

Manipulating *Topoi* in Christian Persecution Narratives
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What is the reason for punishing this man who has not been convicted of adultery or fornication or murder or theft or robbery or, in a word, of having done anything wrong, but merely confess that he bears the Christian name?

-Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.7

The persecution of Christians in Imperial Rome was a formative and integral part of the history of early Christianity.¹ However, recent studies call into question periods of Christian persecution and the existing literary tradition.² If these persecutions did not occur, why do we have persecution stories? To put it another way, how do these early Christian texts exemplify the literary tradition within which they were created, and what does that mean for their narratives and role in constructing early Christian identity? As Leonard Thompson (2002, 28) writes, regarding Polycarp's martyrdom in Roman games, "Did not death in the Roman games affect how the New Religious Movement understood itself?" This evaluation must go beyond merely the historicity of Christian persecutions; it must incorporate an examination of the divergence of

¹ Ancient Christian sources starting with Tertullian's *Apology* and Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* record Christian persecution, creating an identity for Christians which has prevailed through time. Modern authors, such as Thompson 2002 and Keresztes 1973, continue to include persecution as a defining factor of Christian identity.

² Most recently, Shaw 2016 called into question the "Myth of Neronian Persecution" in his provocative and groundbreaking article. Carrier 2014 also casts doubt on the historicity of Neronian persecution through his exploration of the possibility of Christian interpolation in Tacitus. Barnes 1968, Jones 1992, and Harms 2009 have all crafted convincing arguments questioning Domitianic persecution. Keresztes 1971 states that there is no evidence of an imperial decree mandating Christian persecution under the emperors Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, or Marcus Aurelius. Furthermore, Keresztes 1968 argues that Marcus Aurelius did not purposely persecute Christians, while Thompson 1912 calls into question the existence of Aurelian persecution altogether. This is not to say that a consensus has been reached within the scholarly community regarding the historicity of these persecutions. Neronian persecution is still largely considered to be fact, as supported by Jones's 2017 response to Shaw. Keresztes 1973 remarkably advocates for veracity of Domitianic persecution, and while in his 1968 work he does conclude that Marcus Aurelius never took any measures to purposely persecute Christians, he does still hold to the fact that there was persecution present.

Christianity from Judaism. Even further, Roman relationships with the Jews factor into the issue, all of which leads to the question: Why the Christian persecution narrative?

Sources

The literary evidence is a necessary aspect to the study of the history of Christian perception of persecution, especially considering how little contemporary literary evidence exists.³ While the concept of Neronian persecution was adopted and embellished by later sources, such as Tertullian's *Apology* (5.3-4) and Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (2.22; 3.18; 4.9,13), Tacitus's *Annales* 15.44 is the only extant contemporary source which discusses Neronian persecution. Even then, Tacitus includes only a few lines on the subject, which, as Carrier (2014) argues, could have been the result of later Christian interpolation of the manuscript tradition. In his section on Nero, Suetonius also briefly mentions that Christians were punished under Nero, but goes into no greater detail than: "affecti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae" (*Nero*, 16).⁴ These punishments are not described and should not necessarily be taken as persecution. Furthermore, the original text says "Chrestians" not "Christians," which introduces the possibility that Suetonius was writing about another sect of Judaism and not Christianity.⁵ Meanwhile, Cassius Dio, a contemporary of Tertullian, remained silent about Neronian persecution. While some scholars have interpreted

³ Shaw draws attention to the lack of literary documentation regarding Neronian persecution specifically when he says: "Given the weight of all the surviving evidence and the known historical trajectory of the development of the Christian movement, the burden of proof must be placed on those who would use a few phrases in a single passage in Tacitus' *Annales* as sure evidence for a Neronian persecution of Christians" (2015, 92-93). Shaw's observation does not apply solely to the examination of Neronian persecution, since there is a serious issue with the extant literature discussing other persecutions as well. For this examination of early sources, the writings of the Early Church Fathers such as St. Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp have been excluded. Erhman 2012, 312-21, 460-480, 493, 496-99 addresses the issues with determining the authenticity and dating of these sources, which thus complicates their role as viable sources for analyzing the verity of these various Christian persecutions.

⁴ "punishments were inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous superstition," trans. Graves, revised Rives (2007).

⁵ For more on the "Chrestians" instead of "Christians" argument, see Carrier 2014, 269- 272 and Shaw 2015, 83-84.

this gap in Dio's account as a result of Dio's feelings towards Christianity, it is dangerous to assume that Dio purposely excluded anything.⁶ Considering how little contemporary literary evidence exists concerning Christian persecution, especially if Tacitus *Annales* 15.44 was the result of later Christian interpolation, Dio might not have had any knowledge of Christian persecution under Nero.

In regards to Domitianic persecution, the contemporary sources are similarly silent. Suetonius does not mention anything related to Christian persecution. He mentions the execution of Flavius Clemens -whom later sources identify as Christian- but only states that he was executed because he was lazy (*Dom.*, 15). However, Suetonius does not discuss Domitilla, Clemens's wife and Domitian's cousin, whom later sources record as being executed with Clemens.⁷ Cassius Dio's account also fails to document the Christian persecution and the roles Flavius Clemens and Domitilla reportedly played. However, Dio states; "the charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned."⁸ While the execution of Clemens and Domitilla was later considered part of the Christian martyr tradition by Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.*,3.18), all these executions illustrate is that Domitian ordered the death of his close family members who may have been sympathetic to the Jewish cause- among other charges. The link between Clemens and Judaism is significant and, as discussed below, plays an important part in later Christians' construction of their identity.

