

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## THE BEAST AND HIS NUMBER.

### REVELATION xiii.

THE Christians who were still living in Rome thirty years after the resurrection of our Lord, were witnesses of scenes which will ever be reckoned among the most terrible in history. They must also have been cognizant of a condition of society more revolting and degraded than any which the world has ever known. The events of that time have found their lurid record in the pages of Tacitus:—the picture of its social degradation and fathomless corruption is photographed in the satires of Juvenal and Persius; in the epigrams of Martial; in the loathly fictions of Petronius and Apuleius; in the coins and gems dug up on the coast of Campania; in the inscriptions and frescoes upon the walls of unclean imagery which once more shocked the daylight when the lava and scoriæ were removed from the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It is the surest sign of a nation's political abasement when its history dwindles into prurient anecdote, and its annalists have little or nothing to record but the personal follies or baseness of its autocrats. At no period is this more essentially the case than in the days of the Cæsars. Though one after another perished by assassination and suicide—Augustus perhaps poisoned, Tiberius perhaps smothered, Caligula assassinated, Claudius poisoned, Nero by his own hand, Galba assassinated, Otho by his own hand after defeat in battle, Vitellius by the hands of the multitude, Domitian assassinated—yet, while they were emperors, they wielded a more tremendous power, and had at their command more inexhaustible resources, than have ever fallen to the lot

of men. The lonely splendour and awful responsibility of their position had the effect of blood-poisoning on the minds of some of them. It told even on the strong brain of Tiberius, and drove him to the tainted and blood-stained solitude of Capreae. It helped to inflame the sanguinary madness of Caius. It enhanced the natural fatuity of Claudius. But its subtle and deadly intoxication worked most strongly on the feeble brain of Nero. Nero was not mad. His nature, weak as it was and wholly devoid of principle, was not totally deficient in redeeming elements. The exquisite and engaging beauty of the busts which represent him in the days of his innocent childhood shew us the features of one who, if he had grown up in a private position and under wise training, might conceivably have been a respectable and honest man. But Nero had, humanly speaking, no chance. His father was a man exceptionally worthless, and exceptionally wicked. His mother, the second Agrippina, was not only a woman of passionate temper and imperious will, but was one of the most abandoned characters of an abandoned age. His tutor, Seneca, no doubt did his best, but circumstances were too strong for him; and there was a certain insincerity in his own character which gave a hollow sound to his elaborate and sententious aphorisms. The career of Nero, from the time that he emerged into youth, became a career of such headlong degeneracy, that his name sank into a proverb of infamy, and men spoke of him as "a mixture of blood and mud." But the final turning point which plunged him into the abyss of shameless wickedness was the discovery that practically nothing was denied him, and that no atrocity was too enormous to shock the terror and servility of his people.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tac. *Ann.* xiv. 13. *Obvius tribus, festo cultu senatum, etc. Hinc superbus, et publici servitii victor. . . se in omnes libidines effudit.* Dion Cass. lxi. 16, *μετὰ τὸν τῆς μητρὸς φόνον. . . δημοσίᾳ. . . ἐθεράπευον.*

A living poet has spoken of

“The fierce light which beats upon a throne:”

but the comparative publicity of these days gives us no measure of that which prevailed in the days of the twelve Cæsars. The Roman populace, depraved and idle—the Roman aristocracy, corrupted and deprived of all outlet for their energies in careers of legitimate ambition—had nothing to talk of but their Emperor. The spectacles which occupied their days were due to his munificence; the regular supply of the necessaries of life depended on his supervision. Boundless wealth and distinction might follow upon his smile; death or exile lay in his most casual frown. In spite of a hideous multitude of spies and informers, whose whisper might betray any man, however illustrious, to death, the most secret doings of the palace were the common bruit of the multitude. The Emperor himself was often the last man to hear of the disgrace which attached to the nearest members of his family circle. All the world knew the true character of Julia before it reached the ears of her father Augustus.<sup>1</sup> The humblest slave in Rome was aware of the crimes of Messalina, before they came to the knowledge of her husband Claudius.<sup>2</sup> Again and again some slight allusion to some interior secret scandal of the palace was caught up in theatres crowded by fifty thousand spectators, and greeted with shouts of derision and applause.<sup>3</sup> Hence the Christians of Rome must have heard, week by week, and day by day, about the doings and character of Nero, for years before they had reason devoutly to thank God if they were “delivered from the mouth of the lion.”<sup>4</sup> Even during the vaunted peace and beneficence of the first five years of his reign, which used to be spoken of as his “golden *quin-*

<sup>1</sup> Suet. *Aug.* lxxv.

<sup>3</sup> Dion Cass. lxxi. 10, 22, 29, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Tac. *Ann.* xi. 29, 30.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Tim. iv. 17.

*quennium*”<sup>1</sup> they must have heard how the adoption of this youth at the age of sixteen by Claudius, had only been due to the infamous intrigues of his mother, Agrippina. It would soon have become known to all by what cruel plot his step-father was poisoned; by what arts he usurped the throne from his step-brother Britannicus; what aversion he shewed towards his wife, Octavia, the sister of Britannicus; and how before he had been a year on the throne he had poisoned Britannicus at the age of fourteen. The rumours of his friendship with the bad Otho; of his marriage with Poppæa, Otho’s wife; of the banishment and murder of Octavia; of the horrible plots by which he had at last succeeded in murdering his mother Agrippina; of the unworthy follies, the disgraceful orgies, the nameless abysses of iniquity and abomination into which the undisputed master of the world had sunk, would soon be flying from lip to lip. It is impossible to write, or to name, one half of the atrocities and crimes which stain the character of this miserable and incestuous matricide; and to Christians, who could not choose but hear what manner of man he was, there must have been a certain portentous awfulness in the thought that such a monster was the lord of the civilized world, and was, in all things lawful, one of “the powers that be,” to whom civil obedience was due.<sup>2</sup>

But, during the first ten years of this reign, a Christian might take refuge in the thought which, centuries afterwards, consoled the heart of St. Augustine during the horrors of a disintegrating society and the storms of barbarian invasion,—the contrast namely between the city of God in its peace and purity, and the anarchic wickedness of the world. Up to A.D. 64, the tenth year of Nero’s reign, the Christians had found no cause to complain of the Roman power. The grand and saving virtue of the Roman people lay in their respect for Law, and the majesty of

<sup>1</sup> Suet. *Nero*. 9, 10; Tac. *Ann.* xiii. 4.      <sup>2</sup> Rom. xiii. 1.

