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Identity and Character of the Beast of Revelation: Rome/Nero

The beast with the seven heads and ten horns represent Rome. As we peruse Chapters 13 and 17 of the Book of Revelation, we are immediately conscious of the role that the beast (**θηρίον**, *thērion*) of these two chapters plays in our interpretation of this apocalyptic book. Does the word *beast* carry within its bosom a two-fold depiction—Rome and Nero? What is the character of the “beast” in these two chapters? An answer to these questions also sheds light on the date of the writing of this book, as already observed in my chapter on “The Date of Revelation: Written Before June AD 68.” This present chapter focuses on both the identity and the character of this beast that worked havoc among the saints of God. It appears from the Book of Revelation that the beast represents both an individual (Nero, see Revelation 13:18 and 17:1-10) as well as a government (Rome, see Revelation 13).

IDENTITY OF THE BEAST

Revelation 13 introduces us to the beast that is extremely terrible—“on each head a blasphemous name” (13:1). John describes the beast this way:

Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” (Revelation 13:4)

John does not leave us in the dark as to the identification of this beast. He begins his detection by saying:

And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. (13:1)¹

¹“**Seven hills**” represent the Seven Hills of Rome: (1) Palatine, (2) Aventine, (3) Caelian, (4) Esquiline, (5) Viminal, (6) Quirinal, and (7) Capitoline. The “**ten horns**” represent the ten provinces within the Roman

As stated above, the beast in the Book of Revelation carries a twofold imagery. John, at times, employs the term beast to describe a kingdom and sometimes to portray a particular person, such as Nero. In other words, John moves back and forth between the generic and specific usages of the word *beast* as he seeks to capture the full import of Rome with its sixth emperor—one who is bestial, or inhuman, in his nature. Satan, according to John, gave the beast (Rome) that came up out of the sea its power (13:2). John’s description of this beast is of a political nature. He speaks of “**ten horns,**” “**seven heads,**” “**ten crowns**” on his horns,” and on the head of each of the seven heads, there is a “blasphemous name” (13:1). John continues to describe this beast that came up out of the sea as a beast of a composite nature—one whose characteristic attributes consist of a leopard, a bear, and a lion (13:2).

Our reflection upon John’s phraseology is reminiscent of Daniel’s vision of animals representing world powers (Daniel 8). John’s narrative, too, points toward civil powers. What world authority does this beast represent? The author of Revelation does not leave us wondering. An angel reveals to John the interpretation of this mystery:

This calls for a mind with wisdom. The **seven heads are seven hills** on which the woman sits.¹⁰ They are **also seven kings**. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while.¹¹ The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.¹² “The **ten horns you saw are ten kings** who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. (Revelation 17:9-12)

The “seven heads are seven hills” represent Rome itself, the city of the famed seven hills. Once more, we detect a dual meaning in the “seven heads.” **The seven heads not only represent the Seven Hills of Rome, but also the first seven emperors of Rome.** The twelfth chapter of Revelation identifies “an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads,” (12:3), which language of political power is also employed in Chapters 13 and 17. The “red dragon” (Satan) uses Rome to “make war against the Lamb” (17:14). Chapter 17 recalls the earlier mention of the onslaught against God’s Son and the Christian community (12:1-6). Listen to John as he depicts in graphic language the onslaught of the empire against the people of God:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.² She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.³ Then another sign appeared in heaven: **an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads**.⁴ His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.⁶ **The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.** (12:1-6)

Empire: (1) Italy, (2) Achaia, (3) Asia, (4) Syria, (5) Egypt, (6) Africa, (7) Spain, (8) Gaul, (9) Britan, and (10) Germany.