⁶ For more on Cassius Dio's omission of Christian persecution, and the idea that this stems from his feeling towards Christians, see Shaw 2015, 82 and F. G. Millar 1964, 179.

⁷ Dio 67.14 and Eusebius 3.18 are the first to record Domitilla's execution. However, Dio identifies Domitilla as Clemens's wife whereas Eusebius states that Domitilla is Clemens's niece. This discrepancy over the identity of Domitilla also casts doubt on the credibility of these accounts.

⁸ Cassius Dio, "Book 67," in trans. E. Cary, *Roman History* ,(Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1925). 14.1-2.

One of the first authors to explicitly name both Nero and Domitian as persecutors of Christians is Tertullian in his *Apology*.⁹ It is important to note that this first recording of Neronian and Domitianic persecution was by no means the work of a contemporary author. Rather, Tertullian records these events over a hundred years after the deaths of both Nero and Domitian, if the dating of Tertullian's *Apology*, placing it in late second century, is believed.¹⁰ While the lack of extant sources from the intermittent period does not necessarily mean that there were no other, earlier authors discussing this issue, the silence is still worth noting as the fact remains that none of the other extant sources, deemed worthy enough to survive transmission through the Christian medieval period, contain any reference to Christian persecution under both emperors. Furthermore, at the beginning of the tradition, Domitian is not considered as harshly as Nero. Tertullian states: "Temptaverat et Domitianus, portio Neronis de crudelitate, sed qua et homo, facile coeptum repressit, restitutis etiam quos relegaverat." (*Apol.*, 5.4-5).¹¹ This comment indicates that Domitianic persecution, if it did occur, was considered at the time of Tertullian significantly less severe than Neronian persecution. It is only later in the tradition that Domitianic persecution is elevated to the level of its Neronian counterpart. The fact is that the linkage between these persecutions was not established until significantly after their supposed occurrence.

A detailed analysis of Hadrianic, Antonine, and Aurelian persecution narratives is likewise problematic, as Eusebius was the first source to mention all three.¹² As with Tertullian's

⁹ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, trans. G. H. Rendall, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931). 5.

¹⁰ Barnes 1971 and Wilhite 2007 discuss Tertullian in his historical and social situations.

¹¹ "Domitian, too, who was a good deal of a Nero in cruelty, attempted it (Christian persecution); but, being in some degree human, he soon stopped what he had begun, and restored those he has banished." Trans. Rendall (1931).

¹² Thompson 1912 and Keresztes 1971 discuss the fact that Eusebius is the first author to record the persecutions under these Emperors. Thompson, specifically, both discusses Eusebius's *History* as an introduction to the persecutions and also highlights how much writing about the persecutions is missing.

work, a significant period of time, well over a hundred years, exists between the rule of these emperors and the production of Eusebius's account. Yet again, while the lack of extant sources from this period does not necessarily mean that no one was discussing the persecutions, it is still worth considering that none of the contemporary sources that do survive mention the persecutions. Even then, Eusebius does not dedicate much discussion to these persecutions, and when he does he tends to adopt a positive attitude towards Roman Imperial authority. He includes a letter supposedly written by Hadrian which condemns both persecuting Christians without a trial and blackmailing people by accusing them of being Christians (*Hist. Eccl.*, 4.9). Furthermore, while Eusebius does record that the martyrdom of Polycarp occurred within the reign of Antoninus Pius, he first includes a letter from Pius within which Pius says he will adhere to Hadrian's previously mentioned policy (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.13). Tertullian, a source predating Eusebius, actually stated that these emperors were friends of the Christians. At one point Tertullian says: "Sicut non palam ab eiusmodi hominibus poenam dimovit, ita alio modo palam dispersit, adiecta etiam accusatoribus damnatione, et quidem tetriciore." (*Apol.*, 5.6).¹³ Towards the end of the following section, Tertullian further claims that neither Hadrian nor Pius enforced the laws, which calls into question the historicity of this supposed law. Therefore, the contemporary evidence for Christian persecution is minimal; indeed, the sources offer direct evidence against persecution in the first and second centuries CE.

Biases in Persecution Literature

Nothing can be proved with complete certainty from the missing sources, and the silence alone is not credible evidence to prove that these persecutions did not happen. No historian can

¹³ "M. Aurelius, indeed, did not openly remove the penalty from Christians, but in another way as openly he got rid of it by attaching a condemnation to their accusers, and a harsher one too" trans. Rendall (1931).

know for sure why these ancient authors chose to exclude certain elements from their writing, and speculating about the authors' silence is just that- pure speculation. Therefore, other considerations are necessary for understanding why later Christian authors would claim that Christian persecution occurred under these Emperors.

As the discussion of sources above has shown, there are a few important patterns in the literature: most of the sources concerning Neronian persecution are also a part of the conversation on Domitianic persecution, including Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio. These authors have reasons to be biased against both emperors and join in the common practice of character assassination.¹⁴ Tacitus lived and wrote at the end of Domitian's reign and the beginning of Trajan's. Therefore, Tacitus's constructed image of Nero, the last of the Julio-Claudian line, may be taken as a justification for the Flavians' right to rule.¹⁵ Similarly, Trajan would want to defame Domitian, as the last of the Flavian line, to legitimize his own reign.¹⁶ Tacitus could have been receptive to these imperial desires and tailored his writings accordingly. On a personal level, Tacitus's father-in-law, Agricola, was slighted when Domitian became emperor instead of him, which would provide Tacitus an emotional reason to be biased against Domitian. Suetonius, who wrote shortly after Tacitus during the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, had similar political motivation to purposely assassinate the character of these

¹⁴ For more on character assassination of Roman emperors, see Jan Meister 2014. Meister argues that the ancient Roman historians did not include the accounts of the sexual depravity of emperors in an attempt to accurately profile their sexual relations, but rather as a way to reflect poorly on their characters. Throughout her chapter, Meister lays the groundwork for studying character assassination as well as how these historians utilized moral concepts such as *infamia* and *impudicus* in their purposeful portrayal of the emperors.

