia Seminary in partial ful-
fillment of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Divinity.*

Concordia Seminary.

St. Louis, Mo.

(Written under the supervision of Prof. P. Kretzmann, D.D.)

*WJ
K 5/16/26*

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In the year 64 A.D., July 19th to be exact, when Rome flourished ^{as the} as the leading city of the world and was then under the sovereignty of the ^{the} "bloody Nero", there broke out in that metropolis of the so-called world-^{empire} empire an immense fire which raged for approximately one week or a few ^{days} days more, according to the testimony of various historians, and reduced that splendid city to a shell of its former glorious self. The damage wrought ^{that} by the consuming conflagration is well described by Gibbon in his ^{Decline} "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", Chapt. XV, where he writes: "The ^{monuments} monuments of Grecian art and of Roman virtue, the trophies of the Punic ^{and Gallic} and Gallic wars, the most holy temples, and the most splendid palaces were ^{involved} involved in one common destruction. Of the fourteen regions or ^{quarters} quarters into which ^{Rome} Rome was divided, four only subsisted entirely. Three were leveled with the ^{ground} ground, and the remaining seven, which had experienced the force of the flames, displayed a melancholy prespect of ruin and desolation." Or as the fire is recorded in Spence-Jones "The Early Christians in Rome", (pp.25 and 26): "A terrible and unlooked for calamity reduced Rome to a state of mourning and desolation. The 19th July, A.D.64, the date of the ^{commencement} commencement of the desolating fire, was long remembered. It broke out in the shops which clustered round the great circus; a strong summer wind fanned the ^{flames} flames which soon became uncontrollable. The narrow streets ^{of} of the old quarters and the somewhat crumbling buildings fed the fire which raged for ^{some} some nine days, destroying many of the ancient historic buildings. Thousands of the poorer inhabitants were rendered homeless and penniless. At that period Rome was divided into fourteen regions or quarters; of these ^{three} three were entirely consumed; seven more were rendered uninhabitable by the fierce fire; only four were left really unharmed by the desolating calamity."---We can well imagine what results this mighty catastrophe had on the populace of the city. With many of the people perishing in the same flames which destroyed the lowly hovel of the poor as well as the splendid mansions of the rich; with the survivors in a fear-

crazed state of mind; and with the entire order of life and custom in an upheaval, which state of affairs always exists when any national calamity takes place, and that is what the burning of Rome amounted to, since it was the hub of the wheel representing the Roman empire and all the other parts of the country turned with Rome, we can well imagine that those in authority were face to face with a great crisis, namely, the control of the populace. For where had this fire started? Was it purely accidental or was it the work of an incendiary? That the government realized the dire need of cooling the wrath of the people (and especially a certain government official, namely, Nero, the Emperor) we realize from the statement of Gibbon in his "History of Christianity", p.221: "The imperial gardens were thrown open to the distressed multitude, temporary buildings were erected for their accommodation, and a plentiful supply of corn and provisions was distributed at a very moderate price". But all these efforts availed nothing against the rumor which constantly persisted, in blaming the emperor Nero himself with having started the disastrous fire. Although some historians discredit this entirely on the basis that on the 19th of July Nero was absent from Rome, nevertheless it would have been a very easy matter for his hired agents to have started the conflagration which ruined the city. As to his reasons for such an act, some say he wished to destroy the old city, and build up a new one of most magnificent splendor and to have the name of this city changed to 'Nero'. Others, calling attention to the vanity prevalent in this emperor, say it was merely a foolish whim of his, and that while the city burned Nero watched the flames from a high tower and sang an ode about the burning of Troy to the accompaniment on his lyre. But whether Nero caused the fire or not, public opinion accused him of the deed, (Duchesne, "Early History of the Christian Church", p.47) and with such insistency and increasing intensity, that Nero was forced to look for a scape-goat, for one on whom the blame could easily be placed, so that an impending revolution against the throne, which might

easily have resulted would be averted.