Roman law had many a time protected Christians from the indiscriminate fury and recklessness of Jewish and Gentile mobs. In the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, we see how the authority of Gallio, Felix, Festus, even of Pontius Pilate, had been wielded on the whole to protect rather than to injure. The conduct of the little provincial "prætors" at Philippi had been quite exceptional.<sup>1</sup> The "politarchs" of Thessalonica had dealt equitably towards St. Paul.<sup>2</sup> The authority of Proconsuls had been invoked to protect him from mob-violence at Corinth and at Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> He had himself, with some confidence, appealed to Nero at Cæsarea.<sup>4</sup> Up to this time, the Christian—as he observed how the imperial institutions of Rome helped him to disseminate the Gospel, and protected its missionaries from violence, and how it was along the straight roads hammered by "the gigantic hammer of the legionaries" that the feet of the messengers of peace were able to pass to all parts of the civilized world—saw in the existence of Roman Empire a proof of the Providence of God, and waited peacefully for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ.

But in the year 64 an event happened which had an immense significance in the history of the Christian Church; an event which inaugurated the era of martyrdoms, and brought about that direct collision between Heathendom and Christianity which was to end two centuries afterwards in the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, and therefore in the irresistible triumph of holy weakness over the banded forces of the world.

That event was the burning of Rome. The conflagration broke out with fury on July 19, near the Capuan gate, in the part of the Circus Maximus which abutted on the Palatine and Mount Cœlius. Devouring the small shops along the line of the Circus, and swept along by the wind,

<sup>1</sup> Acts xvi. 19. See my *Life of St. Paul*, vol. i. pp. 493–502.

<sup>2</sup> Acts xvii. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Acts xviii. 15; xix. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Acts xxv. 11.

it spread through the lower parts of the city, finding abundant fuel in the high buildings of the narrow and tortuous streets. Raging for six continuous days and nights, it reduced to ashes the immense pile of Nero's palace, and left in its course huge areas of glowing ashes and blackened walls. Then it burst out once more in a range of buildings which were the property of Nero's infamous minister, Tigellinus; and, after having destroyed countless temples, lodging houses, works of art, and ancient monuments, was not arrested till it more or less totally devastated ten out of the sixteen districts into which the city was divided.<sup>1</sup>

It is hardly possible to conceive the horror and misery caused by this terrible disaster. While the flames were roaring along the streets, the noise of the conflagration was increased by the shrieks of women and children trying to snatch what they could from their burning homes, or hurrying to escape from the streams of fire which seemed to meet them in all directions. Many perished in the attempt to save their relatives; many were starved to death; tens of thousands were totally ruined. The destruction of many of the most ancient and hallowed temples of the gods added the terrors of superstition to the sufferings of the densely crowded population, who were now driven to encamp in open gardens and temporary sheds.

Who was the author of this crime, if crime it were? In such a city as Rome, and with the defective appliances and organization of social matters in ancient days, the burning of Rome may have been due to accident. But the impression of the day, caused by many actual circumstances, was that it had been the result of a criminal design; and the suspicions of the people began to fix themselves with deadly tenacity on the still youthful Emperor. It was known that his head was full of Homeric poetry; that the

<sup>1</sup> For the details of this conflagration, see Tac. *Ann.* xv. 38-44.

burning of Troy had seized on his imagination; that he had been heard to speak of Priam as a man to be envied because he had seen his own city in flames. It was further whispered that he had a design for rebuilding Rome and calling it by his own name; and that he profited by the disaster, since he seized additional ground for his "Golden House."<sup>1</sup> It was rumoured that his agents had been seen busily engaged in throwing firebrands, or in menacing those who tried to suppress the flames. It was also said that, during the burning of the city, he had mounted a tower, and there, high above the surging sea of flame, had sat in a scenic dress and sung to his lyre the capture and conflagration of Troy. Many of these stories were absurd, and others owed their origin to the silly language of a man whose brain was fatally haunted by a criminal conception, and who had become hopelessly demoralized from perceiving that not even by the darkest and deadliest of crimes had he diminished one iota of his power, or silenced the frantic adulations of his people from the proudest senator down to the meanest slave. It is in Nero's favour that he was not at Rome but at Antium when the fire began, and that he only returned to the city when the flames rolled up towards his palace and the gardens of Mæcenas. Undoubtedly he gave orders that all possible steps should be taken to relieve the general suffering. He lowered the price of corn, and threw open his own gardens for the people, to diminish the intensity of the odium which the suspicion, if not of his positive guilt, at least of his *complicity*, had excited against him.

Then he tried religious remedies. The Sibylline books were consulted; the matrons of Rome walked in long processions to propitiate Juno, whose temple and statue were lustrated with sea water. Public banquets were given in honour of the gods and goddesses of Rome. It was only

<sup>1</sup> Suet. *Nero*. 38. Dion Cass. lxi. 18.



when Nero found that sacred ceremonies were as unavailing as profuse largesses to dissipate the dark clouds of sullenness and fury which were beginning to endanger even his colossal power, that he conceived, or had suggested to him by others, the diabolical purpose of throwing the blame upon the innocent.

“To do away with the rumour,” says Tacitus, “he trumped up a false charge against men who were already hated for their enormities, and whom the populace called Christians.<sup>1</sup> Christ, the founder of that name, had been capitally punished, in the reign of Tiberius, by the Procurator Pontius Pilate; and the deadly superstition, repressed for the present, began once more to break out, not only throughout Judæa whence the evil sprang, but even throughout the city whither from all sides all things monstrous or infamous flow together and find votaries. Those therefore who confessed the crime were first arrested, then on their evidence a vast multitude, who were convicted, not so much on the charge of the conflagration as on that of hatred to the human race. Insults added poignancy to their death. They were covered with the skins of wild beasts to be torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set in flames, and when the daylight failed they were burnt for purposes of nightly illumination. Nero offered his gardens for this spectacle, and gave a Circensian festival, mingling with the mob in the dress of a charioteer or riding in a chariot. Hence commiseration was excited even towards men who were guilty and had deserved the extremest penalties; for it was thought they were being ruthlessly sacrificed, not for ends of public usefulness, but to gratify the savagery of a single man.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This expression is an interesting indication that the name “Christian” was looked upon as a vulgar and more or less unintelligible hybrid. Not understanding the meaning of “Christus” (“Anointed”) the Gentiles turned it into “Chrestus” (“Excellent”). See Suet. *Claud.* 25; Lactant. *Inst.* iv. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Tac. *Ann.* xv. 44. Sulp. Severus, ii. 29.