¹⁵ For more on the purposeful cultivation of the Flavian image, including the purposeful attempt to distance themselves from Nero, see Steven L. Tuck 2016.

¹⁶ Stanley E. Hoffer 2006 explores accession propaganda in Pliny's letters to Trajan and the "Panegyric". In his analysis, Hoffer explores Trajan's denigration of his predecessor, Domitian, and how this action can have an important impact in accession propaganda.

emperors.¹⁷ Furthermore, Suetonius wrote biographies, not a history.¹⁸ Suetonius delved deeper into the character and person of these emperors, and selected which morals and values to portray them with.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Cassius Dio wrote later than the other two authors, towards the end of the second century. Dio therefore may well have felt the pressure to slander Domitian as a form of predecessor denigration.²⁰ Also, when he was writing, the negative historiographic characterization of these emperors had developed through time. All three of these more contemporary authors wrote scathingly about Nero and Domitian, but they barely mention Christian persecution, if they mention it at all.

As a Christian, Tertullian had a very real and personal connection to the topic of Christian persecution. The work itself in which Tertullian names Nero and Domitian as persecutors of Christians is an apology for Christianity directed at a non-Christian audience. Therefore, it is a work of persuasive rhetoric. Furthermore, Tertullian's *Apology* was addressed to the magistrates on the hill of Byrsa, which would indicate that his audience would be the educated elites of his town and thus familiar with the literary tradition surrounding Nero and Domitian.²¹ By the time Tertullian delivered his *Apology*, the historiographical characterization of Nero and Domitian, propagated by Suetonius and Tacitus, had had many years to develop and become deeply entrenched in literary tradition. Thus, the cruel and depraved natures of these

¹⁷ While Suetonius was writing during the Nerva-Aelian dynasty which would profit from negative propaganda regarding his predecessor, Suetonius's supposed dismissal from Trajan's service calls his allegiance to this dynasty in question. For more on Suetonius's biography on Nero, and the ulterior motives behind his histories, see Hurley 2013.

¹⁸ Stadter 2017 dissects the differences between histories and biographies, and explains what exactly that means for interpreting and understanding their content.

¹⁹ For more on Roman values, see Martin 2012. Martin explores Roman values within the familial and religious aspects of life.

²⁰ For more on the process of predecessor denigration, specifically in the case of Domitian, see Charles 2002.

²¹ It is interesting that Tertullian was able to write so freely in a time of Christian persecution, without explicit fear of repercussions for his writings. For more on Tertullian and the audience for his *Apology*, see Barnes 1971, 104-111.

emperors had become the dominant narrative, allowing Tertullian merely to add Christian persecution onto the extensive list of their heinous crimes. Due to his personal bias as a practicing Christian, Tertullian would have reason to convince his audience of elite, educated, historiographically-minded Romans that Christians were not bad and amoral, but rather victims of these horrific and infamous emperors. Crediting Nero and Domitian with Christian persecution is a rhetorical strategy. Tertullian uses the historiographic representation of the “bad” emperors to appeal to his audience, and the ulterior motives behind Tertullian’s discussion of Christian persecution require an analysis into how the persecution narrative served Tertullian’s purposes and what that means for its veracity.

Eusebius, building on Tertullian and other sources, simply incorporated this historiographic foundation into his account. By the time Eusebius was writing, in the early 300s CE, the characters of Nero and Domitian had been exaggerated by time. Eusebius actually lived through the persecutions of Diocletian and survived long enough to become a close advisor of Constantine. For Eusebius and his audience, persecutions were a fact of life and deeply ingrained in his view of what it meant to be a Christian.²² Thus, it would not have seemed abnormal to hear of persecution stories; it would almost be expected. Eusebius’s experience of having lived through such a period of normalized persecution would surely have warped the way in which he retrospectively recounted past events. Furthermore, Eusebius’s purpose for writing was to write a history of the church, not a history of Rome. Christianity was specifically made the focal point of Eusebius’s work in a way that overemphasizes its true impact in its early years. The reader thus

²² Diocletian is infamous for his harsh and widespread persecution of Christians, and his round of persecutions is often called the “Great Persecution.” There is a consensus among the scholarly community concerning the historicity of these persecutions, see Digeser 2012 for an analysis of the catalyst for the Great Persecution and Diocletian’s role in it.

is led to believe that Christianity had a much more active role in Roman politics, beginning with the first imperial dynasty, than it did in actuality.

