

14: BURNING ROME, BURNING  
CHRISTIANS\*

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In the year 64 during the Principate of Nero, in the night between July 18 and 19, a fire broke out in Rome that within nine days destroyed or badly damaged a substantial part of the City, leaving many dead or homeless. Rumors circulated that the fire had been set by Nero, who, it was claimed, sought to divert blame from himself by holding responsible a new sect of aggressively proselytizing Jews, known as Christians. Most recent scholarship has rejected the popular view of Nero as an arsonist “who fiddled while Rome burned.”<sup>1</sup> Largely ignored, however, has been the question of whether the Christians, generally regarded as innocent scapegoats of Nero, might in fact have played some role in the fire. This chapter considers the problematic nature of Christianity and Roman attitudes toward Christians in the first century CE and suggests based on this evidence that Christian involvement is not out of the question.

14.1 NERO AND THE FIRE

Of the few surviving ancient accounts of the Great Fire of 64, the most detailed is that of Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.38–44), who wrote in the early second century. Most sources contemporary with Nero say nothing

\* Too late to be incorporated and discussed *in extenso* in my essay is a new article by B.D. Shaw, “The Myth of the Neronian Persecution,” *JRS* 105 (2015) 73–100. I do not agree with Shaw’s major premise that it is most unlikely that Christians were specifically targeted as arsonists, but that they instead suffered punishment – or rather “persecution” – for their faith. Tacitus notes that Christians were punished for arson, but carefully and skillfully leads us to deduce that the real culprit was indeed Nero. In my opinion, the reason that other elite post-Neronian authors omit reference to early “Christianized Jews” in connection with the conflagration is that they were intent upon laying the blame for it at the feet of the tyrannical Nero, rather than the new heretical Jewish sect.

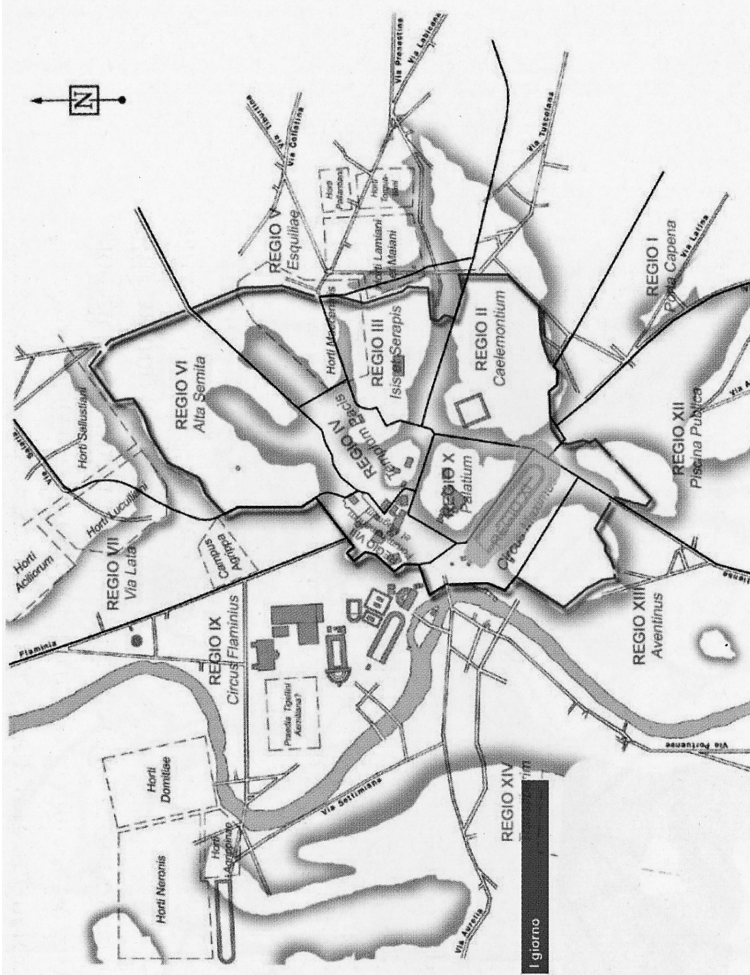
<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Warmington 1969, especially 123–4; Griffin 1984: 133; Wiedemann 1996: 250–1; Dyson 2010: 164–5; Panella 2011b: 85–6. Cf. Champlin 2003: 178–209, especially 191, who is of the opinion that Nero intentionally set the fire to create a new Rome.

about the fire, and it is not mentioned in Juvenal, Martial, or Josephus. Pliny the Elder (*HN* 17.1.5), who hated Nero, merely alludes to “Nero’s conflagration” (*Neronis principis incendia*). The opinions of Nero’s detractors appear to have convinced later authors like Suetonius and Dio of Nero’s culpability. In order to appear objective, Tacitus does not state categorically that Nero was guilty of arson. However, Tacitus leads his reader in that direction by means of innuendo, arrangement of selective facts and suppositions, and at times the presentation of only partial information.

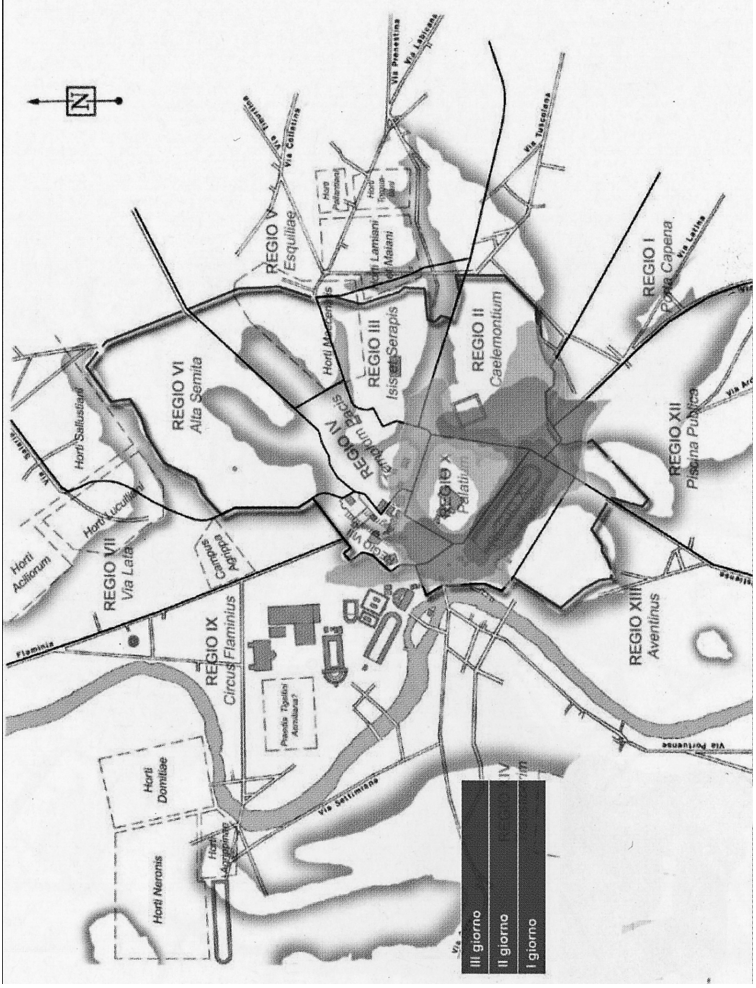
Tacitus begins his narrative by expressing uncertainty as to whether the fire started by chance or by the treachery of Nero (*forte an dolo principis*), since both theories, as he tells us, had their supporters (*nam utrumque auctores prodidere*). At the beginning of his account, Tacitus notes that the fire broke out in the Circus Maximus in the area between the Palatine and Caelian Hills, where shops, jam-packed with flammable goods, were located. Although not generally noted, the fire may have actually started in one of the low-class eating houses or cook shops (*popinae*) along the side of the Circus Maximus, since Suetonius (*Ner.* 16) comments that among the measures Nero took after the fire to help prevent future conflagrations was an ordinance outlawing in such establishments the sale of anything cooked, except for pulse and vegetables.<sup>2</sup> Winds swept the fire along the length of the Circus Maximus both to the northwest toward the Tiber and due east toward the Caelian Hill (Figure 14.1). After spreading up the southwestern slope of the Palatine and over the Caelian, the blaze snaked around to the east and north sides of the Palatine, where it consumed much of the imperial estates that Nero had joined to his own home, the *Domus Transitoria*, as well as a number of the old aristocratic houses on the northeast slope of the Palatine. Only the House of Augustus, it seems, escaped the conflagration (Figure 14.2). Although the fire was extinguished on the sixth day at the foot of the Esquiline Hill, it broke out again on the “Aemilian estates of Tigellinus” (*praediis Tigellini Aemilianis*) (*Tac. Ann.* 15.40). This was perhaps a suburban villa that once belonged to the old noble Aemilian family in the Campus Martius overlooking the Tiber River, but that now belonged to Tigellinus, Nero’s infamous Praetorian commander (Figure 14.3).<sup>3</sup> By the ninth day, Tacitus relates, perhaps with some exaggeration (*Ann.* 15.41), that when the blaze was finally

