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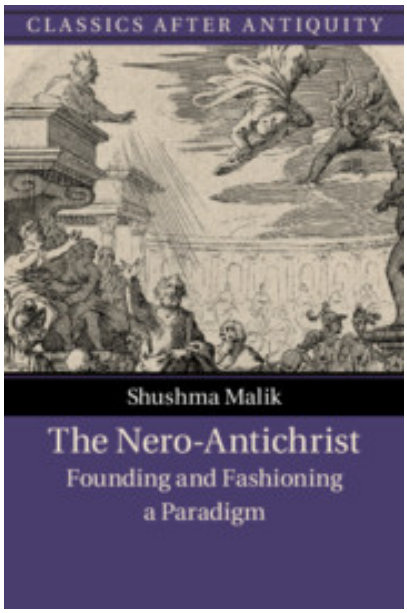

Shushma Malik

The Nero-Antichrist: Founding and Fashioning a Paradigm

Classics after Antiquity

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History has given us several Neros: the matricide, the actor, the persecutor, the fiddler, the pyromaniacal architect of Rome's skyline, the emperor with bad press. The list would be incomplete without adding man of lawlessness, antichrist, and beast. In the late fourth century, Sulpitius Severus (363–425 CE) recalled a conversation with Martin of Tours, who told him that the end was near because Nero had returned from the dead and the antichrist, conceived by an evil spirit, had reached boyhood and was living somewhere in the eastern empire (*Dial*. 2.14). Augustine also knew people who believed things like that. But unlike Sulpitius Severus, who evidently was spellbound by such tales, he was "much astonished at the great presumption of those who venture such guesses" (*Civ*. 20.19). The chief aim of Shushma Malik's *The Nero-Antichrist* (which originated as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Bristol under the direction of Shelley Hales) is to investigate the circulation of history's many Neros and their venturesome guessers, especially the one that has enjoyed an apocalyptic career by way of ancient and modern commentary as well as in fiction and, in these later days, film. She has furnished us with an excellent and ambitious monograph that will repay the attention of New Testament scholars, early church historians, and those who research the reception of biblical texts and Christian tradition. The book is a superb work of reception history, which is to say that it aims to recover "a picture of Nero reception in early Christian history by looking at a sequence of responses to his reign" (12). Malik's monograph has found the right home in Cambridge University Press's Classics after Antiquity series, since Nero has made numerous appearances in Christian tradition as well as popular culture.

One of the planks of the book's thesis is that New Testament scholars have incorrectly identified the beast of Rev 12:11–18 and 17:4–12 and in doing so reveal themselves to be a later chapter in a reception history that stretches back over millennia. The first person unequivocally to identify Nero as the beast was Victorinus of Pettau (250–303) in his commentary on the book of Revelation; he appears as antichrist for the first time in Commodian's (fl. 250) *Poem of the Two Peoples* and in the anonymous, Donatist, Liber genealogus (ca. 405). These authors, she argues, were part of the development of what she calls "the Antichrist paradigm" (1 n. 2), by which she means the coalescence of Nero's career as, alongside Revelation's beast, the arch villain and first persecutor of the early church, the murderer of Peter and Paul, "the man of lawlessness" of 2 Thess 2:3–10, and the antichrist of 1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3, and 2 John 7. Projection of Nero back onto these texts established the emperor's reputation across time and space. But this was not the only product of such retrojection. He appeared again in the nineteenth and twentieth century after several centuries of dormancy (Malik leapfrogs Nero's prolific posthumous career on a multitude of medieval, Reformation, and early modern stages, one of the more colorful ones being an appearance in lines 2463–2550 fo Chaucer's *The Monkes Tale* as angler in hell catching fish with golden nets and dissector of his mother's womb to see where baby emperors come from). Ernst Renan's *Antichrist* (1873) as well as a variety of Victorian figures such as F. W. Farrar and Oscar Wilde revived Nero. They were part of a wave of nineteenth-century authors who were involved in lively discussion of Nero among Victorian Christians, classicists, and decadents (as in the case of Wilde, who prior to his imprisonment and reception into the Catholic Church, sported a Neronian haircut copied from an imperial bust he saw in the Louvre). Thus when New Testament commentators of the book of Revelation from the early twentieth century onward started identifying the beast of Rev 12 and 17 with Nero they were unknowingly captive to a long cultural tradition that had predetermined what they would find when they turned to the text to look for it. While Malik doubt on the hypothesis that Nero is the beast of Revelation, her main goal is to furnish case studies in reception history in order to uncover the ways in which Nero has been interpreted and culturally reproduced in different modes as a historical and cultural figure.

The arc of Malik's argument is necessarily long. After the introduction, which identifies the type of reception history she wishes to undertake, the book proceeds through three chronologically arranged chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter considers the identification by scholars of the past two hundred years of Nero as the Apocalypse's beast; the second takes up the production of Nero as arch villain, anti-Christ, and beast by Christians of late antiquity; the third narrates the unfolding of Nero's career from the perspective of a variety of Victorian and then twentieth-century accounts; the epilogue follows Nero's career in twentieth- and twenty-first century film and television. The chronological structure is clever because it implicitly invites a return to the first chapter to consider ways in which contemporary exegetes have fallen under the spell of the Nero as antichrist paradigm.