However, the biases of these ancient authors are not the only partiality which may impact interpretation- the biases and assumptions of modern historians also affect the reading of these sources. Neronian persecution is a prime example of how expectation creates context. The majority of the evidence used to support Neronian persecution is read within the presupposed context of Neronian persecution. Historians read the sources assuming a Neronian persecution, and are influenced by their own assumptions, stuck in a form of circular reasoning.²³ This presumption has led historians to read other sources such as Pliny the Younger's letter to Emperor Trajan with the expectation of persecution. Corke-Webster (2017) exemplifies the issue by pointing out how the problem is not with the Christians, but rather with Pliny. Since Pliny, as he himself states, was not familiar with the process of Christian trials, his letter to Trajan was the act of a desperate governor trying to protect himself in case his actions, specifically the measures he took against the Christians, spurned later aggravation in the province (Webster 2017, 372-374). In crafting this argument, Corke-Webster illustrates how the letter does not actually support the existence of an Imperial persecution of Christians (2017, 400-406). A similar concept is found in the reading of sources, specifically Cassius Dio, in an attempt to support Domitianic persecution. Dio clearly states that Clemens and his wife were accused of atheism, and Dio himself clarifies that atheism was associated with sympathy for Jews (*Hist.*, 67.14.1-2). However, already in the ancient sources the characters of Clemens and Domitilla were adopted

²³ Shaw 2015 and 2018 points out this cyclical process. Shaw specifically calls attention to the burden of proof and how historians need to acknowledge that the basis of this assumed fact comes from only one source.

and transformed into Christian martyrs, serving as evidence for Christian persecution.²⁴ These biases are seen less often in the context of Hadrianic, Antonine, or Aurelian persecution since the scholarly discourse has long doubted the veracity of these persecutions.²⁵ Nevertheless, historians read these sources and are influenced by their own presumptions, and thus we, as historians, must consider our own bias in reading these sources and the biases others might bring into their arguments and analyses. The combination of the impact of these biases, along with the lack of literary evidence, casts doubt on the veracity of these Christian persecutions. Even if the persecutions did occur, they were most likely small and insignificant, only to be exaggerated by later authors. Yet again, this doubt leads to the question: Why the narrative of Christian persecution? Where did this narrative come from, if not from the actual events?

“Bad” Emperors

Nero and Domitian are portrayed as “bad” emperors²⁶ in the literary tradition, which starts as early as Tacitus and Suetonius. They are cruel, bloodthirsty, sexually perverse, financially profligate, selfish, and effeminate, to name a few of their many negative characteristics.²⁷ These characterizations are not surprising when considering their actions and the

²⁴ Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 3.18 tells of how Domitilla was exiled as a testament to the Christian faith under Emperor Domitian, which is the first mention of Domitilla and Clemens associated with Christianity. Keresztes 1973, 7-11 presents a convincing argument establishing Clemens and Domitilla as Jewish proselytes, which further illustrates the bias of modern readers.

²⁵ Compared to the conversation casting doubt on Neronian persecution, which began in 2015 with Shaw’s article, the discussion of these persecutions has been considered for a longer period of time. In 1912, Thompson published an article reexamining the persecution of Christians at Lyons under the emperor Marcus Aurelius. In 1964, Keresztes entered the academic conversation publishing his paper on law and the persecution of Christians. From there, Keresztes remained active well into the 1980s producing literature which questioned Christian relations and persecutions under these three emperors.

²⁶ For a few reasons, Nero and Domitian deserve to be looked at separately from Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. Mainly, the reputation of both of these emperors underwent similar processes, which the later three emperors did not necessarily experience as drastic character assassination. In this paper, the term “bad” emperors applies specifically to Nero and Domitian, as propagated through their various, albeit extremely biased, literary sources.

²⁷ Some examples of these qualities in Nero may be found in Suetonius “Ner.” 26, 27, 29, 34; Dio 61.5,8 Examples of these qualities in Domitian are recorded in Suetonius “Dom.” 10, 13; Dio *Hist.* 67.1, 3, 11.

extensive reasons these ancient sources would have to commit character assassination.²⁸ Both emperors received their position through familial ties, without having first proved their worth and merit. Therefore, in the eyes of the Roman elite they were unfit rulers from the very start.²⁹ They both also acted in ways which would benefit the common people of Rome, at the expense of the elite.³⁰ Nero would humiliate the Senate and Domitian did not attempt to hide his power in an attempt to appease the Senate.³¹ Therefore, when both men died neither had found favor in the eyes of the Senate, and Domitian even suffered *damnatio memoriae*.³² Since the contemporary literature was written by the educated elite for the educated elite, or others attempting to appease the elite, Senatorial opinions and distaste for these emperors strongly influenced their literary portrayal.³³ Furthermore, Nero and Domitian were both the last of their dynastic lines, meaning that the next imperial family that took over had motivation to portray them in the worst possible light as a form of predecessor denigration. Thus, these emperors gained an extremely negative

²⁸ For more on character assassination see Meister 2014. For more on the development of the myth of Nero, see Champlin 1998. See Charles 2002 for more on character assassination of Domitian.

²⁹ Rhodes 2014 traces and analyzes Domitian's complex relationship with the Senate, and his lack of legitimacy throughout his reign.

³⁰ A primary example of this during Nero's reign is the housing codes which he established after the Great Fire of Rome, see Tac., *Ann.*, 15.43; Suet. "Ner." 38; Cass. Dio, *Hist.*, 62.18.5. These housing codes improved safety for the common people of Rome, at the expense of the Roman elite who owned the housing. Champlin 1998, 103 discusses Nero's heroic actions after the fire. An example of Domitian's legislation benefiting the people at the expense of the elite is recorded in Suetonius "Dom." 9 where Domitian refuses to accept an inheritance which required the heir to pay the Senate annually. As Rhodes 2014 analyzes, Domitian's action in refusing this inheritance benefits a common Roman at the expense of the Senators who lose out on money.

³¹ Nero notoriously degraded the Senators by forcing them to participate in his theatre productions, as seen in Tac., *Ann.*, 14.20; Suet. "Ner." 11, 12. Fantham 2013 discusses Nero's role as a performing prince while McAlindon 1956 discusses the senatorial opposition to Nero. As for Domitian, he isolated himself and did not exempt the Senate from punishments, see Suet. "Dom." 8.3. Rhodes 2014 further explores the tense dynamic between Domitian and the Senate and how the Senate was not pleased with Domitian's lack of pandering to them.