<sup>2</sup> Although Dio (62.14) reports this ordinance under the year 62, it would seem more likely to date after the fire of 64. There may also have been concerns about foods like fatty meats that required higher temperatures to cook and therefore necessitated greater flames.

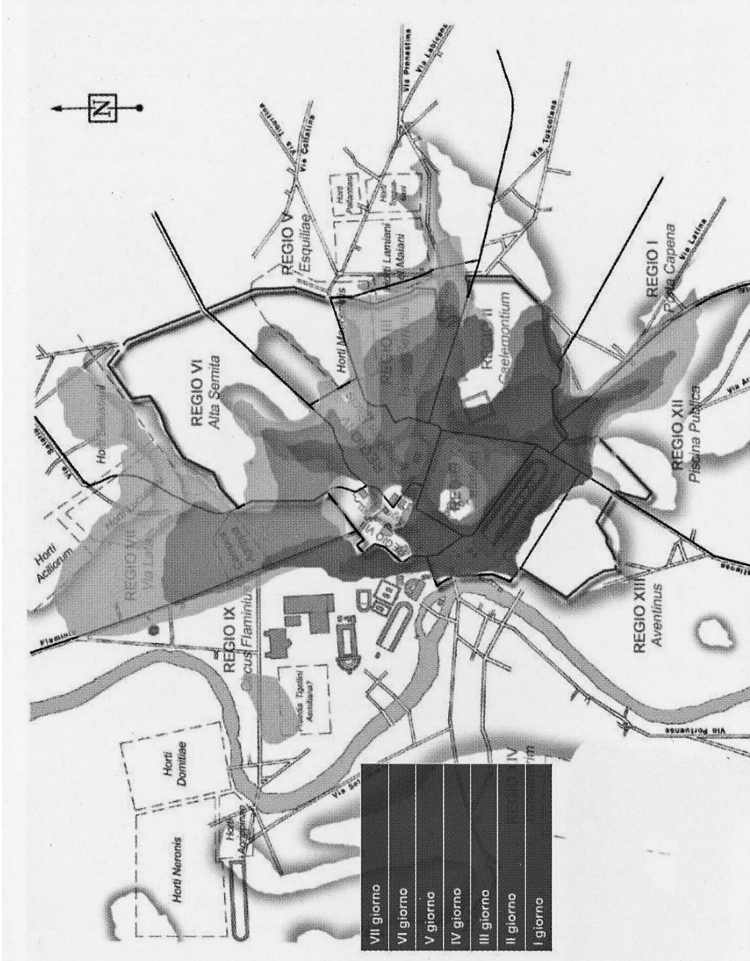
<sup>3</sup> Cf. Panella 2011b: 82, 89.



I.4.1 Day I of the fire. After Panella 2011: fig. 10a.1 (S. Borghini and R. Carliani).



1.4-2 Day 3 of the fire. After Panella 2011: fig. 10a.3 (S. Borghini and R. Carliani).



I 4.3 Day 7 of the fire. After Panella 2011: fig. 10a.4 (S. Borghini and R. Carliani).

extinguished, only four of the fourteen Augustan *regiones* remained intact, while three were leveled and the other seven greatly damaged (Figure 14.4). This account has been more or less confirmed by the archaeological evidence.<sup>4</sup>

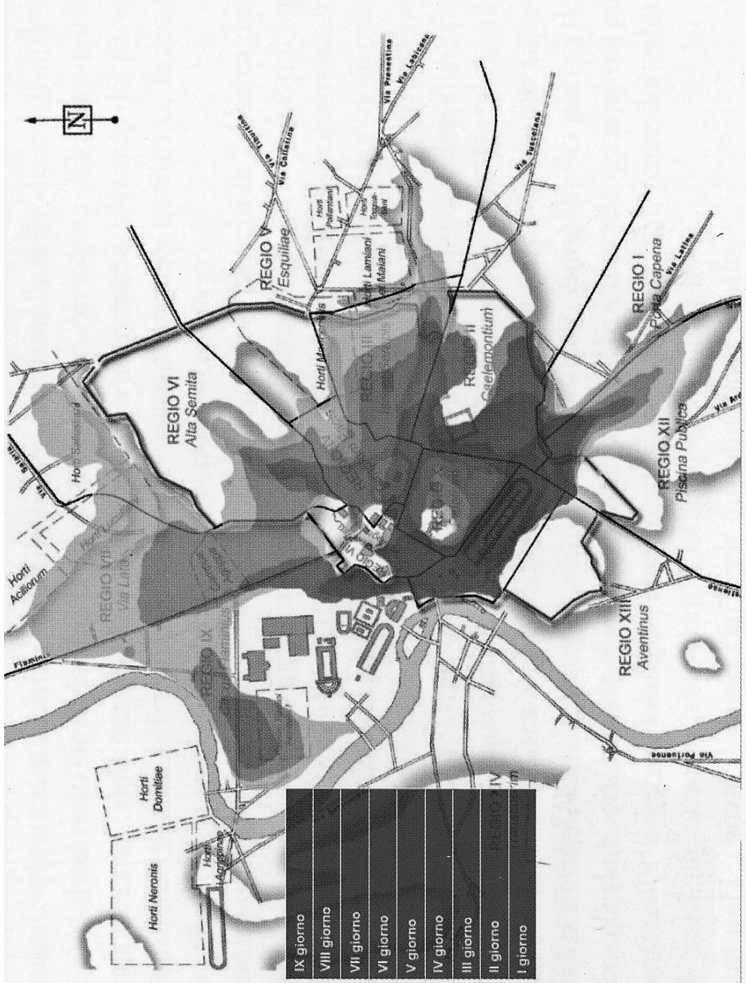
Tacitus introduces into his narrative of the horror and devastation of the conflagration an interesting piece of information; namely, that a large number of unnamed individuals threatened anyone trying to extinguish the fire, while others openly threw firebrands “shouting out that they were authorized – whether to carry out their looting more freely or whether by order” (*Ann.* 15.38).<sup>5</sup> The latter phrase “or whether by order” (*sive iussu*) is clearly intended to raise suspicion that such a directive had come from above, ultimately from Nero himself. Yet, as Tacitus goes on to state, Nero at that time was at Antium (modern Anzio) and returned to Rome only when his own palatial residence, the *Domus Transitoria*,<sup>6</sup> was threatened by the fire. Tacitean innuendo, however, would lead us to believe that Nero had already given the order to set Rome ablaze and that his absence from Rome was to serve as an alibi. Why else would a “large number” of people have been preventing some of the urban population from putting out the flames, while setting more fires themselves? But anyone knowledgeable about the early days of urban firefighting or even contemporary forest or wild fire-fighting methods knows that to prevent fires from spreading, fire walls are created by controlled burning of areas in advance of the main conflagration.<sup>7</sup> Suetonius (*Nero* 38) notes that stone granaries in the area of the Esquiline were demolished with war machines (*bellicis machinis*) and then burned, though he gives no hint that these were preventative fire-fighting measures. These actions are perceived instead as part of Nero’s plan to gain land on the Esquiline for the main wing of his future *Domus Aurea*, one of the reasons he allegedly started the fire in the first place. That many individuals were involved in this endeavor indicates that Rome’s substantial fire-fighting force, the “Night

<sup>4</sup> Excavations, especially in more recent years, have brought to light various pieces of evidence for the fire of 64, allowing more reliable topographical plans for its progressive spread. See, e.g., Santangeli Valenzani and Volpe 1986; Carandini and Papi (eds.) 1999, especially 3–14; Carandini 2010. See also Panella 2011: 84, with figs. 1–9 showing the sequential advancement of the fire.