The woman represents, so it seems, the church and her child; that is to say, the child represents converts to Christ. Paul describes this woman as “the Jerusalem that is above . . . and she is our mother” (Galatians 4:26). John also describes this same woman in Revelation 21:2: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” The **1,260** days in 12:6 is equivalent to the “**42 months**” given to the Gentiles to “trample on the holy city” (11:1-3). Jesus describes the forty-two months as the “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24). This computation of time represents the number of months that the beast waged war against Jerusalem—**February AD 67 to August AD 70**—and, at the same time, the number of months that Christians went into hiding. In other words, this same calculation of time (**1,260 days**) corresponds to the same point in time that many Christians fled to Pella in order to find refuge from the beast. Jesus spoke of this interlude in His Olivet Discourse:

So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’^b spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—¹⁶ then **let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.**¹⁷ **Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house.**¹⁸ **Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.**¹⁹ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!²⁰ Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.²¹ For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. (Matthew 24:15-21)

Eusebius (AD 260-340), bishop of Caesarea Palaestina, the capital of Judaea province, bears testimony that the church in Jerusalem, before the war, by divine testimony, fled to the mountain country of Pella, which is exactly what Jesus foretold as recorded by Matthew. Eusebius reports that

The people of the church in Jerusalem were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city who were worthy of it to depart and dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they called Pella. To it those who believed on Christ migrated from Jerusalem, that when holy men had altogether deserted the royal capital of the Jews and the whole land of Judaea, the judgment of God might at last overtake them for all their crimes against the Christ and his Apostles, and all that generation of the wicked be utterly blotted out from among men.²

The attack against God’s people by **Nero** began even before the actual attack against Jerusalem in February AD 67. Countless Christians suffered from his diabolical acts, not just in the Jerusalem onslaught. We understand from Revelation 13 and 17 that the “red dragon with seven heads and ten horns” represents the Roman Empire with its emperors. Rome made war with the saints—the bride of Christ. Clement of Rome (AD 30-100), known as the Bishop of

^b Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11

²Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, [Loeb edition, Vol., 153], Vol., 1, Books 1-4, III, v. 3-5 Loeb Classical Library, edited by Jeffrey Henderson and with an English translation by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1926, 2001), 201.

Rome and the first Apostolic Father of the early church, wrote about the atrocities committed against Christians by Nero:

But to stop giving ancient examples, let us come to those who became athletic contenders in quite recent times. We should consider the noble examples of our own generation. **2.** Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most upright pillars were persecuted, and they struggled in the contest even to death. **3.** We should set before our eyes the good apostles. **4.** There is Peter, who because of unjust jealousy bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness he went to the place of glory that he deserved. Because of jealousy and strife Paul pointed the way to the prize for endurance. **6.** Seven times he bore chains; he was sent into exile and stoned; he served as a herald in both the East and the West; and he received the noble reputations for his faith.³

Eusebius, as cited above, also wrote about Nero's madness against the saints of God. He wrote his account of Peter's and Paul's deaths:

When the rule of Nero was now gathering strength for unholy objects he began to take up arms against the worship of the God of the universe. It is not part of the present work to describe his depravity: many indeed have related his story in accurate narrative, and from them he who wishes can study the perversity of his degenerate madness, which made him compass the unreasonable destruction of so many thousands, until he reached that final guilt of sparing neither his nearest nor dearest, so that in various ways he did to death (sic) alike his mother, brothers, and wife, with thousands of others attached to his family, as though they were enemies and foes. But with all this there was still lacking to him this—that it would be attributed to him that he was the first of the emperors to be pointed out as a foe of divine religion. This again the Latin writer Tertullian [AD 160-220] mentions in one place as follows: “Look at your records: there you will find that Nero was the first to persecute this belief when, having overcome the whole East, he was specially cruel in Rome against all. We boast that such a man was the author of our chastisement; for he who knows him can understand that nothing would have been condemned by Nero had it not been great and good.”

In this way then was he the first to be heralded as above all a fighter against God, and raised up to slaughter against the Apostles. It is related that in his time Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified, and the title of “Peter and Paul,” which is still given to the cemeteries there, confirms the story, no less than does a writer of the Church named Caius, who lived when Zephyrinus was Bishop of Rome.⁴

From these citations, we are immediately conscious that Rome became the Devil's agent. Paul was beheaded and Peter was crucified. In the previous chapter of this book (*Biblical Preaching and Teaching*, Vol. 1), the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18 was identified with Nero.⁵ Also, in this earlier section, the sixth king in Revelation 17:10 was also identified as

³Clement of Rome, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, [Loeb edition, Vol., 24], Vol., 1, First Clement 6:1-6, Loeb Classical Library, edited by Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003, 2005), 43-45. The number 1 does not appear in the citation.