³² Both Suetonius "Dom." 23 and Dio *Hist.* 68.1 record that after Domitian's death, his statues and images were taken down. For modern scholarship on *damnatio memoriae*, see Varner 2004 and Carroll 2011. Meanwhile, John Pollini 1984 analyzes two portraits of Nero which were recut into Vespasian.

³³ For more on ancient audiences and their expectations, see Marincola 2009. Charles 2002, 20-22 describes the authors and audience of literature regarding Domitian and how Domitian's tense relationship with the Senate negatively impacted his portrayal in literature.

characterization in literature, which proved to be fertile ground for Christian authors to attach Christian persecution to the long list of their misdeeds.

However, Nero and Domitian are not the only emperors who exhibited these features, and yet they are the two most commonly associated with Christian persecution. Commodus fulfills all of these requirements perfectly. He was made emperor at a young age by the death of his father, he did not attempt to appease the Senate, and the Senate went so far as to issue a *damnatio memoriae* after his death.³⁴ The literary sources similarly describe Commodus with the same negative qualities attributed to Nero and Domitian.³⁵ Caligula also fits this description, differing only in that he was not the last of his line. Each of these emperors are the villains in their stories, and their personas became like magnets, attracting other bad deeds to their legacy. In this way, the accusation of Christian persecution attaches to the infamy of Nero and Domitian. Yet, neither Commodus nor Caligula are accused of Christian persecution. What is different about Nero and Domitian? Why are Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius, who were otherwise remembered as competent rulers, associated with Christian persecution?

The answer to this question lies within Roman relationships with the Jews. Unlike Nero and Domitian, neither Commodus nor Caligula had any issues with Judean Jews.³⁶ However, like Nero and Domitian, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius all had troubles relating to

³⁴ Cassius Dio 73.4, 17, 21 provides some examples of Commodus's reportedly troubling character. For more on Commodus, see Grant 1994 60-79. It is important to note, however, that the literary sources are not entirely monolithic. Rather, they express common themes.

³⁵ See Suet. Calig. 22, 33-37, 49; Cass. Dio, 59.4-5. For more on Caligula's life and reign, see Wilkinson 2005.

³⁶ It is important to note, though, that Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius did face issues with Jews during their reigns. However, these emperors were not dealing with Judean Jews but rather Alexandrian Jews. Fredriksen 2014 discusses Jewish identity in the diaspora and briefly mentions the unrest with the Alexandrian Jews. For more on the Julio-Claudian relationship with Jews, see Russell 249-265. Fredriksen 2008 analyzes the development of Christianity within its Jewish framework and traces the complicated interrelation between Christianity and Judaism leading up to Augustine's defense of Judaism in his *Confessions*. Keresztes 1989 and Fredriksen 2018 outline early Christianity's place within the Roman empire.

Judean Jews during their reigns.³⁷ Nero is the emperor who starts the Jewish war which Vespasian and Titus get the credit for ending, which is the result of the Jewish revolt of 66 CE (Joseph., *BJ*, Book 3, 1). Domitian, while still dealing with tense relations with the Jews resulting from the sack of the Temple in 70 CE, is also reported to have strictly enforced the *fiscus Iudaicus*.³⁸ During Hadrian's rule, the Temple was destroyed yet again after a large scale revolt in Judea. Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius likewise had to deal with provincial uprisings and the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. The Jews had already had a strained relationship with Rome before these emperors came to power. The monotheistic nature of Judaism meant that the Jews were different from other social and religious groups within the Roman Empire.³⁹ However, the Jews were relatively tolerated due to their long history. Judaism is, and was at that time, an ancient religion. The Romans respected the *mos maiorum*- the ways of the ancestors (Fredriksen 2008, 13). In that regard, since Judaism had been around for so long, the Romans allowed Jews to continue their practices. This does not mean that Judaism was at peace within the Empire. As already noted above, and recorded in Josephus's many volumes of the *Jewish War*, there was much strife between Roman rule and Jewish customs. Adherents of Judaism suffered politically, socially, economically, and religiously. The emotional impact of the destruction of the Temple,

³⁷ For more on Roman military involvement with the Jewish revolts see Goldsworthy 2014. Goldsworthy discusses the Roman military response to the Jewish revolts and in doing so highlights the martial issues facing each of these emperors. For more on why the Jewish revolts started under Nero, see Mason 2014's chapter which analyzes the religious, social, economic, and political problems which catalyzed the Jewish revolt.

³⁸ Both Suetonius and Dio report Domitian's financial troubles leading to his harsh enforcement of this tax. Suetonius recounts how, as a young boy, he saw an old man stripped in court to see if the man was circumcised, to learn if he had been lying about being a Jew to avoid paying the tax (*Dom.*, 12).

³⁹ It is important to note that the word "monotheistic" here does not assume its modern meaning. As Fredriksen 2008 describes, these Jews were monotheistic in that they only worshipped one god. However, Jews did acknowledge the existence of other gods, but still maintained the belief that their god was the one supreme god. Also, Fredriksen calls attention to how Jews were sometimes recorded as having participated in social and political events which focused on the gentile religion. Nevertheless, Josephus records multiple occasions within which the Jews were asked to pray to the image of the emperor and they would refuse (*Jewish War*, Book 2, 9.3, 10.3-5).

done not once but twice at the hands of a Roman Emperor, created deep emotional scars and hardships.