<sup>5</sup> See also Dio 62.16.3–7.

<sup>6</sup> This huge domus (“home”) was called “transitoria” because it “crossed over” the valley, where the later Colosseum was built, thus joining imperial residences on the Palatine with those of the Esquiline.

<sup>7</sup> For example, when fire broke out after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, firemen created such a fire wall, even using dynamite to blow up buildings. I thank the San Francisco Fire Department for this information.



1.4.4 Day 9 of the fire. After Panella 2011: fig. 10a.6 (S. Borghini and R. Carli).

Watch,” or *Vigiles Urbani*,<sup>8</sup> had sprung into action, creating fire walls as part of its fire-fighting operations. Dio, in fact, states specifically (62.17.1) that among those setting fires were soldiers and the *vigiles* (here, the “fire brigade”), but he too puts a negative spin on it by suggesting that their motive may have been plunder, rather than extinguishing the flames. Tacitus clearly knew why such fires would have been set, for later on in another context, he states (*Ann.* 15.40), “Then, on the sixth day, the fire was extinguished at the foot of the Esquiline after buildings had been demolished over a vast area so that an area like an open clearing would oppose the continuing violence [of the flames].”

Tacitus recounts (*Ann.* 15.39) that many viewed with suspicion Nero’s efforts to alleviate suffering after the fire. Nero’s relief program included opening to the homeless Agrippa’s structures in the Campus Martius and his own gardens (*horti*), as well as putting up makeshift shelters. He also ordered foodstuffs to be brought from Ostia and other nearby municipalities and lowered the cost of grain. Tacitus would have us believe that Nero’s only motive for these positive actions was to divert attention from the suspicion that he was to blame for the conflagration, since Tacitus goes on to speak of rumors that during the blaze Nero sang of the destruction of Troy from a stage in his home (*scaena domestica*). Suetonius and Dio have slightly different versions of this story. Suetonius (*Nero* 38.2) indicates that Nero, dressed in stage costume, sang of the Sack of Ilium from the “Tower of Maecenas,”<sup>9</sup> while Dio (62.18) speaks of Nero’s singing of the capture of Troy in the garb of a lyre-player on the “palace roof,” which apparently escaped the flames in the section of Nero’s *Domus Transitoria* on the Esquiline Hill. This part of his villa had once belonged to the suburban estate of Maecenas, who willed it to his friend and benefactor Augustus. From such a high vantage point, Nero would have been able to see what needed to be done to fight the fire. It would have been hardly surprising, in any case, if Nero – artist and author of the *Troica* (Juv. 8.220–1) – had been moved to reference the conflagration of Troy, as had Publius Scipio Aemilianus when seeing Carthage in flames in 146 BCE (Polyb. 38.22; App. *Punica* 132).

Suetonius (*Nero* 38.1) maintains that Nero “set the City ablaze because of his disgust with the unsightliness of its antiquated buildings and the narrow and winding streets.” According to Tacitus (*Ann.*

<sup>8</sup> About 7,000 men: Strabo 5.3.7; Suet. *Aug.* 25, 30; Dio 62.17.

<sup>9</sup> For the “Tower of Maecenas,” its location, and the topography of the Esquiline, see Häuber 2013: 213 with no. 155, 440 (see map 3: location of the tower under and to the right of the “L” of FAGUTAL; map 4: yellow tower), 873–4.



15.40), Nero wanted to re-found Rome, naming it after himself (i.e., as Neropolis: Suet. *Nero* 55). No hard evidence, however, is produced for this claim other than the fact that he undertook a large-scale urban-building program after the fire had caused massive damage. Other leaders of Rome did likewise both before and after Nero. If he were really responsible for the fire as a means of improving the urban landscape, he would have logically started the blaze in the Subura, the slums behind the Forum of Augustus, which were apparently not badly damaged in the conflagration. Ironically, this area may in part have been shielded by the Forum of Augustus, with its roughly 100 foot high retaining wall of fire-resistant peperino stone (*lapis Gabinus*), which was designed to contain fires from spreading from the Subura. Even Nero's new planned constructions in fire-resistant Gabinian and Alban stone and novel types of flat-roofed structures to help fight future fires (Tac. *Ann.* 15.3; Suet. *Nero* 16) came under attack for no credible reason other than that their author was Nero.

Following the destruction of much of his *Domus Transitoria*, Nero undertook the construction of his even larger estate, the *Domus Aurea* ("Golden House"), which would cost an outrageous sum of money (see La Rocca, Chapter 13 in this volume). The project was highly criticized not only because of the new taxes levied for this extravaganza, but also because Nero was in reality creating for his own pleasure a sprawling country landscape villa of enormous proportions (ca. 300–350 acres) in the very heart of the City.<sup>10</sup> Highlighting the vastness of this enterprise, Martial (*Spect.* 2.4) speaks of Nero's house taking up the whole City, while Suetonius (*Nero* 39) reports a popular lampoon that Rome was becoming a house and that Romans should migrate to Veii (ca. 16 km northwest of Rome), if Nero's abode did not engulf that town too. The largely destroyed properties of the nobility in and around the northeastern slopes of the Palatine, along the so-called *Via Nova*, were bought up by Nero to increase the size of his new palatial residence. Suetonius' statement (*Nero* 38.2) that "... the houses of the leaders of old were burned, still adorned with spoils of enemies ..." is undoubtedly a reference to some of these properties. To give further credence to Nero's culpability for the fire, Suetonius comments (*Nero* 38.1) that "his [Nero's] chamberlains (*cubicularii*) were caught with tow and torches on the estates of a number of those of consular rank." However, these *cubicularii* may in

<sup>10</sup> For both these estates, see in general Ball 2003; Dyson 2010: 165–9; and the various essays in Tomei and Rea 2011, especially 76–176. The total size of the *Domus Aurea* is difficult to determine. For the estimation of 300–350 acres, I follow Ward-Perkins in Boëthius and Ward-Perkins 1970: 214.

reality have been sent to convey orders by Nero to create fire walls to stop the spread of the conflagration.

Having lost their estates, the resentful Roman nobility, many of whom already detested Nero, would have understandably been motivated to circulate the rumor that he had set the fire to acquire more land for his new palatial ambitions. Some of these aristocrats might also have been involved in the so-called Pisonian conspiracy against Nero in 65, though Tacitus does not suggest this.<sup>11</sup> He does note (*Ann.* 15.67), however, that when Subrius Flavus, one of Nero's Praetorian tribunes who joined the Pisonian conspiracy, was caught and examined, he reproached Nero for burning Rome, calling him an *incendiarius*. According to Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.50), Subrius Flavus had considered assassinating Nero on the night of the fire, but feared being captured; the absence of any outcome here makes it difficult to know Subrius' intent.

If Nero had sought by means of the conflagration to make available a vast tract of land for a new residence, why would he have started it on the opposite side of the Palatine from where the new great domestic wing of the Domus Aurea was built? Most of this land, especially on the slopes of the Esquiline, was already part of his Domus Transitoria. Moreover, because of the difficulty in controlling fires, it would not have made sense to start a fire anywhere near the Circus Maximus, a fire hazard itself because of its wooden superstructure, which ran all along the Palatine Hill. Located here on the western slope of the Palatine were all of the imperial estates, including the House of Augustus and several important temples, all embellished with great works of art. As it was, the fire consumed much of the property on the Palatine that Nero had already annexed to create his Domus Transitoria. Many of the City's other splendid and famous temples were also destroyed, along with their irreplaceable artistic treasures (Suet. *Nero* 38; Tac. *Ann.* 15.41) – far too great a visual and religious heritage for a self-proclaimed lover of art like Nero to send up in flames! If the agency ascribed to Nero in the fire is problematic, then where else do the voices from this era suggest we look?

