# NERO

MAKERS OF HISTORY SERIES

BY

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# FOREWORD.

 HE Apostle Paul exhorted the Roman Christians to obey civil leaders, saying, "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same" (Rom. 13:3). The civil magistrate, he pointed out, does not bear his sword in vain, for he is God's minister to punish evildoers.

In time, Paul would join many other believers as the Christian victims of Roman persecution. The Roman historian Tacitus said that Christians were made scapegoats for the burning of Rome because they were considered haters of mankind.Describing their deaths, he said, "Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it."

How can Paul's teaching about civil leaders be reconciled with the terrible experiences described by Tacitus? Theologians and political philosophers have labored over Paul's prescription for civil magistrates and the extent of Christian obligation under wicked rulers. For pragmatic as well as moral reasons, rulers should reward good works and punish evil. Although German Jews were faithful citizens, many of whom had served in the army in World War I, Hitler irrationally singled them out for blame and punishment. Although Kulaks were hard-working farmers, Stalin destroyed both them and their capacity to provide food for the struggling Soviet Union. Such rulers are not merely guilty of poor judgment; they are madmen.

The idea of a madman at the helm of the state or the evil genius with power is one of the most alluring themes of history and drama. Whether its Shakespeare's Macbeth or Richard III, or history's Hitler or Stalin, the villainous ruler is a fascinating character.

Nero, the Roman emperor responsible for falsely blaming Christians for the burning of Rome, was just such a madman. He began the first wave of persecution against the early church and was also responsible for the deaths of the Apostle Paul and Apostle Peter. During his reign, which extended from A.D. 54 to 68, he ruled viciously from beginning to end, sometimes banishing, but usually killing his opponents or those he feared as threats to his power.

His victims included his mother, stepbrother, wife, and a one-time mistress. Nero himself was the last to die under his reign. When his enemies were closing in on him, he begged a reluctant servant to kill him.

Such political violence is foreign to us. The Christian contours of our American and Reformational cultural experience blind us to the political practices of most times and places in history. Vanquished political leaders in our day appear as commentators on political talk shows. In most historic settings, their severed heads would have adorned bridge posts.

This human advancement is not due to our own innate or evolutionary enlightenment. Rather, it is God's gracious providence, which includes His use of wicked men and actions to advance His kingdom. A God-centered interpretation of history was most aptly experienced and stated by Joseph. Speaking to the brothers who had betrayed him and sold him into slavery, Joseph said, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

God then has used the evils committed by Nero for good, but that does not lessen the true wickedness of his reign. Roman history is full of accounts of wicked, ruthless, and deranged Caesars both before and after Nero, including two described in this biography—Caligula and Claudius. This helps modern readers understand the political context, but still does not justify political madness.

How then did Rome, as well as other nations in history, endure so long with wicked or incompetent rulers? Historian Jacob Abbott answers this well, observing "The reader of history has often occasion to be perfectly amazed at the lengths to which human endurance will go, when a governmental power of any kind is once established, in tolerating imbecility and folly in the individual representatives of it."

In Nero's case, Roman legions and the senate provided a counterbalance to his actions. It also helped that he had some capable advisors, such as the philosopher Seneca, who was a tutor in his early years, a valuable counselor during much of his reign, and another victim after a suspicious Nero ordered his death. Seneca's writings, particularly on the subject of mercy, would later inspire the writing of a book by a young French classical scholar named John Calvin.

Part of Nero's insanity was his devotion to his perceived artistic gifts. Shocking his audiences and debasing the dignity of his office, Nero performed in stage plays, composed poetry, and competed for artistic honors. His judges, fearing for their lives, acclaimed his artistry. His songs may have bored his unwilling listeners, but this pursuit of art detracted Nero from the traditional military exploits of the Caesars.

There was a major war, however, going on during Nero's time. It was a war of liberation for the souls of men. In one of the physical scuffles found in the Book of Acts, Christians were accused of "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The fallen world, so disoriented by sin, was actually being turned right side up by Christianity. Nero's life and times parallel the events found in Acts and the Epistles; his kingdom and the decadent first century Roman culture stand in glaring contrast with the advance of Christ's reign and the lives of those who were being converted.