An incidental allusion in the epistle of Clemens Romanus<sup>1</sup> reveals to us yet deeper horrors. He speaks of women treated as "Danaiids and Dirces," and so undergoing terrible outrages, and winning a noble crown of martyrdom in spite of their physical weakness. The expression, taken in connection with many contemporary allusions, seems to show that the Christian women had to play their part in terrible "operas" in which the jaded and brutalized sensibilities of a corrupt age were excited by real and not simulated agonies. The same loathsome realism that made Nero and the degraded Romans look on with throbbing delight while Christians were not merely torn to pieces by bloodhounds, but were dressed up as wild beasts whom the dogs devoured, led to their enforcing the presence of Christian women to take part as involuntary actresses in dramas which involved their own martyrdom. After walking in procession upon the stage in mythic dresses as the daughters of Danaus, they were stabbed by an actor who personated Lynceus,<sup>2</sup> or they were rent asunder by wild bulls, to which they were tied, as Dirce was, by actors representing Amphion and Zethus. All that we read in the sanguinary description of other martyrdoms at Lyons, Vienne, and indeed in almost every part of the empire, was thus seen for the first time at Rome, and was directly due to the bloody cruelty and revolting æstheticism of Nero. It is needless to enter into details. Let it suffice to say that the horrors of that year, rendered more horrible from their novelty, were branded as with letters of fire upon the memories of all who bore the Christian name. Henceforth they saw in Nero the consummation of infamy, ferocity, and lust, which marked him out as that Antichrist of whom St. Paul had drawn

<sup>1</sup> Clem. Rom. *ad Cor.* i. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Renan, *L'Antechrist*, pp. 167-172.

a mysterious outline as "the lawless one," and "the man of sin," in one of his earliest Epistles.<sup>1</sup>

If anything could have added yet deeper horror to that which the whole life and conduct of Nero excited in every Christian breast, it was the sense that his unutterable heathen vileness was but the instrument secretly wielded by Jewish hatred. The Romans *did* on this occasion draw that distinction between Jews and Christians which had no significance for them till nearly a century later,<sup>2</sup> when the Jewish false Messiah Barchocba persecuted the Christians with implacable hatred. How, then, came they to single out the Christians as apart from the Jews on *this* occasion, and to point at the Christians only their exclusive calumny and persecution? The enigma would be insoluble if we did not know from other sources that the Jews had insinuated themselves into the noblest Roman houses, often by the most questionable arts. By such arts they had even gained a secret but powerful influence in Nero's palace. The Empress Poppæa, if not actually a proselyte, was at any rate very favourably disposed to the Jewish religion,<sup>3</sup> and had about this very time given a friendly audience to Josephus, at whose instigation she had used her influence for the liberation of certain Jewish priests.<sup>4</sup> Aliturus, a popular mimist on the Roman stage, had also the private entrée of the palace, and could secure interviews with its most powerful inmates.<sup>5</sup> Nero, to whom no heathen or Christian writer can allude without the ab-

<sup>1</sup> 2 Thess. ii. 3-9.

<sup>2</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 21. Seneca ap. Aug. *De Civ. Dei*, vi. 11. This is perhaps what Clemens means by attributing the Christians' persecutions to "jealousy" (*διὰ ζήλος*). *Ad Cor.* i. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, contrary to Roman custom, she ordered that after death her body should be buried, not burned. Tac. *Ann.* xvi. 6. See Grätz, *Gesch. d. Judenth.* vol. iii. p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus calls this murderous adulteress "a pious woman." *Ant.* xx. 8, § 11.

<sup>5</sup> Jos. *Vit.* 3.

horrence which he deserves, finds something almost like an apologist in the person of the astute and treacherous Jew!<sup>1</sup>

A great French artist has painted a very striking picture of Nero walking through the blackened streets of Rome after the fire. He has represented him as he was in mature age, in the unincinctured robe with which, to the disgust of the noble Romans, he used to appear in public, obese with self-indulgence, and with that fearful cloud upon his coarsened features which they must have worn when his conscience was most tormented by the furies of his murdered mother and murdered wife. Shrinking back among the ruins are two poor Christian slaves, who watch him with looks in which disgust and detestation struggle with fear as he passes by with the lictors striding before him. The picture puts in visible form the feelings of almost appalling horror and astonishment with which the brethren must have regarded one whom they came to consider as the incarnate instrument of demonic antagonism to God and to his Christ—the deadliest enemy to all that is called holy, or that is worshipped.

Did St. John ever see that frightful spectacle of a monster in human flesh? Was he a witness of any of the scenes which, in the year 64, made the air of Rome reek with the blood of martyrdom? We cannot say; but the supposition is far from impossible. Tradition at any rate points in that direction. There may be no direct truth in the stories which represent him as having been miraculously preserved when he was plunged into a cauldron of boiling oil at the Latin Gate,<sup>2</sup> or when he drank unharmed the cup of poison which slew his would-be murderers.<sup>3</sup> But, in the deep silence which falls over every fact of the biography of St. John for twenty years

<sup>1</sup> *Jos. Ant.* xx. 8, § 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Tert. De Præscr. Hæret.* 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ps. Aug. Soliloqu.* Isidore *Hispal. De Morte Sanct.* 73.

after the days of Pentecost, it is not impossible that these stories at least point to some residence of St. John in Rome; and he may have escaped—may have been compelled by the Christians to retire—from the menace of the storm before it actually burst in fury on their devoted heads. St. Paul, as we believe, was providentially delivered from his Roman imprisonment just in time to be preserved from the Neronian persecution.<sup>1</sup> But for this, who can tell whether St. Paul and St. John might not have stood, each in his “pitchy tunic,” to form those ghastly human torches which flared upon the darkness in Nero’s gardens; or that they might not have been clothed in the skins of wild beasts to feel the bloodhound’s fangs in the amphitheatre? But even if St. John was not in Rome at this period of Nero’s reign, many a terrified fugitive of that “large multitude” which Tacitus mentions, must have brought him tidings about those blood-stained orgies, in which the Devil, the Beast, and the False Prophet—“that great Anti-Trinity of Hell”—were wallowing throughout the mystic Babylon in the blood of the martyrs of the Lord.

Supposing that St. John had written an Apocalyptic book at this time, is it not *a priori* certain that the events at which we have glanced, and the hideous figure of the Antichrist, who then filled the world’s eye, would have been very prominent in such a book? Do not contemporary events and contemporary persecutions figure in each one of the numerous Apocalypses of this period?