⁴Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, [Loeb edition, Vol., 153], Vol., 1, Books 1-4, II, xxv. 2-6 Loeb Classical Library, edited by Jeffrey Henderson and with an English translation by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1926, 2001), 179, 181.

⁵See “The Date of Revelation: Written Before AD 68,” pages 218--240.

Nero.⁶ The internal evidence, as set forth in Chapter 17 of this study dealing with the Book of Revelation, also focused upon statements by John about the “time is near” (1:3). John begins and ends the Book of Revelation with a consciousness that the events portrayed throughout this book are close by, that is to say, at one’s doorsteps. The beast is not some political person two thousand years in the future, but rather, the beast is associated with one of that period, namely, Nero.⁷

Just a casual reading of the first three chapters of Revelation reveals that the beast is related to the first-century Christians, which relevance is discovered in the seven historical churches located in Asia Minor; otherwise, we wonder why John writes: “To the seven churches in the province of Asia” (1:4). This deluge of persecution existed throughout the Empire. This letter is of such urgency that John addresses the seven churches of Asia with his own comments leading up to the words of Jesus Himself:

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.¹⁰ On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,¹¹ which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to **Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.**” (1:9-11)

John identifies his age and time as that persecution which had already begun to take shape and form. In 1:9 he writes,

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Then in his first letter to the churches, he calls attention to the suffering of Christians in *Ephesus*. John writes the direct words of Jesus, not his words, but Jesus’ words: “You have persevered and have **endured hardships** for my name, and have not grown weary” (2:3). Then, John records the words of Christ to the church in *Smyrna*, a church that is about to suffer:

I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what **you are about** (**μέλλεις, melleis**) **to suffer**. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and **you will suffer persecution** for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (2:9-10)

As Jesus addresses the third church—*Pergamum*—He addresses the faithfulness of this church in spite of their trials:

⁶Ibid., 226-240.

⁷See 1:3 and 22:6—reread “The Date of Revelation: Written Before AD 68” of this study for a detailed analysis of the speed with which the coming catastrophe is to occur—the destruction of Jerusalem.

I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. (2:13)

To the church in *Philadelphia*, Jesus issued a waver from the impending persecution:

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon (ἔρχομαι ταχύ, *ercomai tachy*). Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (3:10-11)

As demonstrated above, the beast that came up out of the sea was none other than Rome in a generic sense but in a specific sense Nero. Rome is the ancient city associated or distinguished by its seven mountains, which is also identified as seven kings (17:10).⁸ John writes to seven historical churches in Asia Minor (1:4, 11) to warn them of the impending persecution and, at the same time, to give them words of comfort. Since the Book of Revelation was written to the Christians of the first century, we can understand why John encouraged the churches to read, to hear, and to heed the things recorded in this apocalyptic book.

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (1:3)

In Jesus' first letter to the Ephesians, as found in the Book of Revelation, the Lord Jesus calls attention to the necessity of listening:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (2:7)

Then in the closing of the Book of Revelation, Jesus again expresses the nearness of the events and the necessity of keeping the words of this particular prophecy (Revelation): “Behold, I am coming soon (ἔρχομαι ταχύ, *erchomai tachy*)! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book” (22:7). If we put ourselves into the shoes of those who lived in the first century, we surely would identify the seven-hilled city of Rome as the beast of Revelation 17:10-11. The words in 17:10-11 graphically depict the Roman Empire with its tributaries:

They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is [Nero], the other has not yet come [Galba]; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. ¹¹ The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

We can hardly reflect upon these words of John without a recall of Daniel's words concerning the fourth world empire:

⁸The “**seven kings**” were: (1) Julius Caesar [44 BC], (2) Augustus [27 BC-AD 14], (3) Tiberius [AD 14-37], (4) Gaius/Caligula [AD 37-41], (5) Claudius [AD 41-54], (6) Nero [AD 54-68], and (7) Galba [AD 68-69].

Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others.⁴¹ Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay.⁴² As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle.⁴³ And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.⁴⁴ **In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed**, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. (Daniel 2:40-44)

The army of Rome possessed such power that it could destroy anything in its path. Michael Grant (1914-2004), an English classicist and numismatist, spoke of the Roman army as one of the best in the world:

This situation did not come about all at once. But when it did, it continued for five hundred years and exercised profoundly far-reaching effects on all subsequent history. For this was one of the greatest and most formidable armies that has ever existed.⁹

The army of Rome was in essence a fighting machine. Josephus (AD 37-101), first-century Jewish historian and apologist of priestly and royal ancestry, comments upon the power and effectiveness of this gigantic power, which is the beast that came up out of the Abyss (17:8) and out of the sea (13:1):

This perfect discipline makes the army an ornament of peace-time and in war welds the whole into a single body; so compact are their ranks, so alert their movements in wheeling to right or left, so quick their ears for orders, their eyes for signals, their hands to act upon them. Prompt as they consequently ever are in action, none are slower than they in succumbing to suffering, and never have they been known in any predicament to be beaten by numbers, by ruse, by difficulties of ground, or even by fortune; for they have more assurance of victory than of fortune. Where counsel thus precedes active operations, where the leaders' plan of campaign is followed up by so efficient an army, no wonder that the Empire has extended its boundaries on the east to the Euphrates, on the west to the ocean, on the south to the most fertile tracts of Libya, on the north to the Ister and the Rhine. One might say without exaggeration that, great as are their possessions, the people that won them are greater still.¹⁰

We can say that this beast is none other than Nero, the sixth Emperor of the Roman Empire. Nero was mad with power. Seneca (4 BC-AD 65), Roman Stoic, philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and counselor to Nero, wrote in the first person concerning Nero's arbitrary and unbridled power:

Have I of all mortals found favour with Heaven and been chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods? I am the arbiter of life and death for the nations; it rests in my power what each man's lot and state shall be; by my lips Fortune proclaims what gift she would bestow on each human being; from

⁹Michael Grant, *The Army of the Caesars* (New York: M. Evans & Company, Inc, 1974), xv.

¹⁰Josephus, *The Jewish War*, [Loeb edition, Vol., 487], Books 3-4, iii. v. vii, Loeb Classical Library, translated by H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1927, 1997), 35, 37.

my utterance peoples and cities gather reasons for rejoicing; without my favour and grace no part of the wide world can prosper; all those many thousands of swords which my peace restrains will be drawn at my nod; what nations shall be utterly destroyed, which banished, which shall receive the gift of liberty, which have it taken from them, what kings shall become slaves and whose heads shall be crowned with royal honour, what cities shall fall and which shall rise—this it is mine to decree.¹¹

Nero was born on “December 15th, A.D.37.”¹² Nine days after his birth, in the presence of Caligula, he was given the name Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, but later he came to be known as Nero. Arthur Weigall states: “He came into the world feet first, which was considered a very bad omen.”¹³ Weigall’s comments about Nero’s father may account for Nero’s abominable behavior later in life: “He was a simple, unabashed, downright man, perfectly aware of his sins, and quite frankly untroubled by them.”¹⁴ Suetonius (AD 70-160), an equestrian and a historian during the Roman Empire, too, wrote that the father of Nero was “a man hateful in every walk of life.”¹⁵ Suetonius also records the prediction about his birth in very negative terms:

Many people at once made many direful predictions from his horoscope, and a remark of his father Domitius was also regarded as an omen; for while receiving the congratulations of his friends, he said that ‘nothing that was not abominable and a public bane could be born of Agrippina and himself.’¹⁶

Nero’s character emerged at an early age. He was adopted by Claudius “in the eleventh year of his age” and then “consigned to the training of Annaeus Seneca, who then was already a senator.”¹⁷ The “cruelty of his disposition” became apparent almost immediately after his adoption. When his brother Britannicus, after his adoption, greeted him as Ahenobarbus, Nero immediately tried to convince his father (Claudius) that Britannicus was a ‘changeling.’ Also when his aunt Lepida was accused, he publicly gave testimony against her, to gratify his mother, who was using every effort to ruin Lepida.”¹⁸ After Nero’s mother poisoned Claudius, Nero was proclaimed Emperor. The first five years of his rule was characterized as good government. Later he had Britannicus poisoned and eventually had his mother banished from the palace. After depleting the state funds, funds that had been accumulated by his father, he resorted to confiscation of “estates of rich nobles against whom the new praetorian prefect

¹¹Seneca, *Moral Essays*, Volume 1, [Loeb edition, Vol., 214], “To the Emperor Nero on Mercy,” Book I. i. 2-5, Loeb Classical Library, translated by John W. Basore (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1928, 2003), 357, 359.

