

Nero, the Christians and the Jews in Tacitus and Clement of Rome

The fire that destroyed most of Rome in 64 A.D. is best known of all the fires of ancient Rome because of the very detailed report that was written on it by Tacitus⁽¹⁾. Significant information was also left behind by Suetonius⁽²⁾, Dio Cassius⁽³⁾, and other ancient authors. This tragic fire and its aftermath have been discussed by scholars and there has resulted an enormous amount of literature⁽⁴⁾.

In simple outline, the fire started on July 19, burnt for six days and seven nights, when finally it apparently ended, but then it started again and was not finally extinguished until the ninth day. According to Tacitus, only four of the fourteen districts of Rome remained intact. What was even more disastrous was that numerous public buildings were damaged or even destroyed.

The responsibility for the fire is of course an important question. Of the earliest surviving sources, Pliny the Elder⁽⁵⁾, Suetonius and Dio Cassius all, without hesitation, put the blame on Nero. Only Tacitus expresses, perhaps only a formal, doubt saying that the disaster was due either to the Emperor Nero or an accident.

According to Tacitus, Nero was deeply troubled when rumours spread that the fire had been authored by him and every Imperial effort to put an end to this rumour proved useless. Then mysteriously – and here starts Tacitus' inventive dramatization of Roman history – Nero received the idea that the Christians (of whom he perhaps had not even heard before) would be ideal candidates for scapegoats: 'that they were being hated and loathed by the populace and that thus regarded as capable of committing any crime'. The idea of transferring the blame from Nero to the Christians was – according to Tacitus – thus carried out to save the Emperor from his embarrassing situation.

The rest of this high drama is given in Tacitus' famous Latin text and its generally accepted interpretation appears, on the surface, to be straightforward.

(1) *Annales*, XV, 38-44.

(2) *Nero*, 38 ; 16, 2.

(3) LXVII, 16.

(4) For a list of books and articles on the subject, see Paul KERESZTES, *The Imperial Roman Government and the Christian Church. I. From Nero to the Severi*, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 23 (Berlin, 1979), pp. 248 ff.

(5) *H.N.*, XVII, 1, 5.

ward enough ⁽⁶⁾: "Therefore, first, those who confessed ⁽⁷⁾ and, then, on the information supplied by them, a vast number of them were arrested and convicted ⁽⁸⁾ by no means of the crime of arson but rather of their hatred of the human race". After this there follows a very vivid and gory description of the execution of all these Christians.

This narrative by Tacitus appears to be so well settled that there are only a few "minor" problems that keep coming up to ruffle the calm surface of Tacitus' story about the aftermath of the fire of Rome and Nero's apparent involvement in this episode.

The phrase *qui fatebantur* ⁽⁸⁾, according to traditional, but rather unsatisfactory interpretation, means either "those who confessed" to having committed arson, or "those confessing" Christianity. This is a certainly critical problem that, if the traditional interpretation is accepted, raises the question of responsibility for the fire. Classical authors are, as already mentioned, almost unanimous in blaming Nero for the fire. Even Tacitus, throughout his account of the origin and the course of the fiery destruction of most of Rome, implies by insinuation the responsibility of Nero. Also, the great majority of modern scholars regard the Christians as innocent of firing Rome in 64 A.D. ⁽⁹⁾.

Of the ancients, Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius do not even connect the Christians with the fire *in any way*. It is only Tacitus and Sulpicius Severus ⁽¹⁰⁾, apparently following Tacitus, who mention the fire and the Christians together. In fact, some modern writers ⁽¹¹⁾ even deny the authenticity of Tacitus' text for mentioning the Christians in relation to the fire.

The phrase *subdidit reos* ⁽¹²⁾ is an explicit absolution by Tacitus of the Christians of the crime of arson. The phrase *qui fatebantur* then must not mean a confession of arson, although it probably means more than just a confession of Christianity.

The reading of *conuicti sunt* ⁽¹³⁾ has remained relatively unchallenged. But it should, perhaps, be replaced with *coniuncti sunt*, the version of the most ancient

(6) *Annales*, XV, 44 : *Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud perinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis conuicti sunt.*

(7) Presumably their Christianity.