And that the Apocalypse *was* written about this time is the view to which all modern criticism is beginning to converge. It is inexcusable at this date to defy every indication of the book itself, and merely to follow with blind credulity the error of Irenæus, who implies that it

<sup>1</sup> See the arguments for this view fully stated in my *Life of St. Paul*, vol. ii. pp. 604–607.

was composed in the reign of Domitian.<sup>1</sup> Against the authority of Irenæus may be placed that of Epiphanius, who says that St. John was banished in the reign of Claudius,<sup>2</sup> and that of the Syriac version which places that event in the reign of Nero. Theophylact, who had many good sources of information, says the same. Two considerations are alone decisive. The one is, that the book was clearly written before the Fall of Jerusalem;<sup>3</sup> the other, that if St. John was the author both of the Apocalypse and the Gospel, the Apocalypse—which is written in Greek more barbarous and solœcistic than that of any other book of the New Testament, as Dionysius of Alexandria observed fifteen centuries ago<sup>4</sup>—must have been written many years before the Apostle had attained, by long residence in Greek-speaking cities, that mastery over the language which he shews in his Gospel and Epistles. Internal evidence would therefore alone suffice to place the date of the book about the year 69; and, if that be the date, it might have been assumed beforehand that the object of the Apocalyptic Seer would be to console the minds of his fellow-Christians, under the lacerating effects of the tortures to which so many of the brethren had recently been subjected, by pointing them to the approaching close of the æon, and the nearer and ever nearer coming of the Lord to judge the old world and to inaugurate the last of earthly dispensations.

Apocalyptic literature differs essentially from prophetic literature. It shrouds the events of the present in symbols, and by means of the same symbols conveys its hopes and expectations of the future. It was the favourite form of prophetic-poetic literature during this epoch, which furnishes us with many Apocalypses similar in general scope

<sup>1</sup> Iren. *Adv. Hæc.* v. 30; and *ap.* Euseb. *H. E.* iii. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Epiphanius. *Hæc.* li.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. xi. 1-13.

<sup>4</sup> Dionys. Alex. *ap.* Euseb. *H. E.* vii. 25.

to the Revelation of St. John, though incomparably inferior to it in power and splendour. Such are, among others, the book of Enoch, the books of Esdras, the Vision of Baruch, and the Sibylline Oracles. The language of them all is more or less founded on that of Daniel and Zechariah, and we find in them essentially the same symbolic combinations and modes of viewing the events of the present and of the imminent future, which we find in the Apocalypse of St. John. It has been usual to regard this book as a great silent sphinx, lying at the outer gate of the inspired volume, and propounding a riddle which no man yet has ever solved. "No competent, and at the same time unprejudiced judge," says Blomfield, "will deny that, after all the labour bestowed on its explanation, no book of the New Testament has so defied all attempts to settle its interpretation." "My readers will not expect," said Dr. Adam Clarke, "that I should either give a decided preference to some one of the opinions sketched above, or produce one of my own. I can do neither; nor can I pretend to explain this book; I do not understand it." "*Mihi*," said Gravina, "*tota Apocalypsis valde obscura videtur et talis cujus explicatio citra periculum vix queat tentari.*" It is doubtless this supposed impossibility of arriving at a satisfactory explanation which has caused so many critics and exegetes either to speak slightly of this book, as uncanonical and uninspired, or to give it up as a book beyond our powers of investigation, and one which has been so deeply discredited by the often preposterous and indefinitely varying schemes of interpreters, as to be beyond the range of sane exegetes. What can the ordinary reader make of a book in which scores of commentators have professed to find a minute history of eighteen Christian centuries, but in the application of which hardly any two original commentators are even approximately agreed?

In spite of the discredit into which the interpretation of

the book has consequently fallen, I believe that the Apocalypse, if explained on the analogy of all other Apocalyptic literature, and if taken to be what it professes to be by its very form and symbolism, is, in its essential particulars and its main outlines, a book perfectly easy to understand; and I venture to predict that, before another half-century has elapsed, such will be the unanimous view of the Christian world. There are two entirely different phases under which it may be regarded: the one as abounding in Divine lessons of warning and consolation, expressed in images of such beauty that they have in all ages thrilled the hearts and passed into the common phraseology of Christians; the other, as a book of symbols which shadow forth contemporary perils and expectations, and which are mainly valuable—not for those subordinate details which belong only to the form of the book, not to its spirit—but for the general principles which these symbols involve as illustrating the tendency of the Divine government of the world.

Now *the key* to the understanding of no small part of this symbolic history is furnished by the Seer to all of his readers who were familiar with Jewish apocalyptics, so plainly that it would have been impossible, for *them*, at least, to mistake his meaning. The Jewish-Christian communities for whom the book was mainly intended, reading it at the terrible epoch of extreme peril and tense expectation in which it reached their hands, would naturally expect to find in it some shadowing forth of the circumstances which now filled their minds, and some indication of the manner in which they were to regard them. An Apocalypse of the seventh decade after Christ which did not depict the character and position of Nero, would have been to them most strange and disappointing. At the same time they would understand, from the very form of the book, that they could only find a cryptograph.



No danger incurred by the early Christians was greater than that caused by the universal prevalence of spies ; and if any one of these wretches got possession of any Christian writing which could be construed into an attack or reflection upon their terrible persecutor, hundreds might be involved in ruthless punishment on the charge of high treason (*laesa majestas*), which was then the most formidable engine of despotic power. St. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, had found it necessary to speak of the Roman empire and of the Emperors Claudius or Nero in terms of studied enigma. St. Peter, making a casual allusion to Rome, had been obliged to veil it under the mystic name of Babylon. We find a similar method of allusion again and again in the Talmud, where, for instance, the Romans constantly figure as Idumæans, and where the Emperor Caligula is called Armillus because of the bracelets (*armillæ*) which he had the folly to wear in public. St. John saw in Nero a realization of Antichrist, just as the precursor of Antichrist in the days of Daniel had been Antiochus Epiphanes. But it would have been fatal, perhaps to whole communities, possibly even to the entire Church, if the Apostle had openly committed to writing either the indication of Nero's character or the prophecy of his doom. He could only do this by means of Scriptural and prophetic images, which would read like meaningless nonsense to Gentiles, but of which, as he was well aware, the secret significance was in the hands of the readers for whom alone his Revelation was intended.