## 14.2 CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITIES

It would appear that our earliest Roman source for Christians living in Rome and fomenting discord is Suetonius (*Claud.* 25.4).<sup>12</sup> He recounts

<sup>11</sup> For the Pisonian conspiracy, see Griffin 1984: 166–70.

<sup>12</sup> As J. Albert Harrill has discussed in the present collection of essays, the earliest Christian congregations were in Rome at least since the 40s.

that probably around the year 49, not long before Nero came to power,<sup>13</sup> Claudius had expelled “Jews” from the City because they were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (*Judaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*).<sup>14</sup> Though there has been much scholarly debate about who is meant by “Chrestus,” this is most likely a reference to Christ.<sup>15</sup> There are at least three possibilities for the spelling as Chrestus rather than Christus: 1) a manuscript error in spelling, 2) confusion or mispronunciation of the name of Christus,<sup>16</sup> or 3) an alternate spelling of Christus, since the ancients were not as fixated on orthography as are moderns.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Tertullian states (*Apol.* 3.5) that *Christianus* was sometimes mispronounced as *Chrestianus*. What is undoubtedly meant by the phrase *impulsore Chresto* is that Christ was ultimately the inspiration and driving force behind those followers who were now spreading his message in Rome.<sup>18</sup> Since Christ himself never wrote, these followers of Christ, who at this early date could be called Jewish Christians or Christianized Jews, were going about interpreting what they thought Jesus’ message was. But lacking any one accepted version of his message, these early Christian proselytizers were, in effect, creating different but related forms of Christianity, or more accurately, Christianities.<sup>19</sup> With the Christian take-over of the Empire beginning in the fourth century, a number of these Christianities would come to be regarded as heresies by the so-called Orthodox Church (*Cod. Theod.* 16.5).

From what little we know about the historical Jesus, it would appear that he saw himself as a reformer of Judaism who wished to unite Jews and bring them back to the path of righteousness, as reflected in the gospels. For example, Matthew (10:5–6) states, “These twelve [disciples] Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’.” In Matt. 15:24 Jesus says to his

<sup>13</sup> Orosius (7.6.15) also places the expulsion in this year, a time that appears to be confirmed by Acts 18.2: On this point, see Gruen 2002: 38.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., however, Gruen 2002: 36–41 for a more complex interpretation. See also Harrill, Chapter 17 in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> That this Chrestus was some other otherwise unknown troublemaker, as some have suggested, with a name similar to Christus, would be, in my opinion, too much of a coincidence and implausible in this context. See further Engberg 2007: 99–104.

<sup>16</sup> Gruen 2002: 38–9; Engberg 2007: 100–1.

<sup>17</sup> For confusion of the names Chrestus/Christus, see Engberg 2007: 99–102, especially with n. 226. Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44) is the first Roman source to refer to Christians as *Christiani* and to the author of that name (*auctor nominis*) as *Christus*. Incidentally, the proper name Chrestus is the Latin transliteration of the Greek *chrēstos*, literally meaning “good man,” which of course is not the same as Christus, which in Greek (*christos*) means “the anointed.”

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Engberg 2007: 99–104 *et passim*. <sup>19</sup> See in general White 1988.

disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” These passages make clear that he did not see himself as the founder of some new religion that was to be spread to all peoples of the Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup> That appears to have been essentially the idea of Saul of Tarsus (St. Paul), who went on to found mainstream Christianity, or what can be called Pauline Christianity.<sup>21</sup> To make this new brand of Christianity more acceptable to non-Jews, Paul did not require a convert to observe all the traditional Jewish religious restrictions and requirements (especially its dietary prohibitions and circumcision) that non-Jews found so unpalatable and repugnant. This revolutionary change, however, went against the Torah-based form of Christianity of the so-called Jerusalem Church, headed by the apostles James (the brother of Jesus) and Peter (Gal. 2).<sup>22</sup> However, it was Paul’s version that won out in the end, becoming mainstream Christianity. Paul’s overly dramatic, miraculous story about a blinding light that caused him to fall off his horse and his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9; Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:11–17) was undoubtedly invented to give Paul apostolic authority, since he was not a disciple of Jesus, nor did he even know him.<sup>23</sup> It is only at the very end of Matthew (28:18–20) and of Luke (24:47) that the resurrected Jesus appears to his followers to tell them that they were now to go forth to preach and convert the gentiles of all nations. This new and very specific directive is found only in the gospels of Matthew and of Luke, aside from of course Acts (esp. 14–15), which follows Paul’s theology. The story in Matthew and Luke is like the “longer ending” of the resurrection story found in the earlier gospel of Mark 16:9–20, but which lacks Jesus’ mandate to convert gentiles.<sup>24</sup> This directive was probably an invented interpolation, added later on to promote Paul’s version of Christianity.

<sup>20</sup> See further White 1988: 7–24 with additional bibliography.

<sup>21</sup> For the invention of Pauline Christianity, see Maccoby 1986, which is highly controversial, but has some interesting insights.

<sup>22</sup> For the Jerusalem Church and Paul’s split from it, see Maccoby 1986: 119–55.

<sup>23</sup> The aspect of the blinding light was probably inspired by the Jewish myth of Moses and the “Burning Bush” (Exodus 3:1–4:17). For an interesting interpretation of Paul’s story, see Maccoby 1986: 85–109. Cf. also the miraculous story of the archangel Gabriel’s revelation of the Qur’an to Muhammad. For a discussion of the Islamic story and tradition, see Peters 1994: 147–52, 206 *et passim*.

<sup>24</sup> As scholars have acknowledged, the later gospels of Matthew and Luke derive from Mark. In addition, it has likewise been pointed out that the style of the language of the “longer ending” is very different from the rest of Mark, which originally had an unsatisfactory “shorter ending” (16:8) that lacks the reappearance of *redivivus* Jesus to his followers. Christian mythographers of a later period clearly conflated elements from Acts and other gospels to create a longer and more satisfying ending to the resurrection story. See *NOAB*: 74 with commentary on 16:8 and 9–20. For Mark being the oldest of the synoptic gospels, on which Matthew and Luke are closely based, with John being the last of four to be written, see *OBC*: 886, and 1001–27.

Whether Torah-based or not, all forms of Christianity were regarded by mainstream or orthodox Jews as blasphemy and heresy.<sup>25</sup> Even the notion of “converting” a Jew to another religion or a heretical form of Judaism was punishable by death under Jewish religious law (Deuteronomy 13:8–10). Conflict, which often resulted in physical violence, was inevitable for those who subscribed to a religion whose fundamental belief system rested on universal monotheistic notions of a singular “God” and a singular “Truth” for all peoples. When Paul turned up at the Yahweh Temple in Jerusalem, for example, he was seized by fellow Jews, who beat and threatened to kill him. He was saved only by soldiers of the Roman cohort in Jerusalem, who protected him because he revealed to the commander that he was a Roman citizen.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, St. Stephen, the first of the so-called Christian martyrs, was not a Roman citizen, for which reason, according to Christian tradition, he was stoned to death by Jews (Acts 7:58–60) in accordance with Jewish law.<sup>27</sup> It is a mistaken notion that only Rome could carry out the death penalty in such religious matters.<sup>28</sup>

With Christianity rejected as a heresy by most traditional Jews, aggressive Christian proselytizers like Paul were forced to begin targeting more receptive non-Jews, including Roman citizens. Unlike monotheism, ancient polytheistic religions themselves (that is, as cults) make no pronouncements about the validity of other peoples’ gods, for which reason polytheists could freely adopt or adapt foreign cults or aspects of them, without the necessity of giving up their own traditional gods. Novel and/or exotic religions, especially mystery cults, that promised a better life to come in the hereafter were particularly attractive, particularly among the credulous lower classes, whose existence was often grim and who saw little justice in life. Being “weak in mind” (*imbecilli*), according to Cicero (*Div.* 2.81),<sup>29</sup> such people were all the more susceptible to *superstitio*, while Columella (*Rust.* 1.8.6; 11.1.22), writing at the end of the first century CE, speaks of *vana superstitio* (“false superstition”) that seduces *rudes animos* (“ignorant minds”) to *flagitia* (“vices”). Both *superstitio* and *flagitia* were specifically associated with Christianity in Pliny the Younger’s famous letter to Trajan (*Ep.* 10.96.2,

<sup>25</sup> See especially Henrichs 1970: 22–3.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Maccoby 1986: 156–71; Wilson 1997: 16, 35, 83, 127–8, 175–6, 187–8, 190–1, 202, 209–12.