(8) If the correct reading is *conuicti sunt* and not *coniuncti sunt*.

(9) Exceptions are, e.g., C. PASCAL, *L'incendio di Roma e i primi cristiani* (Torino, 1900); ID., *Di una nuova fonte per l'incendio neroniano*, in *Atene e Roma*, 4 (1901); L. HERRMANN, *Quels chrétiens ont incendié Rome ?*, in *Rev. belge de philol. et d'hist.*, 17 (1949), p. 633-651.

(10) *Chron.*, II, 29.

(11) E.g. Charles SAUMAGNE, *Tacite et Saint Paul*, in *Revue historique*, 232 (1964), p. 67-110; ID., *Les incendiaires de Rome et les lois pénales des Romains*, *ibid.*, 227 (1962), p. 337-360.

(12) *Annales*, XV, 44.

(13) *Annales*, XV, 44.

ms for the *Annals* of Tacitus, the *codex Mediceus*. This reading has been lately preferred or at least noted as an alternative by many interpreters and editors (14). The more traditional, but later *conuicti sunt* is favoured by others. Some (15) argue that the *coniuncti sunt* does not make sense while *conuicti sunt* does, since the latter phrase "expresses the result of a trial, implies condemnation, and neatly introduces the passage that deals with the execution of the condemned". It is of course possible that the *coniuncti sunt* is the result of corruption, certainly not of correction. The *conuicti sunt*, on the other hand, may be the result of either corruption or, more likely, of intentional correction, since the *conuicti sunt* may indeed appear to make better sense in the context of an apparent trial and execution of some condemned criminals.

The phrase *odium humani generis* has long been connected with the ideas of *misanthropia* (16). This phrase in Ciceronian terminology would mean something like dereliction of one's duties towards the community of men, a separation from the rest of society. Applying the term against the Christians, this would mean practically the same as the celebrated charge that was brought against the Jews, namely, that they were fiercely loyal to their own kind and ever ready to exercise acts of mercy, but that they evinced hostility and aversion towards all others (17). Could this so-called *odium* be a basis for condemnation? There should be no serious doubt that this quite abstract *odium* without concrete proof of crimes could be subject to juridical condemnation to death in view of the indubitable fact that Tacitus' Christians were tried by the *cognitio* process of one of the high magistrates of Rome, perhaps the *praefectus urbi*. A judge at a trial of this kind would deal with crimes not covered by the *ordo iudiciorum publicorum*, such as the rare offences of arson and offences against the state religion. He would dispense justice by the personal discretionary power deriving from his *imperium* (18). The accusers would make allegations of misdeeds, but the judge would make up his mind about the formulation of the charges, and he would freely make his judgement and freely determine the punishment. The trial of these

(14) E. CUQ, *De la nature des crimes imputés aux chrétiens d'après Tacite*, in *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire*, 6 (1886), p. 115-138; K. BÜCHNER, *Tacitus über die Christen*, in *Aegyptus*, 33 (1958), p. 181-192; J. B. BAUER, *Tacitus und die Christen*, in *Gymnasium*, 64 (1957), p. 499 ff., *et al.*

(15) E.g. J. BEAUJEU, *L'incendie de Rome en 64 et les chrétiens* (Berchem-Bruxelles, 1960), p. 28.

(16) E. ZELLER, *Das odium humani generis der Christen*, in *Zeitschr. f. wiss. Theol.*, 34 (1891), p. 356 ff.; H. FUCHS, *Tacitus über die Christen*, in *Vig. Christ.*, 4 (1950), p. 82 ff.; BEAUJEU, *op. cit.*, p. 30 f.; R. FREUDENBERGER, *Das Verhalten der römischen Behörden gegen die Christen im 2. Jahrhundert* (München, 1967), p. 183 f.; *et al.*

(17) TACITUS, *Hist.*, V, 5, 1.