Accordingly it is not too much to say that St. John has neglected no single means by which he could, with any safety, indicate that by the Wild Beast<sup>1</sup> of the 13th Chapter he means the Heathen, but especially the Roman, world-

<sup>1</sup> The confusion caused in our version by the indiscriminate use of "Beast" to represent alike the Heavenly Immortalities (ἰσῶα), and the demonic Wild Beasts (θηρία) is most unfortunate.

power as centralized and personified in Nero. It rises from the sea, by which is perhaps indicated not only a Western power, and therefore, to a Jew, a power beyond the sea,<sup>1</sup> but, perhaps especially one connected with the sea-washed peninsula of Italy.<sup>2</sup> It is a Beast like one of Daniel's four Beasts, but a compound of those. Daniel's four Beasts were the Chaldean lion, the Median bear, the Persian panther, and the Beast of Greek dominion, of which the ten horns represent the ten successors of Alexander,<sup>3</sup> and the little horn represents Antiochus Epiphanes. St. John's Beast being the all-comprehensive Roman power, is a combination of Daniel's Beasts. It is a panther, with bear's feet, and a lion's mouth. It has seven heads,<sup>4</sup> which indicate (in the apparently arbitrary but perfectly normal interchanges of Jewish apocalyptic symbolism) both the seven hills of Rome, and seven kings.<sup>5</sup> The Beast is a symbol interchangeably of the Roman empire and of the Emperor. In fact to a greater degree than at any period of history the two were one. The Roman Emperor could say, with literal truth, "*L'État c'est moi.*" And a Wild Beast was a Jew's natural symbol either for a Pagan kingdom, or for its autocrat. When St. Paul was delivered from Nero, or his representative, he says quite naturally that "he was delivered out of the mouth of the lion" (2 Tim. iv. 17; comp. Heb. xi. 33). When he is alluding to his struggles with the mob and their leaders at Ephesus, he describes it as "fighting with wild beasts" (1 Cor. xv. 32). When Marsyas announced to Agrippa I. the death of Tiberius, he did so in the words, "the *lion* is dead."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the Sibylline Oracles (iii. 176) the beast rises "from the Western sea."

<sup>2</sup> Such is the not improbable conjecture of Ewald. From xvii. 15 we might explain it of "the peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues," over which Rome ruled.

<sup>3</sup> The Diadochi, as they were called.

<sup>4</sup> Comp. Orac. Sibyll., iii. 176, where also the many-headed beast is Rome.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. xvii. 9, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Jos. Ant. xviii. 6. § 10.

Princes, as well as kingdoms, had been described under the same symbol by the Old Testament prophets.<sup>1</sup> Esther, in the Jewish legends, was said to have spoken of Xerxes as "the lion." But, besides all these reasons which made the symbol so easily intelligible, Renan may be right in conjecturing that there was yet another. It was that, on an occasion which was exceptionally infamous even for Nero, he had been *disguised as a wild beast*, and in that disguise had been let loose from a cage, and personated the furies of a tiger or panther.<sup>2</sup> Yet this Wild Beast of Heathen Power has ten horns, which possibly represent the ten main provinces of Imperial Rome.<sup>3</sup> It has the power of the dragon, that is, it possesses the Satanic dominion of the "prince of the power of the air." On its heads are names of blasphemy. Every one of the seven "kings," however counted, had borne the (to Jewish ears) blasphemous surname of Augustus ("one to be venerated"); had received apotheosis, and been spoken of as Divus after his death; had been honoured with statues, adorned with divine attributes; had been saluted with divine titles, and in some instances had been absolutely worshipped, and that in his lifetime, with temples and flamens—especially in the Asiatic provinces. The diadems are on the horns, because the Roman Proconsuls enjoy no little share of the Cæsarean splendour; but the names of blasphemy are only on the heads because the Emperor alone receives divine honour. One of the heads is wounded to death,<sup>4</sup> but the deadly wound is healed. If there could be any doubt that this indicates the violent end, and universally expected return of Nero, or—which is the same thing for prophetic purposes—of one like him, that doubt seems to be removed by the parallel description

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. xix. 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Antechrist*, p. 175. Suet. *Ner.* 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ten horns as in Dan. vii. 24. There they are the Diadochi; here the provinces of Italy, Achaia, Asia, Syria, Egypt, Africa, Spain, Gaul, Britain. (Renan, *L'Antechrist*, p. 13.)

<sup>4</sup> Just as the eagle's head (Nero) in 2 Esdras.

of the 17th Chapter, where we are told that of the seven kings of the mystic Babylon, five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come, and "the Beast that was and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven." Can language be more apparently perplexing? Yet its solution is obvious. No explanation worth the name has ever been offered of this enigma except that which makes it turn on the widespread expectation that Nero was either not really dead, or that, even if dead, he would in some strange way return. The five kings are Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius (Caligula), Claudius, and Nero. Since the Seer is writing in the reign of Galba, the fifth king (Nero) was, and is not; Otho, the seventh king, was not yet come. When he came he was to reign for a short time, and then was to come the eighth, who, it was expected, would be Nero again, one of the previous seven, and so both the fifth and the eighth. Since Rome is the great city (xvii. 18), and the ten horns its provincial governors—"kings who had received no kingdom as yet" (xvii. 12),—it seems difficult even to imagine any other explanation of symbols which it is quite clear that the Apostle *meant* to be understood, and which he assumed *would* be understood, since otherwise they would have been useless to his readers. But, after he has thus all but told us in so many words whom he means, the Seer continues the hints by which he describes the characteristics of the Beast. He says that "*all the land wondered after the Beast.*" The best comment on that particular may be found in the description of Tacitus of the manner in which all Rome, from its proudest senators down to its humblest artisans, poured forth along the public ways to receive with acclamations the guilty wretch who was returning from Campania with his hands red with his murdered mother's blood.<sup>1</sup> That the world "*worshipped*

<sup>1</sup> Tac. Ann. xiv. 13. Dion Cass. lxi. 16. Suet. Ner. 39.

the dragon, who gave his power to the Beast," would be a natural Jewish way of indicating his belief that the Pagan world, when it offered holocausts for its Emperor, was adoring devils for deities.<sup>1</sup> The cries of the world, "Who is like unto the Beast? who is able to make war with him?" sound like an echo of the shouts "Victories Olympic! victories Pythian! Nero the Hercules! Nero Apollo! Saved one! The One of the Æon," *i.e.*, unparalleled in all the world! with which Dion Cassius tells us that he was greeted by the myriads of the populace, when, with the crowns of his 1800 artistic triumphs, he returned from his insane and degraded perambulation of Greece. "The mouth speaking great things and blasphemies" is the mouth which was incessantly uttering the most monstrous boasts and pretensions,<sup>2</sup> declaring that no one before himself had the least conception of what things an Emperor might do, and of the lengths to which he could go; the mouth which ordered the erection of his own colossus, 120 feet high, adorned with the insignia and attributes of the Sun.<sup>3</sup> As for his blasphemies, Suetonius tells us that he was "religionum usquequaque contemptor."<sup>4</sup> "Power was given him to act<sup>5</sup> forty-two months." The exact significance of this mystic number, which is also described as 1260 days (xi. 2; xii. 6), and as "a time, times, and half a time" (xii. 14), is variously explained. The simplest explanation is that it refers to the time which elapsed between the beginning of Nero's

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. x. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The "mouth speaking great things" of Antiochus Epiphanes, in Dan. vii. 8, 20, never uttered half such monstrous boasts as that of Nero.