<sup>27</sup> *OCB*: 714 s.v. “Stephen.”

<sup>28</sup> This is also often and incorrectly stated in the case of the trial of Jesus, based on John 18:31, which was undoubtedly an invented part of his story. For the Jews’ right to employ the death penalty in matters of religious (non-political) transgressions, see Smallwood 1981: 148–50.

<sup>29</sup> See also Cic. *Div.* 2.125, 148.

8–9), while those Christians who could be characterized as being *rudes animi* were the very people (townspeople, villagers, and rustics) whom Pliny reports (*Ep.* 10.96.9) were being infected by the “contagion of this wretched superstition” (*superstitionis istius contagio*).

The problem with Christianity, as with Judaism (and Islam later on), was that it allowed for belief in only one God, whereas it considered the gods of other peoples false or “demonic” and their worship “idolatrous” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:20).<sup>30</sup> It is little wonder, then, that Christians were commonly reviled by polytheists for their “impiety” (*asebeia*) and “atheism” (*atheotes*), in the sense that they denied the existence of the gods of other peoples.<sup>31</sup> Blasphemous insults and flagrant disrespect of the religious beliefs of others, moreover, posed a threat to the *pax deorum* (“peace of the gods”), the divine equilibrium Romans sought to maintain through religious devotion and sacrifice for the well-being of the state. Any acts that resulted in the disruption of the *pax deorum*, which by association threatened the stability of the Roman state, were considered *insania* (“insanity”) and *amentia* (“madness”), especially with regard to the frenzied behavior of fanatics.<sup>32</sup> In fact, *amentia* is the very term Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 10.96.4) used in referring to the Christian *superstitio*. It was undoubtedly Paul’s blasphemy against the goddess Artemis/Diana that caused a near riot in Ephesus, when a mass of polytheists, as we are told in the book of Acts (19:34), rushed to the city’s theater and chanted in unison for two hours “great is the goddess of the Ephesians.”<sup>33</sup> According to the Acts (19:26), the Ephesians said that Paul was preaching to them that “gods made by human hands are not gods at all.” In short, Paul was also reviling the Ephesians as “idol-worshippers.” To polytheists, Christians like Paul were preaching hatred of whatever did not conform to their narrow religious view of the world – a message that earned them the enmity of not only mainstream Jews but also the wider polytheistic populations of the Empire.

<sup>30</sup> Christianity inherited this form of religious bigotry from Judaism: So King David, who declared “all gods of [other] nations are demons”: See Septuagint 95:5, translated into Greek, πάντες οἱ θεοὶ τῶν ἔθνῶν δαιμόνια, from the Hebrew, which calls them “idols.” Cf. also Psalms 96:5 for the gods as idols.

<sup>31</sup> See MacMullen 1984: 15, 128 n. 12 (for the various ancient sources). See further Pollini 2008: 193 with additional references.

<sup>32</sup> See Horace (*Sat.* 2.3.79), for example, who equates *superstitio* with *morbus mentis* (“mental disorder”). For *superstitio* being a manifestation of an insane mind, see Janssen 1997: 137–8, 158. Also in the case of the Jews and fanatical religious behavior, see Pollini 2012: 375–6.

<sup>33</sup> The Christian story that the silversmiths were behind the protest because they feared the loss of business is totally specious, since Ephesus was a major pilgrimage site and the number of potential converts to Christianity at this time would have been negligible.

Unlike Christians, Jews generally kept largely to themselves (see Tac. *Hist.* 5.5.4) and, accordingly, were not on some specific aggressive mission to convert others to their religion.<sup>34</sup> Because of the antiquity of their religious beliefs, they were exempted from direct participation in the imperial cult. Instead, they expressed their loyalty to Rome by offering prayers and sacrifice to their god for the safety of the emperor, which, in effect, was equated with the safety of the state.<sup>35</sup> It should be remembered that in antiquity there was no meaningful division between the state and religion, so that when people pledged loyalty to Rome during the Empire, it could only be done through sacrifice to the *Genius* of the Emperor and gods of Rome, an act that was not a problem for the polytheistic peoples of the Empire.<sup>36</sup> Because of their irreconcilable differences with traditional Judaism, Christians eventually no longer considered themselves even Jewish Christians. Consequently, as non-Jews, they could no longer enjoy certain privileges, exemptions, and concessions that Rome made only to the Jews.<sup>37</sup> The loyalty of the Christians became suspect, and their aggressive proselytizing, especially among Roman citizens, became a concern to the Roman state as Christianity spread, since Roman citizens were expected to continue to revere the Roman gods, even if they added foreign gods to their pantheon. For those who became exclusive Christian monotheists,<sup>38</sup> tensions and problems were inevitable. Early on, Christianized Jews preaching in Jewish communities had caused civil discord and disruption of the peace, and later on, the same things occurred when they proselytized among non-Jews. Christian communities sometimes expected converts to become exclusively monotheistic and to avoid polytheists and even their families who worshiped the gods. This could lead to familial discord, especially because all aspects of Roman life revolved around worship of the gods, including domestic cults.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Whether or not Jews were proselytizing in the Roman period has been greatly debated. Although some Jews might have done so, it was certainly not a specific mission of Judaism, for the very reason that they stuck to themselves and were even endogamous. On the lack of any Jewish proselytizing mission, see especially Gruen 2002: 30–1, 46–7, with n. 206.

<sup>35</sup> Smallwood 1981: 147–8; Gruen 2002: 44.

<sup>36</sup> Sacrifices were also performed before conducting all official and legal business. See also Barnes 2010: 111.

<sup>37</sup> For these privileges, see, e.g., Smallwood 1981: 147–52.

<sup>38</sup> Since there were many different forms of Christianity, some may have accepted aspects of Christianity, even worshipping Christ among their other gods.

<sup>39</sup> For discord of a sexual nature, see also Justin Martyr, 2 *Apol.* 2; North 2000: 75; Barnes 2010: 20. Christians were redefining the notion of the traditional Roman family by creating their own communities, in which they called one another “brother” and “sister.” As Janssen 1979: 158 notes, they were encouraging people to isolate themselves from the surrounding world and to

As their numbers increased over time, especially after the Emperor Gallienus legalized Christianity in 260,<sup>40</sup> more and more problems arose with Christians, especially among competing Christian sects or factions, as well as the more fanatic trouble-makers and aggressive proselytizers among them. But long before the post-Gallienic period, most Christians had initially refused to serve in the Roman army or to assume civic responsibilities.<sup>41</sup> Because such antisocial and anti-Roman behavior went against Roman mores and values (the *mos maiorum*),<sup>42</sup> as well as the religious beliefs of other peoples, Christians were accused of hatred of the human race (*odium generis humani*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.38–44).<sup>43</sup> Their hostile attitude toward the gods and traditional Roman values became of great concern to Roman authorities.<sup>44</sup> Rumors had also begun to circulate about strange and obnoxious Christian cult practices (Tac. *Ann.* 15.44), some of which the Romans clearly misunderstood, while others they did not. In the early days, many Christianities had their own interpretation of what it meant to be “Christian.” Some more orthodox Christian writers, for example, condemned sects like the Christian Carpocratians for their bizarre rites and libertine sexual habits (Clem. *Al. Strom.* 3.2.10).<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, as we know from Trajan’s correspondence with the Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 10.97), who was the governor of Bithynia-Pontus in the early second century, Christians were not to be sought out and arrested, but “if they are brought to trial and proven guilty, they must be punished” (*si deferantur, arguantur, puniendi sunt*). Those most likely to be arrested and convicted were the ringleaders and trouble-makers, who were aggressively proselytizing and promoting civic unrest and discord, while Christians who minded their own business and practiced a harmless form of Christianity in private were left alone. Those falsely accused of being a Christian (usually by neighbors with grudges) could, of course, be exonerated simply by offering wine and incense to the *Genius* or *Tyche* of the Emperor and/or the gods.<sup>46</sup> Nor were all Christians who confessed to being Christian systematically

transform themselves into members of a new *nomen*, the *nomen Christianum* (not the *nomen Romanum*), a tightly knit social unit held together by their own idea of *fides* and *pietas*.