(18) R. A. BAUMAN, *The 'leges iudiciorum publicorum' and their Interpretation in the Republic, Principate and Later Empire*, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang d. römischen Welt*, II, 13 (Berlin, 1980).

Christians in Tacitus' story may be illustrated by the trial of Christ by the governor of Judaea about thirty years earlier. The charges against Christ were not covered either by the *ordo iudiciorum publicorum*, but were allegations of some particular undesirable actions on which Pontius Pilate was asked to judge. The accusers of Christ made various allegations and the governor had to decide, on his own discretion, what to make of them. Although we cannot be certain, Pilate probably settled on the alleged crime of insurrection as the basis of his condemnation of Christ.

In the case of Tacitus' Christians, he himself admits that arson was certainly *not* the basis of their condemnation, but at the same time, he says that they were condemned "of hatred of the human race". Although some scholars worry that "hatred of the human race" can scarcely be regarded as a specific basis for condemnation, this should cause no concern in view of the loose and arbitrary process of the *cognitio extra ordinem*. The Christians of Tacitus could certainly be convicted *on account of* their alleged "hatred of the human race". Nevertheless, to say, as the traditional version of Tacitus' relevant text does⁽¹⁹⁾, that the Christians were convicted "of hatred of the human race" sounds absurd even in the context of the undoubtedly arbitrary process of the *cognitio extra ordinem*.

The *coniuncti sunt* of the ancient *codex Mediceus* would certainly eliminate this apparent absurdity. With *coniuncti* in the text, the interpretation of this critical passage would be as follows: "Therefore, first, those who confessed⁽²⁰⁾ and, then, on the information supplied by them, a vast number of them were arrested and they were [both] joined together by no means *in* the crime of arson but rather *in* their hatred of the human race". In spite, however, of its apparent absurdity when interpreted together with *in ... odio humani generis*, the phrase *conuicti sunt* is generally retained in view of its "better sense" in the context of the trial situation and the subsequent execution of the Christians.

Nevertheless, we should perhaps consider the replacement of the *conuicti* with *coniuncti*. If *coniuncti sunt* is Tacitus' original phrase, its application would not only remove an apparent absurdity, but also it would mean good philology and even better historiography. The replacement of *conuicti sunt* with *coniuncti sunt* may well help us to place the short but critical passage of Tacitus dealing with the trial and condemnation of the Christians after the fire of 64 A.D. into a different context, *i.e.* out of the context of the fire of Rome.

It is, as already mentioned, only Tacitus who connects the Neronian persecution of the Christians with the fire of Rome. Other authors appear to offer a different context for it, or, they are apparently ignorant of the Tacitean version.

It is of the greatest significance that Suetonius, writing about both the fire and the punishment of the Christians by Nero, makes no connection at all between

(19) *Annales*, XV, 44 ... *in ... odio humani generis conuicti sunt*.

(20) Presumably their Christianity.

these two events. In chapter 38 of his *Nero*, he writes about the fire of 64 A.D. in great detail. Elsewhere ⁽²¹⁾, he also speaks of Nero's post-fire activities. In chapter 16, he briefly mentions Nero's punishment of the Christians – far removed from his story of the fire, and without any connection whatsoever.

It is entirely impossible to believe that Tertullian – the great Tertullian engaged in his great work ⁽²²⁾ of defending Christianity against all imaginable accusations by its enemies – it is simply impossible to accept that he would not so much as have mentioned the fire if Christians had been punished for it or in connection with it.

Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Chronicle* ⁽²³⁾, mentions both the fire and the punishment of the Christians by Nero, and places the fire to 64 A.D. and the massacre of the Christians to 68 A.D., at a distance of four years. He also mentions the persecution of the Christians by Nero in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* ⁽²⁴⁾. But Eusebius, incredibly, makes no connection between the two events. St. Jerome, of course, follows Eusebius.