Let us for a moment pause here, and take a closer glimpse of Nero, who at this time occupied the throne at Rome. At the time of the fire he was in the tenth year of his reign. When he first ascended the throne he was held in check by strong outside influences, but since these influences hindered the new emperor in the attainment of his desires he craftily removed these hindrances to the pleasures which he enjoyed, so that by the year 64 he was in the height of his power as ruler of the empire. Nero was a very vain man, and prided himself upon what he thought was ability in music and poetry. He balked at no means to attain his end. The deaths of his mother, his first wife, and his brother were all attributed to him, and his rowdiness and riotous conduct were open secrets to the Roman populace. His physical appearance must have been repulsive, for Tucker tells us in his "Life in the Roman World of Nero and St. Paul", p. 80: "He (Nero) was of fairly good height, his skin was blotched, and his odour unpleasant; his hair was inclined to be yellow; his face was more handsome than attractive (I imagine it was neither); his eyes were grayish-blue and short-sighted; his neck was fat; he was protuberant below the waist; his legs were very slender; his health was good." -- From this short description and from other facts handed down to us concerning this cruel tyrant, there is no doubt in my mind, but that Nero would have no compunctions in starting the conflagration.

But now he had to do something quickly to avert the suspicion under which he had come, due to the rumor among the people, and where was he to turn to find someone to shoulder the blame! We can imagine him racking his brain, when all of a sudden the thought occurred to him: Why not blame some of the sects in this city, who do not worship the Roman gods? Why not the Jews, who were tolerated by the Romans? No, not the Jews and for the following reason: They were powerfully represented at the Roman court. The wife and mistress of Nero, Poppaea, if not a Jewess, was a Jewish proselyte.

But the Christians, and this is the first time that a difference seems^{to} to have existed according to the Romans between Jews and Christians, were^a a party not in favor with the Roman people and it would be an easy matter to have the ire of the inhabitants roused against them. And in this way the first persecution of the Christians originated, one of the worst^{that} that the Christian church had ever experienced through all the ages, and which^{which} was the beginning of a number of persecutions which raged with varying intensity for two and one-half centuries. The rumor against Nero, which brought about this persecu^{tion} is mentioned by Tacitus with becoming dis-^{dis-}trust, for he hated the Christians; but Suetonius greedily transcribes^{the} the rumor, and Dion Cassius solemnly confirms it.

Tacitus, ~~who~~^{but he} was no eye-witness of the fire and the resultant^{persec-} persecution, had good opportunities for obtaining accurate information, and he is the principle^{al} source of information of this catastrophe (Annales XV, 44). In Ayer's "Source Book of Ancient Church History", p. 6, the account of Tacitus concerning the persecution and also its causes is reproduced for us: "Neither by works of benevolence nor the gifts of the prince (Nero) nor means of appeasing the Gods did the shameful suspicion cease, so that^{that} it was not believed that the fire had been caused by his command. Therefore^{-for} to overcome this rumor, Nero put in his own place as culprits, and punished^{punished} with most ingenious cruelty, men whom the common people hated for their shameful crimes and called Christians. Christ, from whom the name was derived, had been put to death in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate. The deadly superstition, having been checked for a while, began to break out again, not only throughout Judaea, where this mischief^{mischief} first arose, but also at Rome where from all sides all things scandalous meet and become fashionable. Therefore, at the beginning, some were seized^{seized} who made confessions; then, on their information, a vast multitude^{con} was convicted, not so much of arson as of hatred for the human race. And they are^{are} not only put to death, but subjected to insults, in that they were either^{either}

dressed up in the skins of wild beasts and perished by the cruel mingling of dogs, or else put on crosses to be set on fire, and, as day declined, to be burned, being used as lights by night. Nero had thrown open his gardens for that spectacle, and gave a circus play, mingling with the people dressed in a charioteers' costume of driving in a chariot." And then Tacitus goes on to describe the result of these persecutions and tortures:

"From this arose, however, toward men who were, indeed, criminals and deserving extreme penalties, sympathy on the ground that they were destroyed not for public good, but to satisfy the cruelty of an individual (p.7).