It is from this marginalized tradition that Christianity emerged, new and unknown.⁴⁰ It had kept all of the parts about Judaism that the Romans did not like, specifically the monotheism, resulting in a refusal to worship the Imperial cult, but lost the ancient tradition which the Romans respected. The attitude of the Romans is reflected in Suetonius's description of Christianity as a "genus hominum superstitionis novae ac malificae" ("Ner.," 16).⁴¹ Suetonius only includes this description after praising Nero for punishing the Christians, which explains why the word "novae" would be an ideal adjective for Suetonius to use. A new religion, especially one which forbid the worship of other gods, did not conform to Roman regard for the *mos maiorum*. Therefore Christians, especially the Christian intellectuals Tertullian and Eusebius, needed to legitimize Christianity.⁴² Since Nero and Domitian had a contentious relationship with Jews during their reign and were already considered bad emperors, they would be a logical choice to portray as perpetrators of persecution. Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius function as very similar figures, Roman emperors who could be incorporated in the persecution narratives. Most importantly, though, they all expressed the same defining characteristic: they had issues with Jews. Christian authors adopted the actions against Jews into active persecution against the Christians, playing off of the Roman tendency to conflate Christian and Jew. Creating a past

⁴⁰ Fredriksen 2008 starts with the beginning of Christianity, when it was still a sect of Judaism, and maps out how Christianity developed from Judaism. Fredriksen analyzes how Paul still considered himself a Jew, even after his conversion to a follower of Christ. Furthermore, Fredriksen cites the persecution of Christians by Jewish religious leaders recorded in The Book of Acts more as punishment, and "punishment implies inclusion."

⁴¹ "a race of people of a new and wicked superstition." Translation my own.

⁴² Buell 1999 discusses Clement of Alexandria's role in creating legitimacy for Christianity. In her argument, Buell successfully analyzes Christianity's need to create its own legitimacy using literature and the rhetoric of invented tradition. For more on invented tradition, see Hobsbawm 1983.

riddled with state mandated persecution would not only give Christianity the tradition it craved, but would also place Christianity within the center of activities and government in Rome.

Christianity did not merely exist, it was important enough for these “bad” emperors to actively try to eradicate. Thus, Christian invention of tradition resulted in these falsified persecution narratives.

Christian Invention of Tradition

Early Christian authors were an integral part of the creation of tradition. Since Christianity did not yet have a defined past or identity, these early authors had the opportunity to create and shape Christianity in a transformative way. Tertullian, in his *Apology*, and Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, especially capitalized on this opportunity to define Christianity, both to non-Christians and Christians alike. However, they did not see themselves as creating a new category of literature. Instead, these authors wrote within the literary traditions mandated by their genre. In their writings, Tertullian and Eusebius both had an ulterior motive: to give Christianity the credibility and relevance which comes with tradition. Both authors utilized the *topoi* of their genres to accomplish their missions of creating a past for Christianity, which involved a narrative of persecution.

Tertullian used the *topoi* of classical rhetoric within his apology to weave a narrative of persecution in a subtle yet clever way. The very nature of apologetic writing is to be persuasive, and so merely from the genre chosen the audience knows that Tertullian is trying to argue a point.

⁴³ As Sider points out, Tertullian’s rhetorical education would have introduced the rhetorical use of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* (1971, 14). In his *Apology*, Tertullian utilizes all three of these

⁴³ Sider 1971 and Dunn 2008 both analyze Tertullian’s writing within the framework of classical rhetoric. Sider offers a more general overview of Tertullian’s works, including his *Apology*, while also introducing the aspects of rhetoric and explaining how specifically Tertullian’s works exemplify them.

strategies to argue in defense of Christianity. His discussion of Christian persecution, in general, exemplifies his use of all three tools in crafting his argument to convince his fellow Roman citizens that Christianity has been dealt with unfairly. At one point, Tertullian says:

Consulite commentarios vestros, illic reperietis primum Neronem in hanc sectam cum maxime Romae orientem Caesariano gladio ferocisse. Sed tali dedicatore damnationis nostrae etiam gloriamur. Qui enim scit illum, intellegere potest non nisi grande aliquod bonum a Nerone damnatum. Temptaverat et Domitianus, portio Neronis de crudelitate, sed qua et homo, facile coeptum repressit, restitutis etiam quos relegaverat. Tales semper nobis insecutores, iniusti, impii, turpes, quos et ipsi damnare consuestis, a quibus damnatos restituere soliti estis.

Consult your histories. There you will find that Nero was the first to rage the imperial sword against this school in the very hour of its rise in Rome. But we glory- nothing less than glory- to have such a man inaugurate our condemnation. One who knows Nero can understand that, unless a thing were good- and very good- it was condemned by Nero. And Domitian too, who was a good deal of a Nero in cruelty, attempted it; but, being in some degree human, he soon stopped what he had begun, and restored those he had banished. Such are ever our persecutors- men unjust, impious, foul, - men whom you yourselves are accustomed to condemn; and those whom they condemn you have become accustomed to restore (*Apol.*, 5.3-4).⁴⁴

In the above passage, Tertullian undertakes an appeal to *pathos* through capitalizing on the feelings of his audience towards these infamous emperors. The historiographic characterizations of both Nero and Domitian would have been well known by Tertullian's audience. They would be familiar with the portraits propagated by biased authors, who committed character assassination, and would have a negative view of these "bad" emperors. Therefore, Tertullian's reference to these emperors would surely have recalled the feelings of animosity in his audience, elicited by the original sources of Suetonius and Dio. The stirring words used to describe Christian persecutors- "iniusti, impii, turpes"- remind Tertullian's audience that they themselves were also victims of the same cruelty which attacked Christians. These "bad" emperors then serve as a

⁴⁴ Trans. Glover (1931).

uniting factor between the Christians and non-Christians, a common enemy who victimized both groups. In this way, Tertullian's emotive approach, *drawing on pathos*, connects the shared past of these Romans in an attempt to garner empathy for Christianity.