¹²Arthur Weigall, *Nero: Emperor of Rome* (London: Thornton Butterworth, Ltd. 1930, 1934), 25.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Volume II, [Loeb edition, Vol., 38], “Nero,” Book vi. iii. v, Loeb Classical Library, edited and translated by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1914, 1997), 89.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

Tigellinus could contrive the slightest charge.”¹⁹ Suetonius also wrote about his wickedness, corruption, law breaking, and so on:

Although at first his acts of wantonness, lust, extravagance, avarice and cruelty were gradual and secret, and might be condoned as follies of youth, yet even then their nature was such that no one doubted that they were defects of his character and not due to his time of life.... He would even break into shops and rob them, setting up a market in the Palace, where he divided the booty which he took, sold it at auction, and then squandered the proceeds. In the strife which resulted he often ran the risk of losing his eyes or even his life, for he was beaten almost to death by a man of the senatorial order, whose wife he had maltreated.²⁰

Once again, Suetonius revealed the sordid life of this beast, the beast that John describes as the beast of the sea. Suetonius wrote:

Besides abusing freeborn boys and seducing married women, he debauched the vestal virgin Rubria. The freedwoman Acte he all but made his lawful wife, after bribing some ex-consuls to perjure themselves by swearing that she was of royal birth. He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his house attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife. And the witty jest that someone made is still current, that it would have been well for the world if Nero’s father Domitius had had that kind of wife.²¹

Tacitus (AD 56-117), senator, consul, governor, and historian of the Roman Empire, also complained about the ruthlessness of this tyrant:

After the slaughter of so many of the noble, Nero in the end conceived the ambition to extirpate virtue herself by killing Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus. To both he was hostile from of old, and against Thrasea there were additional motives; for he had walked out of the senate, as I have mentioned, during the discussion on Agrippina, and at the festival of the Juvenalia his services had not been conspicuous—a grievance which went the deeper that in Patavium, his native place, the same Thrasea had sung in tragic costume at the Games instituted by the Trojan Antenor.²²

Tacitus also gives a graphic description of the horrendous crimes committed against Christians. In his detailed account, we see the ultimate in human depravity. Nero (AD 54-68), according to Tacitus, was responsible for the fire in Rome. In order to throw off suspicion from himself, he accused Christians. The following is Tacitus’ remarks about Nero’s diabolical nature:

¹⁹S. Angus and A. M. Renwick, “Nero,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, four volumes, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 3:521.

²⁰Suetonius, “Nero,” in the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, [Loeb edition, Vol., 38], Vol., 2., XXVI, 123, 124.

²¹*Ibid.*, XXVII, 127.

²²Tacitus, *Annals*, Books XIII--XVI, Vol., 5 [Loeb edition, Vol., 322], Book XVI, Loeb Classical Library, translated by John Jackson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1937, 1999), 367, 369.

Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontitus Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Garden for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.²³

Apollonius of Tyana (4 BC-AD 96), Greek Neopythagorean philosopher, teacher, and a pagan writer, wrote about the bestial nature of Nero. He referred to him as a beast:

Moreover, in traversing more of the earth than any man yet has visited, I have seen hosts of Arabian and Indian wild beasts; but as to this wild beast, which the many call a tyrant, I know not either how many heads he has, nor whether he has crooked talons and jagged teeth. In any case, thought this monster is said to be a social beast and to inhabit the heart of cities, yet he is no much wilder and fiercer in his disposition than animals of the mountain and forest, that whereas you sometimes tame and alter the character of lions and leopards by flattering them, this one is only roused to greater cruelty than before by those who stroke him, so that he rends and devours all alike. And again there is no animal anyhow of which you can say that it ever devours its own mother, but Nero is gorged with such quarry.²⁴