Tacitus in this account clearly displays toward the Christians the injustice and contempt which he loved to heap upon them.---Furthermore, we can assume that from this statement and similar ones of ancient historians, the modern belief that the persecution extended only to the outskirts of Rome and not into the provinces is obtained.

That this attempt at exterminating the Christians was limited to Rome and at the most, the provinces of Italy, is the view also held by most modern historians. They base their arguments mainly on this, that it resulted from the fire in the city, and that therefore those of the provinces would not have to suffer for it. To support a persecution only in the city we have the statement of Gibbon (History of Christianity, p.221): " The effect as well as the cause of Nero's persecution were confined to the walls of Rome". And he continues, saying that the religious views of the Galileans never were made subject to inquiry or to punishment. Ayer makes this statement: "It was not however, a persecution directed against Christianity as an unlawful religion. It was probably confined to Rome and at most the immediate vicinity, and there is no evidence that it was a general persecution". Fisher, in his "Beginnings of Christianity", p.550, is not a bit certain as to the extent of the persecution, for he has the following to say: "How far the cruelty of Nero led to the persecutions of the Christians in the provinces is a controverted point." That seems to be the view held

by McGiffert in his "Church in the Apostolic Age", p.630: "There is ^{no reason} no reason to suppose that the massacre extended beyond the confines of Rome, or that any law was passed or edict issued making the profession of Christianity a crime, or placing the Christian society under the ban of the empire. ^{But} But it was to be expected that the emperor's action should be widely known, ^{and} and that provincial governors should feel at liberty in the exercise of their extraordinary police jurisdiction to follow his example in treating the Christians as outlaws and criminals whenever their own inclination or the hatred of the populace suggested such a course." Leon H. Canfield concedes the possibility of isolated cases of persecution especially in Asia Minor, but not throughout all the provinces. We find his statement in "The ^{Early} Persecutions of the Christians" (Columbia U., Studies in History, Economics, and Law, Vol.55, Part II, p.69): The persecution was by no means universal, though there may have been isolated cases tried by the police authorities outside of Rome, following the precedent set at Rome. Such cases may have occurred in Asia Minor where the Christians were most numerous and most disliked". In Foakes-Jackson "The History of the Christian Church to A.D. 461", p.50: "The Neronian Persecution, during which probably both St. Peter and St. Paul suffered martyrdom, furnishes a good illustration of the ^{general} general policy of the government toward the Church." With these words the author seems to deny ^{that} the existence of any edict or decree which called for a general uprising ^{against} against the Christians in the provinces also. Weizsaecker in his "The Apostolic Age" (Vol. II, 141) speaks for a persecution that ^{only} only existed in Rome: "It is self-evident that this calamity affected ^{only} only the Christians in Rome. As it did not emanate from an impeachment of their religion, so neither was there connected with it any universal decree ^{against} against their religion." And also Norton in his "The Rise of Christianity", p.225: "---while it does not seem to have extended to the provinces, it ^{advertised} advertised the Christians throughout the empire as obnoxious to the government".

In connection with Norton allow me to digress a moment from the

regular flow of thought, and record the popular charges which were ^{brought} brought against the Christians at the time of the persecution (p.223,224): 1. The ^{the} charge of atheism or sacrilege, because they did not worship in the ^{-the-} heathen temples the heathen gods. 2. Seditious or treason, because they taught the coming of the kingdom of God. 3. Disturbances of economic conditions, for they lead people to a knowledge of the true God and thus the sale of ^{shrines} shrines and images suffered. 4. Disturbances of the peace, for the Christians ^{were} were zealous proselyters in that heathen world, and thereby families were ^{often} often broken up. 5. Licentiousness; their men and women were seen together, ^{quite} quite often at night. Their love feasts also brought on this charge. 6. Infanticide and cannibalism. An eavesdropper might hear the words "eat this ^{flesh} flesh" and "drink this blood", would see children taken to the services in the ^{ca-} catacombs, and in this way the rumor would be spread that this new sect killed their babes, and ate the flesh of the children and drank their ^{blood} blood. 7. Magic and Witchcraft, for they had the power to cast out demons, and the ^{the} heathen regarded their making the sign of the cross as an evil sign. ^{In} In short, they were accused of everything possible, and to quote Tertullian: "If the sky stands still (does not fall down in rain), if the earth moves, if there is famine or plague, the shout is immediately raised "To the ^{lions} lions with the Christians!"