<sup>3</sup> Pliny, *H.N.* xxxix. 7. Suet. *Ner.* 30-32. Dion Cass. lxi. 15. Mart. *Spectac.* ii. 1. *Ep.* i. 71. It required twenty-four elephants to drag it away in the reign of Hadrian. Spart. *Hadr.* 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Nero.* 56. The first object of his veneration was the Syrian goddess, "hanc mox ita sprevit ut urinâ contaminaret."

<sup>5</sup> xiii. 5. *ποιῆσαι*, can hardly mean "to continue" as in the English version. It must mean "to act," "to do what he will;" and, if so, the addition of *δ θέλει* in *N* is at least a correct gloss.

persecution in Nov., 64, and his death in June, 68, which is almost exactly three and a half years. "*It was given him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them,*" for it was he who began the terrible era of martyrdom, and put "a vast multitude" to death with hideous tortures on a false accusation.<sup>1</sup> "*Power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations.*" Of the representatives of the world-powers in that day, Greece received him with frantic adulation, and Armenia, in the person of Tiridates, laid its diadem before his feet.<sup>2</sup> Even Herod the Great was accustomed to talk of the "Almighty Romans." All "*the inhabitants of the earth, except the followers of the Lamb, worshipped him;*" for at this dreadful period the cult of the Emperor was almost the only sincere worship which still existed.<sup>3</sup> Then follow two verses (xiii. 9, 10) which do not bear directly upon the symbol, being either a prophecy of retribution, given for the consolation of the suffering saints,<sup>4</sup> or, if we take what seems on the whole to be the more probable reading, a declaration that they must indeed suffer but that they should do so in faith and patience.<sup>5</sup>

In this paragraph then we have fourteen or fifteen hints as to who and what is intended by the Apocalyptic Wild Beast, and every one of these directly points to Rome and Nero. They point so directly to Rome and to Nero that it is difficult to conceive how the writer could have expressed his meaning *less* enigmatically, if he adopted at all that well-understood literary method of Jewish Apocalypses which was enigmatical in its very nature. The most

<sup>1</sup> Tac. Ann. xv. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Tac. Ann. xiv. 26. Suet. Ner. 13.

<sup>3</sup> See Boissier, *La Religion Romaine*, i. 122-208. Augustus disliked all personal worship, and insisted that his cult should be joined to that of Rome. But Caligula claimed to be worshipped in person (Suet. Cal. 21), and Nero received *apotheosis* in his lifetime. Tac. Ann. xv. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps an allusion to Nero's supposed death and flight.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. xiii. 10.

remarkable indication that Nero is mainly intended, is that it is exactly in the *most* enigmatical particulars that the resemblance is most close. He was mortally wounded, and yet (according to the then belief) the wound was *healed*; and he was a fifth king who was, and is not, and yet (so St. John indicates him by the popular belief) should be once more the eighth king, and one of the seven.<sup>1</sup> If we had not the perfectly simple clue to what was indicated by this strangely riddling description, we might give up the interpretation as insoluble; but the clue is preserved for us, not only by Jewish writers,<sup>2</sup> and Pagan historians and authors, such as Tacitus,<sup>3</sup> Suetonius,<sup>4</sup> Dion Cassius,<sup>5</sup> and Dion Chrysostom<sup>6</sup>; but also by St. Irenæus,<sup>7</sup> Lactantius,<sup>8</sup> Sulpicius Severus,<sup>9</sup> and the Sibylline books;<sup>10</sup> and even by St. Jerome<sup>11</sup> and by St. Augustine.<sup>12</sup> Nothing can prove more decisively than this that for four centuries many in the Christian world identified Nero with the Beast. It would have been strange that the Christian world should still have felt any doubt upon the subject, if all history did not shew the extent to which dogmatic bias—not *seeking* truth in Scripture, but going to Scripture in order to find

<sup>1</sup> It was specially believed that he would return from the *East*, by the aid of Parthians, among he was thought to have taken refuge,

<sup>2</sup> The Talmudic tract Gittin, quoted by Grätz, *Gesch. d. Judenth.* vol. iv. p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> Tac. *Hist.* ii. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 57, et ibi *Casaubon.*

<sup>5</sup> Dion Cass. See Zonaras, *Ann.* xi. 15-18. The expectation was most current in Asia Minor, and Nero's thoughts were incessantly turned to the East by astrologers, etc. Tac. *Hist.* ii. 95; *Ann.* xv. 36. Suet. *Ner.* 40-47.

<sup>6</sup> Dion Chrysost. *Orat.* xxi. p. 314.

<sup>7</sup> Iren. *l.c.*

<sup>8</sup> Lactant. *De Mort. Persec.* 2.

<sup>9</sup> Sulp. Sever. *Hist. Sac.* ii. 28. "It is the current opinion of many that he is yet to come as Antichrist." This was written A.D. 403.

<sup>10</sup> *Sibyll.* v. 33; viii. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Jer. *In Dan.* xi. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Aug. *De Civ. Dei*, xx. 19, 3.

there its own ready made convictions—has dominated for centuries over simple and straightforward exegesis. But as though to exclude *any possibility of doubt* about the matter, St. John, after all these clear indications, has all but told us in express words the name of the man whom he means by his Antichrist and Wild Beast; by this deified yet slain and to be resuscitated murderer of the saints. He does so in the last verses of the Chapter.

“Here is wisdom,” he says (Chap. xiii. 18); or, as he expresses it in Chapter xvii. 9, “wisdom is needed to grasp the meaning of my symbol;” or, perhaps, as Ewald understands it, “this is the sense,—whoever has wisdom will understand it thus.” “Let him that hath understanding count the number of the Beast; for it is the number of a man.” In other words, he tells us that he now intends to *indicate numerically* the name which he dared not actually express. A Jew or Jewish Christian would at once be aware that he now intends to give an instance of one of the forms of that Kabbalistic method, of which traces are found even in the ancient prophets, and which was known to the Rabbis as *Gematria*, *i.e.*, Geometry, or the numerical indication of names. Gentile Christians were not so familiar with this method;<sup>1</sup> but we see from Irenæus that they would easily have got the clue from their Judaic brethren,

<sup>1</sup> It was, however, by no means unknown to educated Greeks under the name of *isopsephia*. For instance, they called verses *isopsephics* when their letters made up numerically the same sum. In the Anthology we find an epigram which begins—

“One, hearing the words Demagoras and Plague (Loimos), which are of equal numerical value”—

which he could test in a moment, since, in Greek letters, Demagoras is—

$$4 + 1 + 40 + 1 + 3 + 70 + 100 + 1 + 50 = 270$$

Δ A M A Γ O P A N

and Loimos (Plague) is—

$$30 + 70 + 10 + 40 + 70 + 50 = 270$$

Λ O I M O N

There are isopsephic inscriptions in the *Corpus Inscr. Græc.*, 3544–3546. See Aul. Gell. xiv. 14.