That the charge of incendiarism is not mentioned and the persecution of the Christians is not connected with the fire by *any* of the many Christian apologists is very significant, and it cannot be said they were keeping an embarrassed silence, since they were indeed willing and eager to raise any question concerning Christianity and to defend it against *all* charges. On the other hand, not a single anti-Christian polemist knows or speaks of any charge of incendiarism. Is it not quite unthinkable to believe that a Celsus ⁽²⁵⁾ would not have brought up this charge if ever there had existed one? They must have believed that the Christians were put down by Nero for an entirely different reason, namely, for being such as they were, *i.e.* for being Christians.

On our part, we must conclude, firstly, that Tacitus was wrong in connecting the Great Fire of Rome with Nero's punishment of the Christians. Ever purposeful in his choice of themes and characters, Tacitus shows himself in his writings as a supreme dramatist and a tragic writer of history. By joining together the Christians, the outcasts of Roman society, and Nero, equally, if not more, hated by the Romans, and by joining together the fire of Rome and the massacre of the Christians, the Roman historian paints a tragedy in sheer black – and all this only, perhaps, to make the character of Nero appear even blacker. By painting the Christians as the vilest and most abominable members of society and expressing obvious satisfaction at their horrible punishment by such a man as

(21) *Nero*, 31.

(22) *Ad nationes*; *Apologeticus*, and other works.

(23) *ad loc.*

(24) II, xxv, 1-8.

(25) in his Ἀληθῆς λόγος.

Nero himself – despite their admitted innocence of arson – Tacitus the dramatist fulfils his chief duty as historian in putting on record evil men and their evil deeds.

While considering the historicity of the massacre of the Christians by Nero as being beyond question, we must, secondly, conclude that we have to place the massacre in an entirely different context – the context of a relationship between Christians and a *group of people that, naturally, would and, also, could bring about the tragedy of the Christians in Rome*. Looking at the critical text of Tacitus⁽²⁶⁾ let us try to interpret or rather reconstruct it in this new context: ‘A powerful anti-Christian lobby – perhaps in the same fashion as it had worked about 35 years earlier – enlightened the Emperor Nero and his court about a group of people, the Christians, by saying that they were not worshipping the gods of Rome but rather a criminal crucified by the Roman governor of Judaea for making himself a king; and that they were expecting him to come again as a king over all the world, including naturally the Roman Empire – and not excepting Nero himself. Nero’s men, perhaps Tigellinus and his cohorts, or others, would arrest the leaders of the Christians, Peter and Paul and others who were probably preaching and proclaiming Christianity openly⁽²⁷⁾, since Christianity was at this point not regarded as an illegal religion; the most willing testimony of these leaders of the Church would of course corroborate the rather vague accusations of the anti-Christian lobby and on the testimony of these leading Christians, then, a great multitude of Christians would be arrested and together with their leaders, condemned and put to death’. All this would, probably, happen only after the religion of the Christians as such was condemned as a wicked and anti-Roman superstition and its followers forbidden to profess this superstition.

Suetonius⁽²⁸⁾ seems to put the punishment of the Christians in this same context, saying that “the Christians were punished by Nero for their novel and wicked superstition”. Suetonius makes this statement in his list of Nero’s few but praiseworthy legislative acts.

Who were the people who would wish to destroy Christianity?

Suetonius lists among Claudius’ many praiseworthy acts his expulsion of the Jews from Rome⁽²⁹⁾ because they were continually fighting among themselves at the instigation of one “Chrestus”. Assuming that this “Chrestus” really meant Christ, the otherwise puzzling text makes good sense: ‘Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, because the Jews and Jewish Christians of Rome were continually fighting among themselves about whether or not Christ was the expected Messiah’.

(26) *Annales*, XV, 44.

(27) *Annales*, XV, 44 ... *qui fatebantur*

(28) *Nero*, 16.

(29) *Claudius*, 25, 4 : *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*.

The *Acts of the Apostles* presents a very similar picture of Jewish and Christian relations. It is clear, from its very early chapters on to the very last one, that the Christians, mainly Jewish Christians, but particularly Paul, unwillingly, provoked the deadly hostility of the Synagogue and its leaders. Some of the Apostles and leading figures of Christianity were put to death by them⁽³⁰⁾ and others handed over to the pagans and provincial governors to be tried for their lives⁽³¹⁾. The Jewish leaders wished nothing more than Paul's death. When Paul, after his appeal to the Emperor, finally came to Rome⁽³²⁾, he experienced the same deadly hostility on the part of the representatives of the Synagogue.