<sup>40</sup> It is often said that toleration of Christianity first came about with the so-called Edict of Milan in 313. However, the “Edict of Milan” was neither an edict nor issued by Constantine in Milan in 313. See recently Barnes 2010: 97–8 with n. 4, 113–14, and, for the legalization of Christianity by Gallienus, 97–105.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Wilken 1984: 117–25. <sup>42</sup> On this point, see especially Barnes 1968: 50.

<sup>43</sup> See further below. <sup>44</sup> See Janssen 1979, especially 158.

<sup>45</sup> See also Justin Martyr (1 *Apol.* 26.7) on the unacceptable behavior of other Christian groups. See further Wilken 1984: 19–21.

<sup>46</sup> Barnes 1968: 44 *et passim*; Wilken 1984: 24–30.



executed,<sup>47</sup> except very briefly under Nero because of the charge of arson. In short and contrary to popular belief, Christians were not systematically “persecuted” and martyred over the three centuries of Roman hegemony and on the rare occasions that they were actually executed, it was for a brief period of time.<sup>48</sup> Those who did perish tended to be recalcitrant clergy and/or those with fanatical tendencies, or the credulous who believed they were going to a better place. Therefore, it is largely a myth that there were three centuries of continuous Roman “persecution” of Christians. This notion was perpetuated by Christian religious propagandists in order to spread Christianity by creating the impression that these innocent Christians were willing to sacrifice their lives for the “Truth” of the Christian message – hence the erroneous claim that the seed of the Church was the blood of the martyrs (Tert. *Apol.* 50).<sup>49</sup> In fact, many of those said to be martyrs were fictitious.<sup>50</sup> Instructive, too, is the case of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who appears to have had a great desire to become a martyr.<sup>51</sup> While en route to Rome for his trial during the Trajanic period, Ignatius was allowed by his Roman guard to meet with local Christians, to preach to them, and even to write letters to various Christian congregations along the way. None of these Christians were arrested and thrown into prison and/or executed. Christians – like Paul – who were punished were those who had caused civic disturbances, usually as a result of their aggressive proselytizing mission and blasphemy against the gods.

The fomenting of discord by Christianized Jews, who preached in Jewish communities that which orthodox Jews considered blasphemy and heresy, was undoubtedly the reason that Jews – Christianized or not<sup>52</sup> – were expelled from Rome under Claudius, as Suetonius noted. This action would also be consistent with what we

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Barnes 2010: 55–7 (for Dionysius of Alexandria going into exile), 77–82 (for Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, going into exile under Decius, returning, and later being executed under Valerian). Other Christians were imprisoned for a while; sometimes only clergy were executed (as in the case of Cyprian). Much depended on time, place, circumstances, social status, and especially the changing attitudes of individual emperors.

<sup>48</sup> Even the so-called Great Persecution, technically dated from 303 to 313, was not Empire-wide, being only piecemeal and for the most part for short periods of time. For example, in the West, Christian executions took place over a three-year period (303–6). In propagandistic Christian hagiographies, the number of “martyrs” was generally exaggerated: See Barnes 2010: 97–150, especially 111–15, 126, 139–40, and for a summary, 293–4, 296–7.

<sup>49</sup> See in general Stark 1996: 163–89, especially 178–84 and more recently Barnes 2010, especially 106, 155; Moss 2013.

<sup>50</sup> See especially Barnes 2010. <sup>51</sup> See Stark 1996: 180–81.

<sup>52</sup> At this time, moreover, it should be remembered that the Roman state would not have distinguished between Jews and Christians, precisely because Christianized Jews, who were relatively few in number, were regarded as members of an heretical sect of Judaism.

know from Christian sources about the Christianized Jew Paul being beaten by Jewish authorities and driven out of Jewish communities throughout the Empire (2 Corinthians 11:25).<sup>53</sup> There has, nevertheless, been much scholarly debate about the nature of the expulsion from Rome – including whether there was one or possibly two banishments – and about exactly who the expelled “Jews” were. This controversy is partly due to the statement of Dio (60.6.6) that because of the great numbers of Jews resident in Rome and Claudius’ reluctance to cause a tumult among them, he “did not expel them, but ordered them, while practicing the way of life of their fathers, not to have meetings.” As has been rightly argued, Dio was probably referring to another incident that occurred earlier, at the beginning of Claudius’ Principate in the year 41.<sup>54</sup> Suetonius’ comment about expelling “Jews” later on in 49 did not mean that Claudius was expelling *all* Jews, which, as Dio noted, would have been impossible, especially since a number of them were Roman citizens. Suetonius’ comment was most likely a generalization, as in the case of the expulsion of members of other problematic groups, like astrologers, philosophers, and Egyptians.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, identifying the troublemakers – whether proselytizing Christianized Jews or reactive orthodox Jews – would probably not have been particularly difficult at a formal inquest, since there were bound to have been informers and opponents who would have blamed one another.<sup>56</sup> As a result, all those who could be identified would have been expelled from Rome. Although Claudius was not interested in sectarian Jewish theosophical disputes, he did take seriously his responsibility for maintaining peace and order in the City.

### 14.3 THE CHRISTIANS AND THE FIRE OF 64 CE

As for the Christians and the fire of 64, interestingly no ancient source other than Tacitus (*Ann.* 38.44) connects them with this great conflagration. Dio, for example, does not speak of the Christians at all at the time of Nero, and Suetonius, who does mention them, does not associate them in any way with the conflagration, perhaps because neither Dio nor Suetonius wanted to deflect blame from Nero. This may also explain why later Christian writers, who selectively followed earlier sources,

<sup>53</sup> For St. Paul and the Christian communities of Rome, see Harrill (above n. 12).

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., Smallwood 1981: 210–16, and more recently Engberg 2007: 92–6. For Jews in Rome, see Gruen 2002: 15–53 and cf. 36–41 on this issue.

<sup>55</sup> See Harrill (above n. 12).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. the somewhat analogous case, in which the Jews of Corinth hauled Paul before Gallio, the governor of Achaia (Greece), for his heretical teachings: Acts 18:12. See also Barnes 1968: 33.

generally do not mention Nero's blaming the Christians for the fire,<sup>57</sup> since that might raise questions about their possible involvement in causing the conflagration and divert attention from their being punished supposedly only for being Christians.<sup>58</sup> The fifth-century Christian author Orosius, who is not always reliable, goes further, asserting (7.7.10) that not only was Nero the first to "persecute" Christians for their religious beliefs, but also that he did this throughout the Empire, despite no evidence to support any such Empire-wide persecution. We know only that Christians were punished in the City of Rome on the charge of arson.

There was also another aspect to the case against the Christians. Suetonius (*Nero* 16) notes that during Nero's rule numerous abuses were dealt with severely and that among those punished were Christians, "a class of people who practiced a new and nefarious superstition" (*genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*). Tacitus, for his part, characterizes this new cult as a "destructive superstition" (*exitiabilis superstitio*, *Ann.* 15.44). The Romans generally regarded Christianity, like Judaism, as *superstitio*<sup>59</sup> in part because Christians were prone to go beyond proper religious behavior by, as noted earlier, professing their hatred of the gods of Rome and of the religious beliefs of other peoples, as well as not recognizing the ultimate authority of the Emperor, but rather only that of their god. In addition, Christians preached the second coming of Christ, which would mean the destruction of Rome,<sup>60</sup> and promoted zealotry and fanaticism among adherents.<sup>61</sup> They also were considered to practice magic.<sup>62</sup> In short, Christianity was regarded as a perversion

<sup>57</sup> The first Christian source to mention the Christians being blamed and punished by Nero for the fire is Severus Sulpicius (early fifth century), who in his *Chronica* (2.29.9) clearly follows Tacitus. On this matter and the suspicion – unfounded, in my opinion – that the passage in Tacitus is a Christian interpolation, see Walter 1957: 173–4; Barnes 1968: 35. This is also argued in a popular book on the fire by Dando-Collins 2010: 9–16, 106–10, with Egyptians being substituted for Christians in the putative interpolation! The earliest Christian source for Nero's punishment of Christians (without mention of the fire) is Melito (mid-second cent.) in Eusebius *HE* 4.26.9. See Barnes 1968: 34–5.