In support of the argument that Nero's persecution did not extend to the provinces we can ^{also} present the statements of historians not so recent. Thus Duff says in his "The Early Church", p.62: "There is no reason to believe that this fierce persecution, which seems to have lasted with ^{some} some interruptions to the year 68 A.D., extended far beyond Rome and its ^{environs} environs. Milman also supports Gibbons view, in Milman's "History of ^{Christ} Christianity", as to the extent of the Neronian persecution. In making this statement he is in agreement with Mosheim, that only one ^{valid} valid argument is advanced on either side. The Christians, namely, since they were being persecuted on account of their alleged burning of the city, and not for

their religion, could not have been made to suffer if they lived outside of Rome ^{or} far away in the provinces. Also, Paul, who seems to have ^{Trav-}traversed a large part of the Roman empire just during this period, does not seem to have been molested, outside of ordinary dangers that any traveler might meet with in those days, until he returned to Rome. These, do not forget, are the words of Milman. Others who agree with Gibbon on this point are Heander, F.Görres ("Christenverfolgung" in Kraus, Real-encyklopädie der Christlichen Alterthümer, vol.I, 1882, p.221), Uhlhorn, and Keim (Rom und das Christentum, Berlin 1881, pp.173 ff.)

In opposition to the claims of the afore-mentioned historians, we shall now present the statements of those, who maintain that the persecution instigated by Nero was one which extended not throughout the city of Rome, but also to the provinces of the Roman empire. What are the facts that we can adduce in proving the latter claim? Turning to the ancient historians we have the testimony of that writer who before gave us such a vivid description of the persecution, Tacitus. From his words we can ^{plain-}plainly see that he was quite familiar with the spread of Christianity from Judaea to all parts of the world. His remarks against the Christians show that he ^{was} not so much opposed to any alleged incendiarism of theirs as to the religion which they taught ^{contrary}to Roman belief and custom. He also speaks of an 'ingens multitudo' that suffered under Nero. Now this 'vast multitude' certainly could not have been just those Christians living in Rome; it must have embraced those who dwelt in the provinces. Truly, the executions may in the main have occurred in Rome, but there was nothing hindering the transportation of the Christians from the provinces to the capital city, there to be fed to lions. When Tacitus tells us that as a result of the fierce oppression of the Christians sympathy for them and for their cause was aroused, then the amount of believers slain must have been very large indeed, and must have consisted of more people than were ferreted out in Rome. Another source to which we can go to support this

view is Suetonius (Nero 16), who states that the Christians held a superstition which affected the entire human race. This indicates that the Christians were known quite well throughout the empire, for to Suetonius the entire human race undoubtedly meant in the main the great Roman nation. Then we have the remark of Orosius, whose words have quite often been discredited but which to my mind are so clear and general, that they cast a very bright light on the questions. Orosius (Hist.VII,7) (and his view is also taken by M.Guizot,) speaks quite clearly for a persecution which extended to the provinces, in the words: "Romae Christianos supplicis et morte affecit ac per omnes provincias pari persecutione excruciarum imperavit (he-Nero-visited the Christians at Rome with torments and death and gave orders that they should suffer like tortures throughout all the provinces)". These words are so sweeping that there can hardly exist any authority which could weaken the view of Orosius.---Another writer of note and one whose report is not to be despised is Clement of Rome. He refers to the persecution of Nero, for he was one of the earliest Christian writers, and also has the distinction of being the first one to refer to the martyrdom of Paul and Peter. The former he describes as a preacher in the East and in the West, and that in his travels Paul reached the farthest bounds of the West. In Chapter VI of his first epistle to the Corinthians we have a reference something like that of Tacitus in regard to the great number of the martyrs: "A πολὺ πλῆθος (vast multitude) of the elect" suffered. The idea expressed by Tertullian is also worthy of noting, for he refers to certain laws enacted by Nero. Now it is plain to everyone that if the emperor issued an edict against the Christians, calling for their persecution, such an edict was issued and was to take effect against all of this sect, not only against those located in the capital of the empire, and the resultant persecution would have been universal, not local.