Tertullian additionally employs the rhetorical pillar of *logos* when he establishes the Roman precedent for condemning persecutors of Christians. Tertullian reminds his audience that Nero and Domitian are men "quos et ipsi damnare consuestis" (*Apol.* 5.4). This statement relies on the Roman adherence to the *mos maiorum* and aversion to new ways. Since Romans are careful about following previously established examples and models of behavior, by pointing out that there is already a precedent for condemning Christian persecutors, Tertullian demonstrates a model for his audience to follow. Despite the fact that Nero and Domitian were condemned for their other deeds, and not specifically Christian persecution, Tertullian's connection of their infamous legacy to their persecution of Christians creates a connection in the minds of his audience between the dreadful acts of dreadful people which they denounce and Christian persecution. Tertullian continues on to call attention to the fact that "a quibus damnatos restituere soliti estis." Therefore, not only does Tertullian demonstrate the precedent for an association between bad morals and Christian persecution, he goes further and reminds his audience of their previous leniency towards the victims of these emperors. With this model for treating both Christians and Christian persecutors, Tertullian illustrates to his audience that their logical action should be to follow the established precedent.

Tertullian adds *ethos* to his argument through establishing a history for Christianity, which lends credibility to the religion as a whole. Yet again, Tertullian's language indicates a deeper purpose for this passage. Tertullian first introduces the concept of persecution by telling his

audience to consult their histories. This sentence is the equivalent of modern day footnotes- it gives credibility to Tertullian's statement and gives his audience other literature to look into for more information. Moreover, Tertullian asserts that Nero persecuted Christianity as it was "maxime Romae orientem." This phrase links the very beginning of Christianity to the emperor. Christianity has, from the moment of its inception, been important and involved in imperial affairs. Whether intentional or not, when Tertullian crafted this account of persecution, within which Christianity was tied to the misuse of imperial power from the very beginning, he aided in creating a much needed heritage for Christianity at the center of Roman rule. Establishing this custom of persecution for Christianity lends credibility to Christianity, serving as the *ethos* of Tertullian's argument as it allows Christianity to adhere to the *mos maiorum*. Therefore, Tertullian's rhetorical strategies strengthen the persecution narrative at the same time the persecution narrative adds credibility to Tertullian's argument.

Eusebius similarly applies the *topoi* of his genre, history, in crafting the invention of the persecution narrative. One such *topos* is the tendency for a history to comment on contemporary events. Eusebius lived through the Diocletian persecution of Christians and published his *Ecclesiastical History* in the mid 320s, after Constantine legalized Christianity. Eusebius was documented as being close to Constantine, and his *History*, specifically the persecution narrative, served to legitimize Constantine's support for Christianity.⁴⁵ Since Constantine not only legalized Christianity, but also reportedly converted, inventing this tradition benefited the public images of both Christianity and Constantine. Constantine would have need to justify his rule, considering how he came to be the sole ruler of the Roman Empire after a period of the

⁴⁵ For more on the world in which Eusebius was educated and writing in, as well as his relationship with Constantine, see Barnes 1981.

Tetrarchy.⁴⁶ In his account, Eusebius places Christians, through persecution, in the center of Roman politics starting within the first Imperial dynasty (*Hist. Eccl.*, 2). Creating a venerable, ancient tradition allows Christianity to conform to Roman respect for *mos maiorum*, and therefore justify Constantine’s decision to convert.

Eusebius further utilizes the Christian persecution narrative specifically to justify Constantine’s rule. Eusebius first establishes the link between Christian persecution and the “bad” emperors, especially their cruelty towards the elites (*Hist. Eccl.*, 2.22, 3.17, 4.9). This connection elicits an emotional response from the elites of Eusebius’s day, who are both reminded of the ills their ancestors suffered and are wary to avoid a similar fate. The link between mistreatment of the elites and persecution of Christians is especially clear when Eusebius states:

Πολλήν γε μὴν εἰς πολλοὺς ἐπιδειξάμενος ὁ Δομετιανὸς ὠμότητα οὐκ ὀλίγον τε τῶν ἐπὶ Ῥώμης εὐπατριδῶν τε καὶ ἐπισήμων ἀνδρῶν πλῆθος οὐ μετ’ εὐλόγου κρίσεως κτείνας μυρίους τε ἄλλους ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρας ταῖς ὑπὲρ τὴν ἐνορίαν ζημιώσας φυγαῖς καὶ ταῖς τῶν οὐσιῶν ἀποβολαῖς ἀναιτίως, τελευτῶν τῆς Νέρωνος θεοεχθρίας τε καὶ θεομαχίας διάδοχον ἑαυτὸν κατεστήσατο. δεῦτερος δῆτα τὸν καθ’ ἡμῶν ἀνεκίνει διωγμὸν, καίπερ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶ Οὐεσπασιανοῦ μηδὲν καθ’ ἡμῶν ἄτοπον ἐπινοήσαντος.

When Domitian had given many proofs of his great cruelty and had put to death without any trial no small number of men distinguished at Rome by family and career, and had punished without a cause myriads of other notable men by banishment and confiscation of their property, he finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us, though his father, Vespasian, had planned no evil against us. (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.17)⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Diocletian’s Tetrarchy consisted of two senior emperors (*Augusti*) and two junior emperors (*Caesares*), paired up to rule over the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire, respectively. In this model, succession was determined to maintain the four distinct rulers. Constantine’s position as the sole Emperor of the Roman Empire was an unprecedented change and one that came with conflict, which would mean Constantine would especially need to justify his rule. For more on Constantine and the Tetrarchy, see Barnes 2011, 46-66.