Nero was a madman, who demanded and received obedience and honor from the fearful around him, and for a short time received it. Those Romans who overthrew him did not understand the root of his madness,

but the Christians who suffered under his reign did. Nero's madness was sin.

A rival kingdom was established just prior to Nero's reign. At the time of the event, it was announced to shepherds by angels. Some centuries earlier, it was declared that this kingdom, and more particularly, this King, would break the nations with a rod of iron and dash His enemies to pieces like clay pottery. It was in this manner that Psalm 2 proclaims Christ's Incarnation as a declaration of God's triumph over His enemies.

Nero's life remains an example to emperors, nations, and people who do not bow before the true King. Nero's life teaches us by negative example that good rulers should not be a terror to good works, but to evil.

Ben House
Epiphany Season, 2009


# NERO'S MOTHER.

IN ancient times, when the city of Rome was at the height of its power and splendor, it was the custom for the principal families to possess, in addition to their city residences, rural villas for summer retreats, which they built on picturesque sites at a little distance from the city, sometimes in the interior of the country, and sometimes upon the sea-shore. There were many attractive places to visit for relaxation or pleasure in the neighborhood of Rome. Among them was Antium.

Antium was situated on the sea-coast about thirty miles south of the Tiber. A bold cliff projects into the sea, affording from its downward slope the most extended and magnificent views on every side. On the north, looking from the cliff of Antium, the eye follows the line of the coast away to the mouth of the Tiber; while on the south, the view is terminated at about the same

distance by the cliffs of Circe, which is the second cape that marks the shore of Italy in going southward from Rome. Toward the interior from Antium, there extends a broad and beautiful plain bounded by wooded hills toward the shore and by ranges of mountains in the distance beyond. On the southern side of the cape, was a small harbor where vessels from all the neighboring seas had been accustomed to bring in their cargoes or to seek shelter in storms for as long as anyone can remember.

The beauty and invigorating climate of Antium made it a very attractive place of summer vacation for the people of Rome; and in process of time, when the city attained to an advanced stage of opulence and luxury, the Roman noblemen built villas there. Some chose sites upon the natural terraces and flat open spaces above the cliffs, which looked off over the sea, and others chose cool and secluded retreats in the valleys, on the land. It was in one of these villas that Nero was born.

Nero's father belonged to a family which had enjoyed for several generations a considerable degree of distinction among the Roman nobility, though known by a somewhat whimsical name. The family name was Brazenbeard, or to speak more exactly, it was Ahenobarbus, which is the Latin equivalent. The name certainly was not an attractive one, though the family had contrived to dignify it in some degree by assigning to it an origin out of the ordinary course of nature. There was a tradition that in ancient times a prophet appeared to one of the ancestors of the line, and after foretelling certain extraordinary events which were to occur at some future period, stroked down the beard of his listener with his hand and changed it to the color of brass in miraculous

testimony of the divine authority of the message. The man received the name of Brazenbeard in consequence, and he and his descendants ever afterward retained it.

The family of the Brazenbeards was one of high rank and distinction, though at the time of Nero's birth it was, like most of the other prominent Roman families, extremely and recklessly extravagant and corrupt. Nero's father, especially, was a very bad man. He was accused of the very worst of crimes, and he led a life of constant remorse and terror. His wife, Agrippina, Nero's mother, was as wicked as he; and it is said that when the messenger came to him to announce the birth of his child, he uttered some exclamation of ill-humor and contempt, and said that whatever came from Agrippina and him could not but be fraught with ruin to Rome.