Among later historians who lean toward a belief in a universal persecution was may place Bartlet in his "Christianity in History", p.89:

"This outburst (in Nero's most extravagant style), the policy of which was possibly copied elsewhere, for instance in the province of Asia^{was}---". If the outburst was in Nero's most extravagant style, and we have every reason to believe that it was, we can well assume that it extended throughout the Roman possessions. What Rome did, the rest of the empire did! This view is also taken by Ropes, "Apostolic Age", p.202: "It became the established principle of the Roman administration, if the police chose to act, membership in the Christian sect was a capital offense." We also quote Spence in his "The Early Christians in Rome", p.30: "But in Rome and in the provinces the Christian sect from this time forward was generally regarded as hostile to the Empire." And the afore-mentioned Canfield, who adopts the views of those who hold a local persecution, is willing to admit that "there may have been isolated cases tried by the police outside of Rome, following the precedents set at Rome. Such cases may have occurred in Asia Minor where the Christians were most numerous and most disliked".

Finally, there is a view to be considered quite thoroughly, that is held by Callewaert. His is a two-fold view, for he distinguishes two phases of persecution: 1. A persecution for incendiarism, confined to Rome, and only of short duration. 2. A persecution which took place shortly after the first and which was a systematic repression of Christianity. The writer is rather inclined to accept this explanation of the persecution, for we can readily understand that as soon as Nero issued the statement, rather formal^{ly} or informally, that the Christians were responsible for the great fire, the fierceness of the inhabitants of Rome knew no bounds and that not only the officials of the empire but also all Rome assisted in the persecution. And that this slaughter was confined to Rome for the time being, but only for such a time until that city could offer no more victims to satisfy the general lust for blood, blood, and more blood. If Callewaert has that length of time in mind when he says the first phase of persecution was of "short duration", then he is correct. In the mean time, however,

the news of the orgy at Rome reached out into the provinces and there ^{the} the Roman officials saw fit to duplicate the performances at Rome, but not ^{on} on a very large scale until an edict came from Nero, and then there took place the second phase of the persecution mentioned by Callewaert. Nero, running out of victims for the lions, issues a decree that Christianity ^{is} is a crime punishable with death, and orders all prisoners to be sent to Rome for execution. From this there results that throughout the Empire the Christians are ferreted and hunted out by the Roman soldiery and sent ^{sent} to the "Holy City," to be sacrificed upon the altar of heathen lusts and to sprinkle the sands of the arena with their life's blood, for the amusement of the murderers, mocking, multitude.

Let us now turn to Holy Scriptures and consider the testimony of Paul the Apostle, who was very active at the time of Nero and who finally suffered martyrdom under this cruel emperor at Rome in the year 67 A.D. Nero ascended the throne in 54; one year later Paul wrote in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapt. 7, 26: "I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress---". We do not know what induced Paul to speak these words; if they were prophetic they certainly were fulfilled. Or, perhaps, he had an intuition that this new emperor was going to be one of the first and one of the worst foes the Christian world has ever had to contend with. The following passages are the main ones to be considered in this connection: Hebrews 10, 23, where we read: "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering". Now, whereas the question as to who is the ^{author} author of this book is a controverted point (although it is generally assumed that Paul wrote this letter), this ^{will} will not deter us from making the statement that the writer of this volume which most likely appeared in the year 63 refers to the persecution and that the readers of the letter should steadfastly remain in faith ^{against} against all opposition. Likewise in v. 32, as an incentive the former triumphs should be recalled: "But call to remembrance the former days, in which,

