

## BOOK REVIEW

*Nero-Antichrist: The Founding and Fashioning of a Paradigm.* By SHUSHMA MALIK. *Classics After Antiquity.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xv + 228.

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Shushma Malik's book enters a fertile field of recent Neronian scholarship with a novel story to tell. It has two major goals: (1) to offer a history of the Nero-Antichrist paradigm and (2) to bridge the disciplinary gap between approaches to Nero by ancient historians and by New Testament scholars. By building on methodologies from Charles Martindale and Hayden White, Malik offers compelling readings of a wide-ranging body of Neronian receptions centered on the idea of Nero as Christianity's ultimate eschatological adversary.

Malik's first chapter is a brief introduction that surveys the book's major movements from the biblical material to its late antique reception where, she argues, the Nero-Antichrist paradigm was solidified, to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reception of that paradigm. She positions her book at the intersection of two fields and two Neros. By bringing New Testament Studies into dialogue with the critical historiographical methodologies that have shaped Ancient History's recent approaches to Nero, Malik offers a theoretically-informed history of the Nero-Antichrist paradigm, its creation and its various receptions.

Chapter 2 successfully challenges the belief that Nero lies behind the eschatological adversaries of certain New Testament texts. She begins by foregrounding the methodological problem inherent in assuming that Nero is the biblical Antichrist and cherry-picking the bible and histories of Nero's reign for decontextualized parallels in support. Such readings presuppose both the historicity of the historical tradition's *topoi* and a uniformity to the empire's perception of Nero during his reign which has little grounding, especially in the East. As Malik turns to the biblical material, she notes an important principle for the book as whole, the difference between the idea that some could read Nero into the bible's eschatological adversaries and the idea that certain texts (e.g. Revelation) were written

*about* Nero. By foregrounding debates over composition dates, intertextual connections between the New Testament and the Book of Daniel, and the deliberate ambiguity of apocalyptic literature, Malik challenges many of the assumptions made by scholars who take Nero's biblical presence for granted. When these texts are read in their wider context, features that may seem to be allusions to Nero are revealed to be part of a preexisting symbolic complex endemic within apocalyptic literature.

As Malik dismantles the evidence for a 1<sup>st</sup>-century biblical Nero, she lays the groundwork, taken up in Chapter 3, for understanding the Nero-Antichrist as the product of reception by late antique readers of biblical material. This chapter weaves together an intellectual history of Nero-Antichrist born out of the exegetical traditions of late antiquity, including Lactantius, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Sulpicius Severus, Augustine and Quodvultdeus. Nero's earlier reception(s) contributed to this moment, such as the rise of *breviaria* which draw on Roman historiography, the retrospective view of Nero as the inaugurator of centuries of persecution (and the importance of Tacitus' history to this cultural memory), the emergence of martyr acts as a literary form and the syncretism of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul with the age of Nero. As Christians were writing church histories, Nero's historiographical tyrant-*topos* fused with his historical role as first persecutor to construct an adversary worthy of apocalyptic literature. Especially interesting is the role played by the pagan and Jewish strands of the Sibylline Oracles, a body of texts which makes indisputable allusions to Nero rooted in the historiographical tradition (matricide, tyrannical builder) while also using the legends of the False Neros to create *Nero Rediturus*, an eschatological adversary who will return. The popularity of these texts offered subsequent Christian readers a model for inserting Nero into interpretations of the earlier, significantly more ambiguous biblical texts.

After a period of disinterest in Nero-Antichrist, the paradigm is reborn in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe as a product of wider interest in Rome, religious debates and intellectual preoccupation with decadence and decline and this forms the subject of Malik's final chapter. Through the works of Renan, Farrar and Wilde, Malik traces how a 19<sup>th</sup>-century fascination with ancient Rome gave rise to a revival of the Antichrist paradigm both in academic circles and in popular culture. This chapter covers a lot of ground: a survey of contemporary receptions of Rome, a brief history of the Oxford Movement and intellectual biographies of major writers of the period. I was particularly impressed with her analysis of Wilde's

longstanding yet complex relationship with Nero throughout his “Neronian hours” and beyond.

Malik’s brief epilogue looks forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century where, despite Hollywood’s fascination with Nero as persecutor of the Christians, the Antichrist paradigm seems to have all but vanished as Nero becomes a befuddled and ultimately vanquishable enemy.

My one overarching criticism is that the book’s breadth sometimes causes Malik to stray from *Nero-Antichrist* specifically, especially in the fourth chapter where the intrinsic interest of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Neros (and the need to explicate less familiar background) leads Malik to pursue several broader lines of Neronian reception than could be fully articulated within the confines of a single chapter. But this criticism itself speaks to one of the book’s major strengths. These chapters burst with new interpretations of Nero’s reception from which I learned a great deal. Sure to become a “must read” for scholars across disciplinary lines, Malik’s book offers a cogently argued narrative about the history of an important strand of Neronian reception.

LAUREN DONOVAN GINSBERG

*Duke University*, [lauren.d.ginsberg@duke.edu](mailto:lauren.d.ginsberg@duke.edu)