⁴⁷ Trans. Lake (1926).

Within this passage, Eusebius first lists the crimes committed against the elites and builds up to the persecution of Christians. The list of misdeeds reaches its zenith when Eusebius states that Domitian “τελευτῶν τῆς Νέρωνος θεοεχθρίας τε καὶ θεομαχίας διάδοχον ἑαυτὸν κατεστήσατο.” The dramatic accumulation and order of events leads the reader to believe that mistreatment of the elites is the first stepping stone to Christian persecution and the two events are inextricably linked.

Eusebius takes this connection even further when he ends this section by drawing attention to Vespasian’s innocence. Vespasian had a significantly better reputation than those of Nero and Domitian. Therefore, the only emperors convicted in this specific passage are the “bad” emperors. Eusebius, by grouping Christian persecution with the notorious emperors, and *only* the notorious emperors, links any emperor who participates in Christian persecution with these most infamous emperors. The subtle relationship between these factors serves as a subtle form of predecessor denigration. Constantine’s predecessor, Diocletian, actively persecuted Christians. Eusebius thus created the association between Diocletian, the bad emperors, and abuse of the elites. The denigration of Diocletian and his character would improve the light in which Constantine was considered and further justify his role as sole ruler. In this way, Eusebius utilizes the historiographic characteristics of these previous emperors to legitimize the actions and authority of the reigning emperor.

Another literary *topos* common in histories, which Eusebius employs, is the assumption of the voice of his subjects, exemplified in his inclusion of various letters and accounts from church fathers and other important historical figures.⁴⁸ These letters function in the same way as

⁴⁸ A few primary examples of such quotations in the *Ecclesiastical History* are the letter from Hadrian in 4.9, a letter from Antoninus 4.13, the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp 4.14, the writings of Melito 4.26.

the speeches recorded by historians such as Appian and Tacitus.⁴⁹ The speeches recorded by these historians are not what their historical figures actually said, since these historians would have had no way of knowing what specifically their subjects had said. Similarly, Eusebius includes these excerpts and quotations which he might have fabricated.⁵⁰ Eusebius previously exaggerated other accounts in his history to make Christianity seem more important, which indicates his desire to place Christianity within the center of Roman history.⁵¹ If one were to consider these excerpts the way one considers speeches within other Roman histories, the meaning behind a fair amount of this writing would need to be reconsidered. Eusebius should be viewed as the author of such quotations and letters, especially considering that much of what he quotes is only extant from his writings. Thus, he would truly be the main source, excluding Tertullian, to record Christian persecution. The letters and events that Eusebius includes give the impression to the reader that Christianity did have a corpus of literature. They convey the point that other authors have written about Christianity, and the letters from the emperors would leave the reader to believe that not only was Christianity around in Rome, it was important enough to warrant a response from multiple emperors.

Conclusion

The newness of Christianity demanded a solution if Christianity was ever going to be respected and acknowledged by Roman elites. Thus, Christian authors incorporated the

⁴⁹Levene 2010 analyzes the function of speeches in ancient histories. Levene closely examines the purpose and use of speeches in Tacitus, while introducing the groundwork for evaluating speeches.

⁵⁰ The various sources that Eusebius cite also cast doubt on his credibility. Few are extant, and those which are have serious issues concerning their authenticity and dating, see Erhman 2012, 312-21, 460-480, 493, 496-99.

⁵¹ The most obvious example of Eusebius's aptitude for embellishment is a story recorded in 2.2 within which Eusebius recounts that Emperor Tiberius heard about Jesus's life and mission and wanted to add him to the pantheon of gods. However, the Senate was angry that they were not consulted first so they denied Tiberius's request. This story is not included in any secular histories and therefore brings Eusebius's credibility into question.

established traditions of Rome, specifically the historiography of the “bad emperor,” along with the tradition of Jewish strife to invent a past worthy of a prominent religion in Rome. Tertullian and Eusebius especially employed the practices of their respective literary traditions to invent this tradition for Christianity. These early Christian sources must therefore be read within their own context and analyzed within their genre; and not as a separate genre of Christian writing. This is the only way to truly understand these authors’ intents and utilize them to the fullest extent.

Furthermore, this conjecture does create the possibility for additional exploration. One question in particular worth considering is how the invention of tradition impacted other early Christian literature. One especially interesting source to look into would be the Book of Revelation. The commonly held belief that Revelation dates to the time of Domitian, and was written in response to Domitianic persecution, has recently been argued both for and against.⁵² Revelation exhibits the characteristics of trauma literature, and if the persecution under Domitian was invented by Christian authors, then what trauma spurred the creation of the Book of Revelation?⁵³ Questions such as this emphasize the importance of understanding the circumstances from which Christianity arose, circumstances which fueled the invention of tradition, and how much of an impact these situations truly had on every aspect of early Christianity.

⁵² Robinson 1976 suggests an earlier date for the Book of Revelation, whereas Harris 1979 and Cukrowski 2003 argue for its dating during the time of Domitian. Van De Water 2000, however, suggests that Revelation stems from oppressive forces unrelated to the current emperor.

⁵³ For more on trauma literature and its study in the Bible, see Garber 2015. Garber discusses the recent studies into trauma literature while also defining and describing the characteristics of trauma literature.

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