<sup>58</sup> See also Melito (*ap. Eus. Hist. Eccl.* 4.26.9); Tertullian (*Apol.* 5.3); Lactantius (*De mort. pers.* 2.6); Orosius 7.7.4.

<sup>59</sup> Cicero is one of the earliest sources for Judaism as being a *barbara superstitio* (*pro Flacco* 67). See further Gruen (2002) 42–4.

<sup>60</sup> Such predictions about the destruction of Rome were characteristic of what Romans regarded as *superstitio*, as we know, for example, in the case of the German prophet-priestess Veleda (*Tac. Hist.* 4.61). For these *vates superstitiosi* ("superstitious-minded prophets/preachers"), see further Janssen 1979: 135, 152.

<sup>61</sup> Regarding Christian *superstitio*, see especially the excellent article by Janssen 1979. Cf. also Wilken 1984: 48–50, 60–7 *et passim*.

<sup>62</sup> Christ himself was also regarded as a magician by some because of the miracles his follower claimed he performed. See, e.g., Celsus's charge preserved in Origen (*C. Cels.* 1.38, 68). See also

of religion and was eventually deemed illegal formally by imperial rescript by the time of Trajan.<sup>63</sup>

Little did the Romans realize in these early days how great and real a danger Christianity would ultimately pose to the polytheistic peoples of the Empire, beginning with Constantine's embrace of Christianity in the fourth century. It was only after the defeat in 324 of Licinius, the polytheistic Emperor of the East, that Constantine publicly declared that he was a Christian. However, it was probably not long after 324 that Constantine began to outlaw officially forms of polytheistic religion, especially blood sacrifices, which were at the core of institutionalized polytheistic religion.<sup>64</sup> This marked the beginning of the first assault on traditional polytheistic religions throughout the Empire. Constantine and his successors – except, of course, for Julian – gave the Church increasing power and help over time in implementing an intolerant and dogmatic ideology in an attempt to eradicate polytheism and to Christianize the Empire.<sup>65</sup> From the time of Constantine on, Christians began not only to persecute polytheists, non-orthodox Christians (“heretics”), “apostates,” Jews, and Samaritans, as evidenced in the *Codex Theodosianus* (16.5–10), but also to destroy and desecrate a great deal of the religious and material culture of the polytheistic peoples of the Empire.<sup>66</sup>

Given the fundamental nature of Christianity, how is the punishment of Christians following the fire to be understood? Were they generally viewed as in some way a cause of the conflagration or were they merely scapegoats for Nero? Tacitus provides information about perceived Christian culpability for the fire and Roman animosity toward the Christians. He indicates (*Ann.* 15.44) that they were blamed and

Smith 1978. In addition, transubstantiation (1 Corinthians 11:23–5) could be interpreted as an act of magic. In Christian theology regarding the Eucharist, transubstantiation – the changing of the substance of the bread and wine into the substance of the body and blood of Christ – is considered not as symbolic but literal. See *ODWR*: 324 s.v. “Eucharist,” 988 s.v. “transubstantiation.” To change one substance into another in this fashion is fundamentally an act of magic, and the practice of magic under Rome was illegal: MacMullen 1966: 124–7; *OCD*: 908–11 s.v. “magic,” especially 910 for Roman law with further bibliography. Transubstantiation/communion could also lead to the misperception of cannibalistic practices: Wilken 1984: 17–18; McGowan 1994.

<sup>63</sup> And it remained so, at least on the books, until Gallienus decriminalized it in 260: See Barnes 1968: 36–48.

<sup>64</sup> In the period from 342 to 356 Constantine's son Constantius II issued a series of laws (*Cod. Theod.* 16.10.3–6) that reiterated his father's edict, outlawing polytheistic religion and animal sacrifice in particular. At this time, it is also decreed that temples be closed and any access to them in the cities be forbidden (16.10.4). Also, the penalty for those polytheists who do not comply is for the first time specified as death, with their property remitted to imperial fiscus, that is, the personal treasury of the emperor (16.10.4, 6). Also discussed in Pollini, in progress.

<sup>65</sup> See especially MacMullen 1984. Also Pollini (in progress).

<sup>66</sup> See Sauer 2003; Pollini 2007, 2008, 2013; Kristensen 2013. Also Pollini, in progress.

cruelly punished not so much for arson as for their hatred of the human race (*haud perinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti*).<sup>67</sup> He also speaks of Christians as loathed for their vices (*flagitia*)<sup>68</sup> and of Judaea as the home of this evil (*originem eius mali*). Following the fire, some Christians were burned alive, which was a well-known penalty for arson, since the Romans tended to make the punishment fit the crime whenever possible.<sup>69</sup> Although St. Peter is said to have perished in Rome under Nero, there is no hard evidence for this. Had he actually died there, he would probably have been burned alive and his charred remains either thrown into a common burial pit or dumped in the Tiber like most criminals. This, of course, is at variance with the unreliable Christian tradition that has him crucified upside down and buried under St. Peter's Basilica.<sup>70</sup> His burial in Rome, supposedly like that of Paul, who was probably executed and buried in Spain after being acquitted in Rome,<sup>71</sup> was undoubtedly intended to imbue the City of Rome with sanctity (Peter and Paul became the patron saints of Rome), in order to make it the most holy city of the West, as Jerusalem was for the East. Being burned alive for arson was a punishment still employed under Christian emperors, as the *Codex Justinianus* makes clear (*Digest* 49.9.9). When Nero blamed Christians for the great fire of Rome, his charge of arson would have been viewed by the Roman populace as credible, for even if Christians had not set Rome ablaze by their own hands or helped rekindle it after it had died down, they

<sup>67</sup> In a lecture titled "Tacitus and the Defamation of the Jews" at UCLA (6/17/08), Erich Gruen suggested that the phrase *odio humani generis* could also read "because of the hatred of the human race" [toward the Christians]. This may be a stretch because the common charges of "misanthropy" (*misanthropeia*) and *amixia*, among others, brought against Jews for their anti-social opinions and behavior toward non-Jews applied equally to Christians: See Pollini 2012: 375–6. Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.5.2) also charged Jews with a similar hatred of mankind (*adversus omnes alios hostile odium*). Therefore, if Tacitus meant the human race's hatred toward Christians, he probably would have said *odio humani generis adversus eos*.

<sup>68</sup> As already discussed above.

<sup>69</sup> See Juvenal (8.235), Martial (10.25.5), and Seneca (*Ep.* 14.5).

<sup>70</sup> On the lack of any hard evidence for the death of Peter in Rome, see Moss 2013: 134–8. With regard to Peter's alleged crucifixion in Rome, see Barnes 2010, who carefully and critically reviews the sources and mistaken scholarship, which has followed late second-century Christian sources for the traditional fiction of Peter's being crucified head-down. If he did perish by crucifixion, he would most likely have been bound to a pole or some sort of cross, dressed in a special tunic smeared with a flammable substance, such as is mentioned by Seneca (*Ep.* 14.5), that would have been set ablaze: 5–9, 26–31, 331–42; for the archaeological finds, including the putative bones of Peter in the so-called aedicular shrine of St. Peter, constructed ca. 150 to 170 under the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica, see Barnes 2010: 26–7 with n. 60, 397–413.

<sup>71</sup> Paul's "martyrdom" in Rome appears to be another Christian fabrication of the late second century, when the tradition of "martyr stories" begins to come into vogue. For a review of the various sources, see further Barnes 2010: 31–5.

deserved to be punished because their blasphemy had angered the gods, who did not protect Rome against the conflagration.