CONCLUSION

The characteristics, mentioned above, reveal the wicked nature of the beast that came up out of the sea (Revelation 13:1-7), which is also described as the sixth king (17:10). A perusal of the original writings of those who lived during this time period reveals that Nero was possessed of an exceedingly depraved and immoral character. Sir Paul Harvey (1869-1948) wrote: "He was of a cruel and unrestrained brutality, with a passion for self-advertisement, especially by spectacular display."²⁵ Miriam T. Griffin goes right to the heart of the opinions about Nero, one of the seven heads on the beast that John witnessed coming up out of the sea. She puts into words the scandal of Nero's reputation:

²³Ibid., XLIV, 283, 285.

²⁴Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol., 1 [Loeb edition, Vol., 16], Book IV. XXXVIII, Loeb Classical Library, translated by F. C. Conybeare (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1917, 2004), 437, 438.

²⁵Sir Paul Harvey, "Nero," in Sir Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 287.

Commenting on the unanimity of opinion about the Emperor Nero that prevails among the ancient authorities, the historian Charles Merivale wrote, ‘With some allowance only for extravagance of colouring, we must accept in the main the verisimilitude of the picture they have left us of this arch-tyrant, the last and the most detestable of the Caesarean family.’ Though there were historians who wrote laudatory accounts while Nero was alive, their verdict was overturned after his death and their works have not survived. It could hardly be otherwise. For Nero was the first Princeps to be declared a public enemy by the Senate. Moreover, his failure as Princeps led to a series of bloody civil wars that recalled the death agonies of the Republic, which had continued to haunt the Roman imagination.²⁶

Griffin’s comments are also informative concerning the early church’s identification of Nero as the “antichrist.” She writes:

In comparable Christian outpourings, Nero is the Anti-Christ whose persecution of the Christians heralds the destruction of Rome. This view of Nero as Anti-Christ continued to be celebrated by the Church Fathers and by later Christian writers. The picture of him as the incarnation of evil triumphed as Christianity triumphed.²⁷

The identity of the beast is none other than Nero. His character is that of wild beasts. In conclusion, it is appropriate to cite Suetonius (AD 70-160) once more concerning the depravity of this emperor. He relates the following story, which narrative reinforces the beastly nature of the beast of Revelation 13 and 17:

He so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust, was finished off by his freedman Doryphorus; for he was even married to this man in the same way that he himself had taken Sporus, going so far as to imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered. I have heard from some men that it was his unshaken conviction that no man was chaste or pure in any part of his body, but that most of them concealed their vices and cleverly drew a veil over them; and that therefore he pardoned all other faults in those who confessed to him their lewdness.²⁸

The next chapter (Chapter 18) in this study focuses upon the “new heaven and the new earth.” As we seek to unravel this phrase found in Holy Scripture, we cannot go to the vast number of commentators on the Book of Revelation for a correct interpretation. If we wish to understand John’s terminology correctly, we must examine the context. Some Christian commentators apply the “new heaven and a new earth” to a refurbished earth, which renewal begins the millennium. One godly expositor sets forth the idea that even the “law of gravity”

²⁶ Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984, 1985), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Volume II, [Loeb edition, Vol., 38], “Nero,” XXIX, Loeb Classical Library, edited and translated by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1914, 1997), 127, 129.

would be revised. Others teach that the literal earth will be destroyed by fire. Chapter 18 seeks to lift individuals above their own ideas, which interpretations have been inherited from their prior training and culture. The thesis of the next chapter calls attention to “the first heaven and first earth” that passed away as referring to apostate Jerusalem in AD 70. The “new heaven and new earth” refers to the new community of God, which is known today as the church.

Israel’s covenant is described as “heaven” and “earth,” which covenant passed away with the overthrow of Jerusalem in AD 70. God then gave a ‘new covenant’ that represents the “Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). Paul elaborates this concept in his Epistle to the Galatians (Galatians 4:21-26).