The rank and station of Agrippina in Roman society was even higher than that of her husband. She was the sister of the emperor. The name of the emperor, her brother, was Caligula. He was the third in the series of Roman emperors, Augustus Cæsar, the successor of Julius Cæsar, having been the first. The term emperor, however, had a very different meaning in those days. It seems to denote now a sovereign ruler, who exercises officially a general jurisdiction which extends over the whole government of the state. In the days of the Romans it included, in theory at least, only military command. The word was *imperator,* which meant commander, and the station which it denoted was simply that of general-in-chief over the military forces of the republic.

In the early periods of Roman history, every possible precaution was taken to keep the military power in a condition of very strict subordination to the authority

of the civil magistrate and the law. Very severe regulations were adopted to secure this end. No portion of the army, except such small detachments as were required for preserving order within the walls, was allowed to approach the city. Great commanders, returning from their victorious campaigns, were obliged to halt and encamp at some distance from the gates, and there await the orders of the Roman Senate. The Senate was, in theory, the great repository of political power. This Senate was not, however, as the word might seem to denote in modern times, a well-defined and compact body of legislators, designated individually to the office, but rather a class of hereditary nobles, very numerous, deriving their power from an extended time back beyond memory, and from that strange and unaccountable feeling of deference and awe with which the mass of mankind always looks up to an established, and especially an ancient, aristocracy. The Senate was accustomed to convening at stated times in assemblies which were sometimes conducted with a proper degree of formality and order, but at other times, exhibited scenes of great tumult and confusion. Their power, however, whether regularly or irregularly exercised, was supreme. They issued edicts, they enacted laws, they allotted provinces, they made peace, and they declared war. The armies, and the generals who commanded them, were the agents employed to do their bidding.

The Roman armies consisted of vast bodies of men which, when not in actual service, were established in permanent encampments in various parts of the empire, wherever it was deemed necessary that troops should be stationed. These great bodies of troops were the celebrat-

ed Roman legions, and they were renowned throughout the world for their discipline, their admirable organization, the swiftness of their movements, and for the indomitable courage and energy of the men. In fact, each legion constituted a separate and independent community. Its camp was its city. Its general was its king. In time of war it moved, of course, from place to place, as the situation demanded of the service required; but in time of peace it established itself with great formality in a spacious and permanent encampment, which was uniformly arranged and fortified with ramparts and moats. Within the confines of the camp, the tents were arranged in rows with broad spaces for streets between them; and in a central position, before a space which served the purpose of a public square, the rich and ornamented pavilions of the commander and chief, and of the other generals, rose above the rest, like the public edifices of a city. The encampment of a Roman legion was, in fact, an extended and populous city, only that the dwellings consisted of tents instead of being formed of solid and permanent structures of wood or stone.

Roman legions were encamped in this way in various places throughout the empire, wherever the Senate thought proper to station them. There were some in Syria and the East; some in Italy; some on the banks of the Rhine; and it was through the practice of organizing the forces this way, that the Romans held the whole European world under their sway. The troops were satisfied to yield submission to the orders of their commanders, since they received through them an abundant supply of food and clothing, and lived ordinary lives of ease and indulgence. In return, they were willing to march from

place to place wherever they were ordered, and to fight any enemy when brought into the field. The commanders obtained food and clothing for them by means of the tribute which they exacted from conquered provinces and from the plunder of sacked cities in times of actual war. These armies were naturally interested in preserving order and maintaining in general the authority of law throughout the communities which they controlled; for without law and order the industrial pursuits of men could not go on, and, of course, they were well aware that if in any country production were to cease, tribute must soon cease too. In reading history we find that a fearful proportion of the accounts which describe the achievements of ancient armies, is occupied with detailing deeds of violence, plunder, and crime; but we must not conclude from this that the influence of these vast organizations was wholly evil. Such extended and widely dissimilar masses of population as those which were spread over Europe and Asia, in the days of the Romans, could be kept subject to the necessary restraints of social order only by some very powerful agency. The legions organized by the Roman Senate, and stationed here and there throughout the extended territory, established social order. But still, most of the time the power which a legion wielded was power in times of peace. It accomplished its end by its simple presence, and by the sentiment of awe which its presence inspired; and the nations and tribes within the circle of its influence lived in peace and pursued their industrial occupations without interference, protected by the awareness which everywhere pervaded the minds of men that the Roman power was at hand. The legion hovered, as it were, like a dark