Another important factor in Nero's blaming Christians was likely to have been his wife Poppaea, who is referred to by Josephus (*AJ* 20.195) as a "god-fearer (θεοσεβής) . . . [who] pleaded on behalf of the Jews."<sup>72</sup> But rather than being a convert to Judaism, Poppaea, like certain other non-Jewish intellectuals, was probably interested in Jewish philosophy and would therefore have been sympathetic to the Jewish point of view, especially regarding Christians, who were hated by mainstream Jews. She would undoubtedly have had ties to the leadership of the Jewish quarter of Rome and would have been a strong advocate for them.<sup>73</sup> Poppaea probably learned from them of the heretical sect of Jews (i.e., Christianized Jews) who was stirring up trouble not only in Rome but throughout the Empire, so who better to blame than the Christians? By planting in Nero's mind the idea of Christian involvement in the fire, Poppaea would have been instrumental not only in bringing down the wrath of Rome on these Christianized Jewish heretics, but also in providing an alternative to rumors of Nero's alleged culpability. In short, she was blaming the Christians because of what her Jewish sources said or implied. This hypothesis would be in keeping with late Christian writers, who say that the Jews denounced the Christians for the fire.<sup>74</sup>

It is also not out of the question that more fanatically inclined Christians may in fact have played an active role in the conflagration. Tacitus tells us (*Ann.* 15.44) that those Christians who were apprehended confessed. Although he does not state to what they confessed, it is reasonable to conclude that under torture they probably would have admitted that they were guilty of arson – whether that was really true or not – and implicated others. Tacitus' claim (*Ann.* 15.44) that a great many Christians were convicted (*eorum multitudo ingens*) is undoubtedly an exaggeration, since at the time of Nero there could not have been a large number of them in Rome,<sup>75</sup> especially so soon after Claudius' expulsion. A few Christian extremists may have interpreted the Great Fire of 64 as the beginning of the predicted fiery apocalypse and the second coming of Christ, which Christians of that time believed was imminent, rather than something that would take place at some distant

<sup>72</sup> See further *RE* 22.1 (1953) 85–91, especially 87–8 s.v. "Poppaea Sabina" (R. Hanslik); Hanslik 1963: 92–108, especially 99–100. For Poppaea, see also *OCD*: 1221 s.v. "Poppaea Sabina."

<sup>73</sup> See, e.g., Hanslik 1963: 99–100; Henrichs 1970: 23–4. <sup>74</sup> See Momigliano 1934: 726.

<sup>75</sup> Furneaux 1907: 375, 575, in his commentary on *multitudo ingens*, is certainly correct in stating that this is rhetorical. See also Clarke 1996: 870; Stark 1996: 179–80.

time in the future.<sup>76</sup> Some might even have felt that it was their duty as Christians to hasten this day of judgment and so helped to spread the flames or at least refused to do anything to extinguish them.

The Christian message of a fiery apocalyptic end and of eternal damnation for “idol-worshippers,” as well as for those who did not accept Christ, was not a new idea. It had a long history in the apocalyptic literature of Hellenistic Judaism and in the Jewish Sibylline Oracles, which Alexandrian Jews had modeled on the oracular sayings of the Greeks and which the Christians later further adapted.<sup>77</sup> Dozens of books of Christian revelations were found along with Gnostic gospels in the 1945 Nag Hammadi finds in Upper Egypt.<sup>78</sup> The most infamous vision of this fire-and-brimstone myth, of course, is captured in the Book of Revelation, probably written in the late autumn of 68 C.E. by a malcontent Christianized Jew, possibly by the name of John, not to be confused with the Apostle John.<sup>79</sup> The Book of Revelation reads like the rants of a lunatic, in which Nero is cast as the Antichrist who will return from death (13:3), and the eternally detested Rome will in the end be destroyed with the second coming of Christ (17:6, 18:24, 19:2). With such predictions of the destruction of Rome, little wonder that Christianity was thought to be a *superstitio* and the product of a *mens insana* (“insane mind”), going beyond proper *religio* and causing disruption in the fabric of society.<sup>80</sup> The invention of such a fiery apocalypse was intended to terrify and at the same time reassure believers – whether Jews or Christians – of their righteousness and to give them hope that their suffering on earth would be rewarded with their final triumph over the “wicked idolaters” of the world – strong motives perhaps for some

<sup>76</sup> For the imminence of the apocalypse in Paul’s thinking, see e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 (dated ca. 51); for a number of early Christian followers, as well as for some Jews, see, e.g., Hopkins 1999: 87 et passim. For the apocalyptic tradition in the Jesus movement, see Meeks 1983: 171–80; White 1988, especially 12–13. This impending destruction was also in the prophecies of the Jews (e.g., Malachi 4.1). For the apocalyptic literature of the Jews and Christians, see *OCB*: 34–41 s.v. “Apocalyptic Literature.”

<sup>77</sup> The original Sibylline Oracles were widely circulated in the Greek and Roman world long before the Jews appropriated them. For the Sibylline Oracles in general, see Parke 1988. For the appropriation and revision of the Sibylline Oracles in Jewish tradition, see Gruen 1998: 268–91. In *Sib. Or.* 3.63–74, Nero appears to be equated with the wicked Beliar. See further Collins 1974: 80–7; Gruen 1998: 271, 285–6. The view of an imminent end of the world (“the Second Coming”) was also held by the fiercely monotheistic Qumran sectarians: Hopkins 1999: 51.

<sup>78</sup> Pagels 2012: 40, 74, 99–101, 145, 167, 202 n. 28.

<sup>79</sup> See especially Barnes 2010: 36–40. Cf. Pagels 2012. For the role of the imperial cult in the creation of the Book of Revelation, see Friesen 2001. For a succinct commentary, see *OBC*: 1287–1306, but for a comprehensive and exegetical treatment of its text and its reception from antiquity to the present, see Stevens 2014.

<sup>80</sup> For the relation of *superstitio* and *insania*, see above. For the possibility of Christians being put to death for merely disturbing the peace, see Barnes 1968: 49.

unhinged Christian fanatic(s) to resort to arson. In the end, however, whether a few Christians helped to spread the fire, especially after it had died down, should remain an open question. What is far more certain is that many Romans of that time would have believed that the Christians were guilty of arson or at least indirectly responsible for the Great Fire because of their denigration of the traditional gods, leading to the disruption of the *pax deorum* and consequently the loss of divine goodwill and protection, resulting in the fiery holocaust of 64.

#### FURTHER READING

For Nero and the fire of 64, see especially Momigliano 1934, Warmington 1969, Griffin 1984, Wiedemann 1996, Panella 2011b, and cf. Champlin 2003. For the topography of Rome with regard to the archaeological evidence for Nero's building activities, see Ball 2003, Carandini and Papi 1999, Carandini 2010, Tomei and Rea (eds.) 2011 and La Roca Chapter 13 of this volume.

For Christianity, see Meeks 1983, MacMullen 1984, Clarke 1996, Engberg 2007, and especially Wilken 1995 and Hopkins 1999 for how the Romans saw them. See also Harrill's bibliography in Chapter 17 of this volume. For Christianity as a *superstitio*: Janssen 1979 and Wilken 1995. For the Christian apocalyptic tradition: Barnes 1968; Pagels 2012, and Stevens 2014. For the myth of Christians' being systematically persecuted by the Romans, see Stark 1996, Barnes 2010, and Moss 2013. For the destructive nature of Christianity, see Sauer 2003, Pollini 2007, 2008, 2013, and Kristensen 2013. The best late antique source for Christians persecuting polytheists and others is the *Codex Theodosianus* (to be used with caution), especially 16.10 (polytheists), 16.5 (heretics), 16.7 ("apostates"), 16.8 (Jews and others).

For the Jews under Roman rule, see Smallwood 1981, Gruen 1998, 2002, and Pollini 2012: 369–411. For a detailed study of Roman religion, see Beard, North, and Price 1998; for a more concise survey: North 2000. For the Sibylline Oracles in general, see Parke 1988.