

THE NERO-ANTICHRIST

It has traditionally been assumed that biblical writers considered Nero to be the Antichrist. This book refutes that view. Beginning by challenging the assumption that literary representations of Nero as a tyrant would have been easily recognisable to those in the eastern Roman empire, where most Christian populations were located, Shushma Malik then deconstructs the associations often identified by scholars between Nero and the Antichrist in the New Testament. Instead, she demonstrates that the Nero-Antichrist paradigm was a product of late antiquity. Using now firmly established traits and themes from classical historiography, late-antique Christians used Nero as a means with which to explore and communicate the nature of the Antichrist. This proved successful, and the paradigm was revived in the nineteenth century in the works of philosophers, theologians, and novelists to inform debates about the era's *fin de siècle* anxieties and religious controversies.

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Founding and Fashioning a Paradigm

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To Neil.

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Foreword

Alastair Blanshard, Shane Butler, and Emily Greenwood

At the heart of the Roman empire lies the emperor. At the heart of Christian teleology (or to be more precise, eschatology) lies the apocalypse. This book examines what happens when one becomes conflated with the other. In lucid prose, Shushma Malik tells the story of how the emperor Nero became understood as the Antichrist, the instrument of Satan whose actions will usher in the End of Days. It is a story about biblical prophets, late-antique exegetes, nineteenth-century biblical scholars and jaded decadents looking for their next thrill. It is also a story about classical reception.

Few can match Nero for the fecundity of the different traditions that he generated. Augustus may have created the principate, but in many ways Nero is the emperor that matters. He becomes paradigmatic for our understanding of what an emperor is and can be. His reputation demonstrates the full potential of the imperial persona to overtake and replace the real with myth and fantasy. He may have committed suicide in AD 68, but Nero the man had been absent for decades, replaced by a simulacrum, a series of refracted images, anecdotes, and sketches. Everybody claimed to know Nero and in doing so ensured that nobody could know Nero.

Just as no emperor is like Nero, no book is as semiotically promiscuous as the Bible. Its texts shimmer with the possibility of multiple, different, contradictory interpretations. It demands authoritative readings while constantly eluding closure. It is remade anew through faith, theology, and historical change.

Given the interpretational pull – the desire for exegesis – exercised by these two unstable centres, it is tempting to think that it was inevitable that Nero and the Bible would become entangled. Yet, as Malik ably shows in this work, this entanglement was no accident. It happens comparatively late in antiquity and arose out of a particular set of conditions. The idea that biblical writers intended that references to the Antichrist be

understood as referring to Nero is a fiction that was centuries in the making. It required a set of ways of reading to coincide with a particular hermeneutic problem. In telling us this story, Malik reminds us just how important situatedness and temporality are in considering any moment of reception. This book analyses the way that late antique scriptural commentators naturalised their reading of the Antichrist as Nero by retrojecting their own interpretations onto early writers. In their hands, Nero was and always had been the Antichrist.

The book tells us not only about the history of reading, it also teaches about the operation of disciplines. Malik illustrates well the ways in which the interpretation of Nero between biblical and classical studies begins to diverge sharply in the nineteenth century. She exposes the investment that both disciplines had in revising and reaffirming their respective visions of Nero. Given the way in which Classics and Christianity were interwoven in the nineteenth century such subsequent demarcation is remarkable. Yet such divisions happen. So, for example, Ernest Renan, a figure discussed towards the end of the book, was both a distinguished philologist and a firm believer in the idea that Nero would eventually return at the end-of-time to fulfil his eschatological role. Yet in discussing his legacy, it becomes clear that each discipline seizes the aspect that makes it most comfortable. So philology embraces Renan as the editor of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* and conveniently forgets his authorship of *Antichrist* (1873), a damning account of Nero's reign that focused particularly on the deaths of Peter and Paul. Scholars of religion do the reverse. Such ruptures prove remarkably hard to resolve as each discipline operates in insolation, hived off from each other, able to communicate only with difficulty. Information may want to be free, but disciplinary boundaries prove to be anything but porous. The two remarkably different Neros of classical and biblical studies stand as testament to a much larger issue in the organisation of knowledge.

In the nineteenth century, the nature of Nero became a debate which imperilled one's very soul. As Malik shows, for a number of nineteenth-century Christian writers, the diabolic character of Nero was integral to their own visions of Christianity, the Bible, and the End of Days. It also resonated with a period whose mood was characterised by one of its writers as 'the impotent despair of a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently for ever'. In the midst of clashes between Catholicism and Protestantism, advocates of progress and forecasters of decline, moralists and decadents, stood Nero. Aubrey Beardsley is reputed to have remarked that 'Nero set Christians on

fire, like large tallow candles; the only light that Christians have ever been known to give.’ In its dissolute pose of indifference to suffering and its provocatively anti-Christian sentiments, this quote seems emblematic of its age. Yet, as this book shows, such words do not come easily. They are produced by a complex, rich, and dynamic history that Malik’s expansive but meticulous study brings vibrantly to life.