whom the Apocalypse has mainly in view. There was not much danger of their betraying a secret which might cost their lives to themselves and the whole community. What St. John says in effect is: "I shall now give you the name of the Wild Beast in its *numerical value*. You have heard many specimens of this method, so that you can easily apply it, though I warn you that it may give you some difficulty." He evidently *intended* them to find out the number of the Beast, which was also the number of a man, while he pointed out that there was *one* element of exceptional difficulty in this particular solution. If it had been merely a name in the numerical value of its *Greek* letters, there would have been so little difficulty about it that any ordinarily educated reader might have discovered it after a few trials. He would only have to find out what living men there were who had the dozen or more attributes which the seer had given to the Beast, and whose names, counted by the value of the letters, made up the number 666. As there was scarcely *any* other living person to whom the Apocalyptic description could apply, Nero's was probably the first name which a Jewish Christian reader would have tried. And here he would have been at once baffled. In Greek letters he would have found that *Nerōn* made  $13 + 5 + 17 + 24 + 13$ , which only gives 72. If he tried *Neron Kaisar*, it would only make  $72 + 56 = 128$ . Almost every combination which he tried would fail, and very possibly he would give up the task in despair, with the thought that he did not possess the requisite "wisdom," though he may have solved many such problems in Sibylline or similar books. Thus, in the Sibylline books, the poet indicates the name Jesus, in Greek *Ἰησοῦς*, by saying that it is a word which has 4 vowels and 2 consonants, and that the whole number is equivalent to 8 units, 8 tens, 8 hundreds, *i.e.*, 888 (*Ἰησοῦς* =  $10 + 8 + 200 + 70 + 400 + 200 = 888$ ), and no Greek-

speaking Christian would have had any trouble in solving the riddle. Since, however, all the other indications pointed so clearly to Rome and Nero, the Greek Christian reader might very naturally have hit upon "Latinus" (*Λατίνος*) as a sort of general indication of Rome and "a Latin man." This accounts for the prevalence of this explanation among the Fathers, beginning with St. Irenæus, who may have heard it from St. Polycarp, who had seen St. John in his old age.<sup>1</sup> These early Christian writers were, so to speak, on the right scent; yet with "Latinus" they could hardly have been quite satisfied. It is a vague adjective, and the names *Latium* and *Latinus* had long been practically obsolete. If this were indeed the solution, they might have put down its vagueness to intentional obscurity. We can hardly conceive what care a foreign writer had to take if he touched in any respect unfavourably upon the imperial power in those days of *delators* and *laesa majestas*.<sup>2</sup> Josephus was in high favour, first with Poppæa and then with the Flavian dynasty, yet he stops abruptly in his explanation of the prophecies of Daniel, with a mysterious hint that he does not deem it prudent to say more.<sup>3</sup> This evidently was because he feared that, if he touched on any explanation of the work of destruction wrought by the "stone cut without hands," he might seem to be threatening future ruin and extinction to the Roman empire; and this was beyond his very limited daring. It was perhaps the complete unsatisfactoriness of the solution "*Lateinos*" which made some Christians, as Irenæus further tells us, try the name *Teitan*, which also gives the mystic number 666 (*Teitan* = 300 + 5 + 10 + 300 + 1 + 50 = 666), and which has the additional advantage of

<sup>1</sup> Iren. *Adv. Hær.* v. 30. Hyppolit. *De Christo*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> See Tac. *Ann.* iii. 38; iv. 50; *Hist.* i. 77. Suet. *Ner.* 32:—"tum ut lege majestatis, facta dictaque omnia, quibus modo delator non deesset, tenerentur."

<sup>3</sup> Jos. *Ant.* x. 10, § 4: "Daniel did also declare the meaning of the stone to the king; but I do not think proper to relate it."

being a word of six letters. In this instance also ingenuity was not very far astray; for Titan was one of the old poetic names of the Sun, and the Sun was the deity whose attributes Nero most affected, as all the world was able to judge from seeing his colossus with radiated head, of which the substructure of the base still remains close by the ruins of the Coliseum.

On the whole, however, the Greek Christians must have remained a little perplexed, a little dissatisfied; and must have been inclined to say, with some of the Fathers,<sup>1</sup> that only time could reveal the secret, or else to believe that perhaps there was more than one solution. They must, however, have known what was *meant*, even if the exact equi-numeration of any words which they could hit upon did not quite satisfy them. And this was the general condition in which the secret remained in the early Christian Church. At any rate there stood the strange number before them.

χϞϞ'

The very look of it was awful. The first letter was the initial letter of the name of Christ. The last letter was the first double letter of the cross. Between the two the Serpent stood confessed in sign and sound.<sup>2</sup> The whole formed a triple repetition of 6, the essential number of toil and imperfection; and this numerical symbol of the Antichrist, 666, stood in terrible opposition to the 888—three perfect 8's of the name of Jesus.

But Jewish readers and, as we have said, it was to Jewish readers that the Apocalypse was primarily addressed, would find none of the difficulties which perplexed their Gentile fellow-Christians. The Apostle had warned them that the solution did not lie so much on the surface as was

<sup>1</sup> Irenæus, v. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. xii. 9; xx. 2.

usual in similar enigmas. Every Jewish reader, of course, saw that by the Beast Nero was meant. He would not try the name Nero Cæsar in Latin, because *isopsephia* (which the Jew called *Gematria*) was almost unknown among the Romans, and their alphabetic numeration was wholly defective. He might try *Νερων Καισαρ* in Greek, but it would not give him the right number. Then, as with a flash of intuition, it would occur to him to try the name *in Hebrew*. The Apostle was writing as a Hebrew, was evidently thinking as a Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> His solœcistic Greek was sufficient to prove that the language was unfamiliar to him, and that all persons of whom he thought would be naturally presented to his mind primarily by their Hebrew designations. This, too,<sup>2</sup> would be an additional safeguard from the prying inquisition of treacherous Pagan informers. It would have been to the last degree perilous to make the secret *too* clear. Accordingly the Jewish Christian would have tried the name as he *thought* of the name—that is *in Hebrew letters*. And the moment that he did this the secret stood revealed. No Jew ever thought of Nero except as “*Neron Kesar*,” and this gives at once—

$$\text{נרון קסר} = 50 + 200 + 6 + 50 + 100 + 60 + 200 = 666.^2$$

The Jews were remarkable for reticence, and men are specially liable to keep their secrets to themselves when they involve matters of life and death. Many methods and secrets of Rabbinic exegesis, though of great value, have remained unrevealed by Jews to Christians, simply because

<sup>1</sup> See the startling Hebraism in the Greek of Rev. i. 4, and comp. Rev. ix. 11.