cloud in their horizon, silent and at rest; but containing, as they well knew, the latent elements of thunder, which might at any time burst upon their heads. Therefore, in its ordinary operation, its influence was good. However, occasional intervals of commotion would occur, when the actions of the legion were violent, cruel, and mercilessly evil. Nevertheless, mankind in subsequent ages, for all the good that came from the agency, found very little good to report; while every deed of violence and crime which was committed by its agency furnished materials for an entertaining and exciting story. The good which was accomplished extended perhaps through a long, but monotonous, period of inactivity and peace. The evil was brief, but was attended with a rapid succession of events and varied by innumerable incidents; so that the historian was accustomed to pass lightly over the one, with a few indifferent words of cold description, while he employed all the force of his genius in amplifying and adorning the narratives which commemorated the other. As violent and oppressive as the military rulers were, by whom in ancient times the world was governed, they were less violent and oppressive than the general tenor of history makes them seem; and their crimes were, in some degree at least, offset by the useful function which they generally fulfilled—restraining and repressing all disorder and violence except their own.

The Roman legions, in particular, were for many centuries kept in tolerable subjection to the civil authorities of the capitol; but they were growing stronger and stronger all the time, and becoming more and more conscious of their strength. Every new commander who acquired honor and acclaim by his victories added greatly

to the importance and influence of the army in its political relations. The great Julius Cæsar, in the course of his foreign conquests and of his prolonged and terrible wars with Pompey, and with his other rivals, made enormous strides in this direction. Every time he returned to Rome at the head of his victorious legions, he overawed the capitol more and more. Octavius Cæsar, the successor of Julius, known generally in history by the name of Augustus, completed what his uncle had begun. He made the military authority, though still nominally and in form subordinate, in reality paramount and supreme. The Senate, indeed, continued to assemble and to exercise its usual functions. Consuls and other civil magistrates were chosen and invested with the insignia of supreme command; and the customary forms and usages of civil administration, in which the subordination of the military to the civil power was fully recognized, were all continued. Still the actual authority of the civil government was wholly overawed and overpowered; and the haughty imperator dictated to the Senate and directed the administration, just as he pleased.

It required great genius in the commanders to bring up the army to this position of domination and power; but once up, it sustained itself there, without the necessity of ability of any kind, or of any lofty qualities whatever, in those subsequently placed at the head. In fact, the reader of history has often occasion to be perfectly amazed at the lengths to which human endurance will go, when a governmental power of any kind is once established, in tolerating imbecility and folly in the individual representatives of it. It seems to be immaterial whether the dominant power assumes the form of a dy-

nasty of kings, a class of hereditary nobles, or a line of military generals. It requires genius and statesmanship to instate it, but, once instated, no degree of stupidity, folly or crime in those who wield it, seems sufficient to exhaust the spirit of submission with which man always bows to established power—a spirit of submission which is so universal, and so patient and enduring, and which so transcends all the bounds of expediency and of reason, as to seem like a blind instinct implanted in the very soul of man by the Author of his being—a constituent and essential part of his nature as a gregarious animal. In fact, without some such instinct, it would seem impossible that those extended communities could be formed and sustained, without which man, if he could exist at all, could certainly never fully develop his capacities and powers.