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Abbreviations

All abbreviations follow the conventions of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, fourth edition. Texts not listed in *OCD*⁴ are abbreviated as follows:

1 En.	Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch
1 Jn.	1 John
2 Bar.	Second Book of Baruch or Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
2 Jn.	2 John
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
Ambrosias. <i>Comm. 2 Thess.</i>	Ambrosiaster <i>Commentary on 2 Thessalonians</i>
Apoc. Pet.	Apocalypse of Peter
<i>Asc. Isa.</i>	<i>Ascension of Isaiah</i>
Ath. <i>Epist. Fest.</i>	Athanasius <i>Festal Letter</i>
August. <i>De Doct. Chris.</i>	Augustine <i>On Christian Teaching</i>
August. <i>Exc. urb.</i>	Augustine <i>On the Destruction of Rome</i>
Clem. Alex. <i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria <i>Miscellanies</i>
Clem. Rom. 1 <i>Clem.</i>	Clement of Rome <i>First Letter</i>
Comm. <i>Carm. Apol.</i>	Commodian <i>Poem about Two Peoples</i>
Comm. <i>Instr.</i>	Commodian <i>Instructions</i>
Cyr. Jer. <i>Log. Cat.</i>	Cyril of Jerusalem <i>Catechetical Lectures</i>
Dan.	Book of Daniel
Euseb. <i>Laud. Const.</i>	Eusebius <i>Oration in Praise of Constantine</i>
Ezek.	Book of Ezekiel
Fest. <i>Brev.</i>	Festus <i>Brief History of the Roman People</i>
Hipp. <i>De Ant.</i>	Hippolytus <i>About Antichrist</i>
Iren. <i>Adv. Haer.</i>	Irenaeus <i>Against Heresies</i>

Iren. <i>Dem.</i>	Irenaeus <i>Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching</i>
Jer. <i>Comm. in Dan.</i>	Jerome <i>Commentary on Daniel</i>
Jer. <i>Comm. in Isa.</i>	Jerome <i>Commentary on Isaiah</i>
John Ant. <i>fr.</i>	John of Antioch <i>Fragments of the Chronicle</i>
John Chrys. <i>Adv. Oppugn.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>Against Those Who Oppose the Monastic Life</i>
John Chrys. <i>De Laz.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>On Lazarus</i>
John Chrys. <i>De Virg.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>On Virginity, Against Remarriage</i>
John Chrys. <i>Hom. Jn.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>Homilies on the Gospel of John</i>
John Chrys. <i>Hom. Matt.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew</i>
John Chrys. <i>Hom. 2 Tim.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>Homilies on 2 Timothy</i>
John Chrys. <i>Hom. 2 Thess.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>Homilies on 2 Thessalonians</i>
John Chrys. <i>Prof. evang.</i>	John Chrysostom <i>Concerning the Lowliness of Mind</i>
Just. Mart. <i>1 Apol.</i>	Justin Martyr <i>First Apology</i>
Just. Mart. <i>Quaest. et resp. ad Orth.</i>	Justin Martyr <i>Questions and Answers to the Orthodox</i>
Lact. <i>Mort. Pers.</i>	Lactantius <i>On the Deaths of the Persecutors</i>
<i>Lib. Gen.</i>	<i>Liber Genealogus</i>
Liban. <i>Or.</i>	Libanius <i>Orations</i>
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>
Matt.	Gospel of Matthew
Oros. <i>Adv. Pag.</i>	Orosius <i>Seven Books of History against the Pagans</i>
Polyc. <i>Ep. Phil.</i>	Polycarp <i>Letter to the Philippians</i>
ps.-Luc. <i>Nero</i>	Pseudo-Lucian <i>Nero or On the Digging of the Isthmus</i>
Quod. <i>Lib prom. praedi. Dei</i>	Quodvultdeus <i>On the Promises and Predictions of God</i>
Rev.	Book of Revelation
Rom.	Romans
Shep. Herm. <i>Vis.</i>	The Shepherd of Hermas <i>Visions</i>
Sib. <i>Or.</i>	Sibylline Oracles

List of Abbreviations

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Soz. <i>HE</i>	Sozomen <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
Sulp. Sev. <i>Chron.</i>	Sulpicius Severus <i>Chronicles</i>
Sulp. Sev. <i>Dial.</i>	Sulpicius Severus <i>Dialogues</i>
Tert. <i>Ad Mart.</i>	Tertullian <i>To the Martyrs</i>
Tert. <i>Ad Ux.</i>	Tertullian <i>To His Wife</i>
Tert. <i>De Pat.</i>	Tertullian <i>On Patience</i>
Tert. <i>De Praes. Haer.</i>	Tertullian <i>Prescription against Heretics</i>
Tert. <i>Fug. Pers.</i>	Tertullian <i>Flight in Persecution</i>
Tert. <i>Scorp.</i>	Tertullian <i>Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting</i>
Vict. <i>Comm. in Apoc.</i>	Victorinus of Pettau <i>Commentary on the Apocalypse</i>
Zech.	Book of Zechariah
Zonar.	Zonaras <i>Extracts of History</i>