Concerning the fate of "Tacitus' Christians" and the reason for their condemnation, the best testimony is probably coming from Clement, according to solid tradition, the third or fourth Bishop of Rome. A jewel of ancient Christian doctrine, his work, known as the *Prima Clementis*, appears to be invaluable for the solution of our problem, since it gives rare details of the Neronian persecution and the author seems to claim⁽³³⁾ to have been an eyewitness of the punishment of the first Roman martyrs of Christianity.

Clement states⁽³⁴⁾ that both Peter and Paul, unquestionably under Nero, were persecuted, condemned, and put to death through jealousy and envy. These leaders of the Church, then, were joined, according to Clement⁽³⁵⁾, by a great multitude of other Christian martyrs as victims of jealousy.

Where is the source of this jealousy and envy to be found ?

It is very significant for our purpose to find that Clement adds to this information that all these Christians were giving testimony to their faith ἐν ἡμῶν⁽³⁶⁾. This means that Clement and many others of the Church in Rome were eyewitnesses of the suffering and death of these martyrs and that they were also aware of the events leading to this massacre by Nero.

Prior to his statement that Peter and Paul and the great multitude of the Christian martyrs were the victims of jealousy and envy, Clement, to warn the Church in Corinth, discusses⁽³⁷⁾ some very harmful and even at times very tragic results of jealousy and envy in the history of God's Chosen People. These victims of jealous brothers were Abel, Jacob and Joseph, while Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and King David were victimized by their own fellow-people. Dathan and Abiram were victims of their own rebellious jealousy.

(30) *Acts*, 7 ; 12.

(31) E.g. *Acts*, 21-26 ; an other passages.

(32) *Acts*, 28.

(33) VI, 1 ; LXIII, 3.

(34) V, 1-7.

(35) VII, 1.

(36) VI, 1.

(37) III-IV.

It is at this point that Clement brings up Peter and Paul together with their fellow martyrs of Rome as victims of jealousy.

Clement never, not even with one word, blames Nero, or the Roman authorities, as the persons whose jealousy originated or brought about the massacre of the Roman Christians.

Who would, in Rome, out of jealousy, wish to cause the end of the young and growing Christian Church? The context of the Roman tragedy rather suggests that it was the result of fratricidal jealousy similar to the examples just mentioned from the history of the Chosen People.

Who were these brothers who both would and could destroy their Christian brothers around them? As already mentioned⁽³⁸⁾, the Emperor Claudius, some time during his reign, but probably toward the end of the 40's, expelled the Jews from Rome. Since many, probably most of the Christian community in Rome at this time were of Jewish origin, many Christians, as a result of Claudius' order, were expelled together with their non-Christian Jewish brothers⁽³⁹⁾. It is significant that the Jews and their Christian Jewish brothers had to leave Rome because of their continual fighting concerning, no doubt, the mission of Christ. Numerous passages in the *Acts of the Apostles*, but, especially its last chapter⁽⁴⁰⁾, clearly shows the deadly hostility provoked by the Apostles and, especially, by Paul proclaiming Christ as the long-expected Messiah. According to his custom, Paul met in Rome the leaders of the Synagogue and many other Jews⁽⁴¹⁾ and tried to convince them that Christ was the Messiah they were waiting for. He convinced some, but was repulsed by many others of his Jewish brothers.

The final words of the *Acts*⁽⁴²⁾ aptly describe the zeal and success of Paul in his missionary work in Rome: "... and he welcomed all who came to him, preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ *with all boldness and unhindered*".

There can be little doubt that, seeing the activities and the great success of Paul and other leaders of the Church in Rome, such as Peter, the Synagogue, moved by jealousy and envy, enlightened, as explained above, Nero and the Imperial government about a sect waiting for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Thus Peter and Paul and many others, according to Clement⁽⁴³⁾, were arrested, condemned and after many tortures, put to death.