<sup>2</sup> The name was so written in Jewish inscriptions. See Ewald, *Die johann. Schriften*, ii. 203; Buxtorf. *Lex. Rabbin. s. v.* The secret has been almost simultaneously re-discovered of late years by Fritzsche in Halle, by Benary in Berlin, by Reuss in Strasbourg, and by Hitzig in Heidelberg. See Bleek, *Vorlesungen*, 292 ff.; Krenkel, *Der Apostel Johannes*, 88; Volkmar, *Offenbarung*, 18 and 214.

the haughty and jealous exclusiveness and prejudice of that singular race—feelings which it must be confessed have been due in no small degree to the brutality of their enemies—make them indifferent to the views of others. It is therefore by no means remarkable that the Asiatic Judaists, who first read St. John's Apocalypse, did not betray what they must have easily recognized to be the name corresponding with the number of the Beast. Enough, however, may have escaped them to put others in the right direction, and, as far as the *general* understanding of the Apostle's meaning was concerned, it mattered very little whether the guessed solution was *Lateinos*, or *Teitan*, or *Nero Kesar*, since all three words were but other forms of the same essential thing.

If any confirmation could possibly be wanting to this conclusion, we find it in the curious fact recorded by Irenæus, that, in some copies, he found the reading 616. Now this change can hardly be due to *carelessness*. The letters  $\chi\xi\zeta'$  were so singular, even in their external form, that no one could have been likely to alter them into  $\chi\iota\zeta'$  or 616.<sup>1</sup> But if the above solution be correct, this remarkable and ancient variation is at once explained and accounted for. A Jewish Christian, trying his Hebrew solution, which would (as he knew) defend the interpretation from dangerous Gentiles, may have been puzzled by the *n* in Neron Kesar. Although the name was so written in Hebrew, he knew that to Romans, and Gentiles generally, the name was always Nero Cæsar, not Neron. But Nero Kesar in Hebrew, omitting the final *n*, gave 616 not 666; and he may have altered the reading because he imagined that, in an unimportant particular, it made the solution more suitable and easy.

One objection will at once be made to this solution. Nero, it will be said, never did return. The belief in his

<sup>1</sup> ἐξήκοντα δέκα ξξ is the reading of the Codex Ephraemi.

return, though it shewed an obstinate vitality, was a mere chimæra. St. John could not have enshrined in his Apocalypse what turned out to be but a popular mistake.

Such an objection is entitled to respect, and I have no space to give it the full answer which it deserves. All that I can now say is that this belief about Nero's return *did* prevail in the Christian, no less than in the Pagan, world. In the Pagan world it led to the success of more than one false Nero. In the Christian world it originated a belief which was still existent three centuries later, that Nero would return in person as the future Antichrist. The vividness of the contemporary belief must be measured by its extraordinary permanence.

But we have no right to frame our interpretation of Scripture by our *a priori* theories respecting the character and limits of its inspiration. Our duty is to discover its interpretation, and to be guided by this to the true theory of its claims. When we study the meaning of a passage we must try fairly to get at the meaning, and not repudiate that meaning in obedience to *a priori* convictions.

In reality, however, this question is not one which in any way affects the dignity of revelation. St. John uses the common belief, as he might have used any other contemporary fact, or any contemporary but erroneous scientific conception, to help him in the elaboration of his symbol, and to enable him to point out the person whom he is describing. The mere arrangement of the symbolism affects in no wise the truth of the great *principles* which he reveals. The Divine hopes and consolations of which the Apocalypse is full, the priceless lessons in which it abounds, are not in the slightest degree affected by the circumstance that he depicts the Neronian Wild Beast in the colours which every other historian, whether secular or sacred, would have used to describe him.

It should also be observed that the Apocalyptic method

differs wholly from the Prophetic, and appears to stand—if the expression may be used—upon a lower level of predictive insight, as though it sprang from a less intense degree of inspiration.

Yet even if this detail of Nero's personal return had been meant to be in any way essential to the general prediction, it cannot be said that it has in any way failed. Although Nero had not (as was popularly supposed) taken refuge among the Parthians, and never was restored by their aid, as was the common expectation of that day, yet this record of the actual Nero belongs in no way to the essence of the Apocalypse. Every successive Antichrist has shewn the Neronian characteristics. If the prophecy of the return of Elijah the Prophet was adequately fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophecy of the returning Nero was adequately fulfilled in Domitian, in Decius, in Diocletian, in many a subsequent persecutor of the saints of God.

If these considerations are not satisfactory to those Christians who hold the mechanical and superstitious theory of verbal dictation, they must at least account for the unmistakable clearness with which Nero is pointed out; they must furnish an even approximately satisfactory explanation of the number of the Beast; they must give some other clue to the meaning of the Apocalyptic symbolism which can command the assent of criticism at its present stage; they must account for the fact that recent exegesis has only *revived* the theory which was suggested by a Father who had talked with a pupil of St. John. Of all the books of the Bible, there is not one which, in spite of strong external evidence, has been received with so much hesitation and doubt as this. Not to speak of the doubts of Gaius the Presbyter, of Dionysius of Alexandria, of Euseb-<sup>1</sup>ius,<sup>1</sup> and of the remarkable omission of the book from

<sup>1</sup> Euseb. *H. E.* iii. 39.

the Peshito-Syriac, Luther never withdrew his remark, that "for many reasons he regarded the book as neither Apostolic nor Prophetic."<sup>1</sup> Probably, as we may judge from his own remarks, this unwarrantable judgment arose from a deficient acquaintance with the necessary characteristics of the Apocalyptic style. Zwingle also "did not regard the book as Biblical," and Ecolampadius, Bucer, and Carlstadt, shared his doubts. I regard the book as both Apostolic and Prophetic, and it abounds in chapters inestimably precious. No discovery of its real immediate significance—which the Seer himself announces at the very opening—will obliterate the meaning of its wider import in those prophecies which, like all true prophecies, have "springing and germinant developments." Nothing but the true solution can put an end to the scandal of endless conjectural schemes of interpretation, each more arbitrary and baseless than the last, and none of them commanding more than the most partial and temporary assent. It is these fantastic attempts to wrest the meaning of the book, for purposes of Protestant or Roman Catholic controversy, which have made so many Christians regard it as an insoluble enigma, and even speak of it in terms of positive disrespect. We shall not lose our reverence for it, nay, it will acquire a fresh and intense interest, when once we understand what was its real primary meaning, and when we bear in mind that allegory is only susceptible of allegorical explanation.

FREDERIC W. FARRAR.

<sup>1</sup> *Preface of 1522.*