The first chapter chronicles the ways in which scholars from the early twentieth century onward linked Revelation's picture of the beast's seven heads, one of them wounded and healed (13:3), with the *Nero redivivus* legend, namely, the popular expectation following the account of the emperor's demise that the emperor had not been assassinated but escaped to the eastern empire, where he was amassing troops to return to Rome to avenge his usurpers. Most of Revelation's leading English-language commentators accepted the attribution; a few others, following German exegetes, did not. Malik's explanation for the success of the majority position is central to her project: interpreters begin with the assumption that Nero is the biblical antichrist and then try to use characteristics from biblical books and ancient accounts of the emperor to prove it. They thus (as the argument will show) reveal their captivity to the cultural Nero as antichrist paradigm. Malik joins her voice with others who have cast doubt on the identification of the Nero as *redivivus* beast by reminding readers that Revelation was written for an audience in the eastern Mediterranean far removed from Nero's detractors and (the reports of) his abuses, that Nero was not perceived as a megalomaniac in the east, that he did not persecute Christ-believers outside Rome, and that as a consequence the identification is forced or, more to the point, arises from the cultural power of the Nero antichrist paradigm. Neither do the Johannine references to antichrist or 2 Thessalonians' account of the "man of lawlessness" contain any references to Nero, unless biblical scholars—under the influence of their preunderstanding— look for it. Malik rightly points to the difficulty of making the seven heads and ten crowns of Rev 17:9–12 align with Nero. However, in her desire to reveal the eisegesis of Nero attribution, she does not fully enough recognize the strength of gematria in assigning 666 (alternatively 616) to Nero and rather argues that "the number has been variously attributed to many people and things both in antiquity and throughout history, depending upon the context" (71). This is correct, but various calculations do not logically preclude the correctness of the solution furnished by following the steps of Latin and Hebrew gematria, which, whatever the influence of the larger cultural paradigm and its influences on exegetes, do make the attribution compelling.

The next chapter, the heart of the book, traces the steps of the Nero antichrist paradigm in late antiquity. Malik traces the confluence of a variety of factors to create the paradigm: millennialism (which developed and read back into Revelation the *Nero redivivus* legend); apocryphal treatments of Nero in the second-century Ascension of Isaiah (which blended Jewish apocalyptic with Nero as infernal villain) and in the Jewish-Christian Sibylline Oracles (where, accordingly to Malik, the returning Nero first appears as part of apocalyptic expectation); late antique historiography; and homiletical treatments of Nero as murderer of apostles and ignominious antichrist whose vices Christians were to avoid. Malik shows how each of these resulted in a number of Nero antichrist variations, each culturally fashioned as needed. She usefully gathers together the varying accounts of Nero in late antiquity and masterfully discusses the richness of Nero reception and the emperor's ability to occupy a variety of biographical/apocalyptic careers tailored for different uses. A counterpoint to such uses to these biographies is the scrutiny of classical sources as prejudicial

accounts of the emperor, equally created for differing political ends, sources upon which Christians drew either directly or through other depictions relying on earlier accounts.

Chapter 4 aims to fill a gap in historical examination of the reception of Nero by considering the resurrection of the Nero antichrist paradigm in nineteenth-century France and late Victorian England. Scholars and literary artists alike returned to Nero in a period of fin de siècle religious upheaval, anxiety about the end times, and cultural narratives of decadence and decline. She takes up as case studies treatments of Nero by the French philologist Ernst Renan, the novels of Dean of Canterbury F. W Farrar, and the playwright, novelist, and wit Oscar Wilde. The Nero of each diverged from the one classicists were reconstructing through close scrutiny of ancient reports. As classicists recovered one historical Nero, the emperor as wicked and/or effete was made to play a different role in nineteenth-century causes. Malik argues that Renan, who believed that Nero would literally return at the end of history, in his *Antichrist*, the first modern investigation of the Nero-antichrist legend, depicted an emperor who reflected the philologist's rejection of Pope Pius IX as having corrupted Roman Catholicism through political intrigue and ecclesiastical tyranny. Farrar's fictional accounts of Nero played a didactic role in inculcating Victorian Christian identity by depicting a corrupt Nero opposed to his Christian protagonists' virtues and prepared the way for Nero's adaptation into later literature and film. Wilde in his letters and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* first celebrated Nero as an ideal of artistic decadence after whom to model one's life. During Wilde's imprisonment, the emperor furnished him with a profile to renounce. Throughout her case studies, Malik insightfully identifies ways in which various portraits of imperial Rome and Nero were used to support competing ideals in fin de siècle Europe.

A brief epilogue considers the ways in which Nero has appeared in film and television productions. The gold standard of Nero impersonation was Peter Ustinov's 1951 portrayal of the emperor as an infantile aesthete in the eponymous movie version of Jòzef Ignacy Kraszewki's Polish novel, *Quo Vadis* (which repeatedly refers to the emperor as satan, antichrist, or beast). The depiction influenced the presentation of Nero of BBC I's *I, Claudius* (1976). Michael Sheen's depiction of Nero in the docudrama *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (2006) steered Nero away from the decadent artist toward a violent and cruel demagogue.

This study is a model of reception history. It locates the various cultural productions of Nero along different social horizons of interpretation and cultural appropriation. Through the centuries, the Nero of history and the Julio Claudian of legend have been complexly interwoven. Biblical commentators who seek to identify Nero as the biblical antichrist, the man of lawlessness, and/or the beast should take close note. Nobody who is examining the emperor's historical or fabled relationship to emergent Christianity or his anticipated afterlives at the end of time can afford to ignore this study, if for no other reason than because one also may be entangled in the Nero antichrist paradigm without knowing it.