Interestingly, some phrases of the *Prima Clementis*⁽⁴⁴⁾ are reminiscent of

(38) *above*; SUETONIUS, *Claudius*, 25, 4.

(39) *Acts of the Apostles*, 18, 1-3.

(40) *Acts*, 28, 17-29.

(41) *Acts*, 28, 30-31.

(42) 28.

(43) V.

(44) VI.

certain phrases in Tacitus (45). Clement, speaking of the massacre, says that a "great multitude", *πολύ πλῆθος*, "was joined", *συνηθροίσθη*, to the Christian leaders, i.e. Peter and Paul, in being condemned and, after terrible tortures, put to death. In Tacitus we read similarly that a "great multitude, *multitudo ingens*, "were joined", *coniuncti sunt* (46), to the leaders, *qui fatebantur*, in being arrested, condemned, and, after tortures put to death.

Traditional interpretations of the phrase *qui fatebantur* as meaning "those who confessed" supposedly either to the crime of arson or to belonging to the sect of the Christians, with strong preference to the second interpretation, are very weak and certainly unsatisfactory. It is very difficult to visualize how some Christians of Tacitus (47) were first arrested *after* confessing their faith. Were the police going around in Rome and looking for Christians? Did they have to go to the Jewish and Christian ghettos of Rome to look for Christians? And why would they be looking for Christians, since Christianity, at this time, was not illegal in Roman law? Paul and the other apostles of Christianity were, at this stage, preaching the new way with complete openness. They had nothing to be afraid of in Roman law. They had their troubles only with the Synagogue and other ethnic groups. Roman governors, such as Gallio (48), Felix (49) and Festus (50), found Paul completely blameless in his activities as a Christian preacher. Paul, according to his custom in his missionary travels across the Roman Empire, was preaching openly, and was acting in similar fashion, together, no doubt with Peter and other apostles at this very time in Rome when this tragedy, some time after the fire, was about to take place in the Christian community of Rome. Paul, Peter and other leaders of the Christian Church in Rome were undoubtedly *openly preaching and proclaiming*, (*qui fatebantur*) (51) the message of Christ (52).

Thus, when the Synagogue denounced the Christian sect as something anti-Roman, Nero's police did not have to look for the leaders of Christianity. They were in the open, *preaching, fatebantur*. And when arrested, these leaders, Peter, Paul, and others, most willingly revealed the whereabouts and even, perhaps, the identity of the great multitude of their sect.

(45) *Annales*, XV, 44.

(46) This phrase would certainly make just as good a sense in Tacitus' doubtful text as Clement's similar phrase, *συνηθροίσθη*, does in his text. That, first, the leaders and, then, the great multitude were arrested, makes good logic in Tacitus' text as well as in Clement's.

(47) *primum correpti qui fatebantur*.

(48) *Acts*, 18, 12-16.

(49) *Acts*, 24, 1-26.

(50) *Acts*, 25.

(51) For this meaning see, CAESAR, *Bellum Alex.*, 58, 3; CICERO, *Ad Fam.*, 10, 23, 4; MARTIAL, 12, 32, 16; *et al.*

(52) The *imperfect* tense of Tacitus very properly indicates a habitual behaviour on the part of the apostles, a circumstance completely lost in the traditional interpretation.

Thus they died condemned not *of* but *because of* their alleged *odium humani generis*. But Tacitus' Christians would have suffered, I suggest, in the wrong context, the context of the Great Fire of Rome, while the Christians of Clement, a few years after the fire, in fact, suffered in the right context, the context of the deadly hatred of the Synagogue and the outlawing of Christianity by the Emperor Nero.

Up to this moment, enjoying the goodwill and even the protection of Roman Law and authorities, the Christian Sect, from now on, experienced many cruel persecutions by Imperial Rome, and added thousands more to the first martyrs of Nero, until Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, made the Church free and Christian worship legal again.

University of Waterloo, Ontario.

Paul KERESZTES.