However this may be in theory, it is certain in fact that the work of bringing up the military power of ancient Rome to its condition of supremacy over all the civil functions of government was the work of men of the most exalted capacities and powers. Marius and Sylla, Pompey and Cæsar, Antony and Augustus evinced, in all their deeds, a high degree of sharp mental discernment, soundness of judgment, energy, and greatness of soul. Mankind, though they may condemn their vices and crimes, will never cease to admire the grandeur of their ambition, and the magnificence, comprehensiveness, and efficiency of their plans of action. The whole known world was the theater of their contests, and the armies which they organized and disciplined, and which they succeeded at length in bringing under the control of one central and consolidated command, formed the

most extended and imposing military power that the world had ever seen. It was not only vast in extent but permanent and self-sustaining in character. A wide and complicated, but most effectual system was adopted for maintaining it. Its discipline was perfect. Its organization was complete. It was equally trained to remain quietly at home in its city-like encampments, in time of peace, or to march, or set up camp, or fight in time of war. Such a system, once formed, could afterward sustain itself; and not only so, but it was found capable of holding up, by its own inherent power, the most imbecile and incompetent men, as the nominal rulers of it.

Caligula, for example, the brother of Agrippina, and the reigning emperor at the time of Nero's birth, was a man wholly unfit to exercise any high command. He was elevated to the post by the influence of the army, simply because he was the most prominent man among those who had hereditary claims to the succession, and was, therefore, the man whom the army could most easily place in the office of chieftain, and retain most securely there. His life, however, in the lofty station to which accident thus raised him, was one of continual folly, vice and crime. He lived generally at Rome, where he expended the immense revenues that were at his command in the most wanton and senseless extravagance. In the earlier part of his career the object of much of his extravagance was the gratification of the people; but after a time he began to seek only pleasures for himself, and at length he manifested the most wanton spirit of spite and cruelty toward others. He seemed, at last, to hate the whole human species and to take pleasure in teasing and tormenting men whenever an occasion of any kind

occurred to afford him the opportunity. They were accustomed in those days to have public events and shows in vast amphitheaters which were covered, when the sun was hot, with awnings. Sometimes when an amphitheater was crowded with spectators and the heat of the sun was unusually powerful, Caligula would order the awnings to be removed and the doors to be kept closed so as to prevent the people from exiting; and then he would amuse himself with the signs of discomfort and suffering which so crowded a concourse in such an exposure would necessarily exhibit. He kept wild animals for the combats which took place in these amphitheaters, and when it was difficult to procure the flesh of sheep and oxen for them, he would feed them with men, throwing criminals and captives into their dens. Some persons who offended him, he ordered to be branded in the face with hot irons, by which means they were not only subjected to cruel torture at the time, but were frightfully disfigured for life. Sometimes when the sons of noble or distinguished men displeased him, or when under the influence of his caprice or spite he conceived some feeling of hatred toward them, he would order them to be publicly executed; and he would require their parents to be present and witness the scene. At one time after such an execution he required the wretched father of his victim to come and dine with him at his palace; and while at supper he talked with his guest all the time, in a light, joking, and mirthful manner, in order to trifle with and insult the mental anguish of the sufferer. At another time when he had commanded a distinguished senator to be present at the execution of his son, the senator said that he would go, in obedience to the emperor's orders, but

humbly asked permission to shut his eyes at the moment of the execution that he might be spared the dreadful anguish of witnessing the dying struggles of his son. The emperor in reply immediately condemned the father to death for daring to make such a recklessly brave proposal.

Of course the connection of Agrippina, the mother of Nero, with such a royalty as this, while it gave her a very high social position in the Roman community, could not contribute much to her happiness. In fact all who were connected with Caligula in any way lived in continual terror, for so wanton and capricious was his cruelty, that all who were liable to come under his notice at all were in constant danger. Agrippina herself at one time incurred her brother's displeasure, though she was fortunate enough to escape with her life. Caligula discovered, or pretended to discover, a conspiracy against him, and he accused Agrippina and another of his sisters named Livilla of being implicated in it. Caligula sent a soldier to the leader of the conspiracy to cut off his head, and then he banished his sisters from Rome and shut them up on the island of Pontia, telling them when they went away to beware for he had swords for them as well as islands, in case of need.

At length Caligula's terrible tyranny was brought to a sudden end by his assassination; and Agrippina, in consequence of this event, was not only released from her bondage but raised to a still higher eminence than she had enjoyed before. The circumstances connected with these events will be related in the next chapter.