after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions." In v.34 of this same chapter we can almost make a certain statement that Paul wrote this letter and here, too, he makes a very clear reference to his first imprisonment, from which he was released in 63 A.D.: "For ye ^{had} had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your ^{goods} goods!" This spoiling of their goods could only have resulted from persecution on the part of the heathens. In 13,5 another reference to bonds and imprisonment: "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound ^{with} with them and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body".---Another book of the New Testament which is especially valuable just for this ^{point} point is the first Epistle of Peter, who is said to have suffered martyrdom at the hands of Nero at the same time that Paul was beheaded. The date of this book we can set at 64 or 65, and hence the following passages give us an insight into the conditions of the times. And since the book was addressed to several congregations in Asia Minor we can well assume that these congregations were receiving these warnings and words of comfort against the persecution of Nero. In 1,6 he speaks of the readers as being ^{being} for a season in heaviness "through manifold temptations". V.7 Peter ^{refers} refers to a "trial of faith". In chapter 2,20 the apostle writes: "For what ^{glory} glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it ^{by?} patiently? But if, when ye do well and suffer ^{for} for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." In 4,1 the apostle draws a comparison between the suffering of Christ and that which the Christians are liable to endure ^{at} at any time, due to the persecution on the part of the heathens: "Forasmuch then as Christ has suffered for us in the flesh (physical tortures ^{to} on the cross), arm yourselves likewise with the same mind (be prepared to ^{suffer} suffer the same way; even to being dragged to Rome to a martyr's death in the arena)". A possible summons to Rome is undoubtedly referred to in 3,17 where Peter tells the Christians to be subject unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him and in 5,17 he exhorts them to honor all men.

Speaking to them in 4,12 the apostle tells them to "think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you". I do not believe that Peter would here speak of any common affliction as every Christian must daily face, as being despised or mock, as a "fiery trial". Such an expression would more fittingly be applied to the devastating fire of persecution breathed out over the Christian world by the monster at Rome.-----The Second Epistle of Paul to Timothy is ~~of~~ of special interest in this case, since it was written from Rome by Paul after he had been arrested for the second ^{time} time. This book is the last product of his pen. We know that the Apostle ^{during} during his first imprisonment enjoyed quite a bit of liberty, especially ^{between} between the years 61 and 65. Although under surveillance of the authorities he was allowed to receive visitors, to engage in his teachings and writings, ^{-ings,} and otherwise live unmolested. But now the end is fast approaching, and he ^{is} knows that his martyrdom is not far off. The conditions in Rome are very depressing, for the persecution has scattered the people of the city to different parts of the world, and the outlook is ~~not~~ bright at all. His friends have left him and only Luke was still with him. In such a frame of mind he writes to Timothy, and urges the young man to be ^o courageous in spite of existing trials (1,6-12). In the third chapter he warns him that errors will increase and asks him to remember the example of steadfast endurance in faith in spite of all trials which Paul himself had shown. ---- It has often been said, and it is a view held by many ^{exegeses} exegetes, that all these warnings to remain steadfast in faith against persecution only refer, as ^o above-mentioned, to common every day jibes which the Christians had to suffer, but those who hold this view always have the question to answer: If such is the case, why do the holy writers use such forceful expressions as we have here recorded? Truly, these remarks could only have been caused by persecutions of the worst kind, such as were instigated by Nero ^{at} Rome and which embraced all the provinces.

The arguments for both sides have been presented and now the case rests with the individual reader to make the decision. The writer is certain that on the basis of the evidence presented the following summary of the extent of the persecution may be urged as the most probable:

When the fire had occurred and Nero had managed to turn the blame for the conflagration upon the Christians, there broke out in Rome a terrible persecution of the Christians both by the government and by the public. The news of this was carried out into the provinces and there the Christians were treated in like manner, although not on the same scale as in the imperial city. Probably a few months later Nero issued an edict against the Christians and then there resulted a detailed and systematic repression of the Christians throughout the Roman empire. Whether Nero issued an edict or not, is a disputed question, but the fact that the persecution extended into the provinces can hardly be denied on the basis of the evidence produced; but whether this persecution made its way to the provinces merely on the strength of the happenings in Rome or by a formal edict of the emperor Nero may never be fully determined.

W.J.Schmedler.