Nero
The Beast of Revelation 13 and Revelation 17

A Life and Legacy of Cruelty

Nero ruled Rome for just thirteen years. But in that time, he carved out for himself a name for one of history's notorious tyrants. Before long, his mere presence caused people to tremble with fear.

Nero came to power following the murder of his uncle, Claudius, who was Rome's emperor, and then the murder of his step brother, whom he poisoned with a chalice of wine. He openly committed murder to get what he wanted, complete control of the reigns of political power. This would not happen until Agrippina was eliminated. Nero tried to have his mother crushed to death. Then he tried to drown her, but, she survived. When that failed, Nero had men stab her with a sword.

Turning on the Christians during his reign, Nero blamed them for the burning of Rome. He then burned them alive in retaliation. He used whips and branding irons on senators who displeased him. He kicked his pregnant wife to death.

The shocking stories about Nero come from the Roman historians, Tacitus (AD 56-117), and Suetonius (AD 69 - c. 122). Though they wrote several decades after Nero's death, their accounts are held to be reliable.
Nero's Childhood

Nero was born in AD 37 to a very disturbed Roman family. His father died when he was just three years old. His male role model and mentor was his mad uncle, Caligula. Nero found no comfort in the arms of his mother, Agrippina. She was the little sister of Caligula. Not one to cherish family value, Agrippina was an ambitious woman. She had grown up believing murder and incest was the norm in political circles. She would do whatever was necessary to advance her personal agenda. What Agrippina wanted was to get to the center of power in Rome. She planned to use young Nero in quest for power and glory.

It would not be easy for Agrippina to achieve her political goals, for women were not allowed to wield power over men. But she was not to be denied. With Nero in Rome, Agrippina could be the power behind the throne. Little by little, Agrippina would implement her plan.

Agrippina's Grand Plan

Step one was to get close to power. Beautiful and cunning, Agrippina seduced and married the emperor Claudius, even though he was her uncle.
Successful in getting near the center of power, Agrippina took her second step which was to pressure Claudius into adopting Nero, and appointing him heir to the throne over his own son, Britanicus. Despite his young age, Nero becomes the emperor in waiting. It is a role he is not prepared for, and probably did not want. But Agrippina was not going to be denied, and so she implemented the third step in her grand plan, get rid of Claudius. Her method of choice for removing Claudius, poison.

Always resourceful, Agrippina knew that Claudius loved mushrooms. During a banquet, after much drinking, Claudius was served a hot dish of poisoned mushrooms, and succumbed. With Claudius out of the way, Nero is crowned emperor, much to the chagrin of Britanicus.

Nero should have been the most powerful man in the Empire, but still behind the throne was the strong willed, domineering, presence of Agrippina. Coins dating from the early years of Nero's reign, show on one side, both Nero and Agrippina, face to face with one another, symbolizing equality.

The Death of Britanicus

As might be expected, the co-reign of Nero and Agrippina was doomed to fail. Tension soon came over the presence of another woman in Nero's life. In AD 55, Nero, age 18, fell in love with an ex-slave girl. Agrippina was furious. She
wanted her son to marry into the highest echelon of Roman society. Agrippina was not about to allow a common girl to marry her son.

Nero proved to be able to stand up to his mother. He refused to give up the girl. But Agrippina was not going to be told no. She had political leverage, and she was willing to use it against Nero.

Claudius had a natural son in Britanicus. Agrippina threatened Nero, that if he did not comply with her wishes, she would have Nero deposed, and Britanicus made ruler, even though he was only thirteen.

Before Britanicus could disown Nero and transfer allegiance to Britanicus, Nero moved against them both. Given a cup of wine, Britanicus collapsed in convulsions and died foaming at the mouth. Nero claimed his step brother died of an epileptic fit. After all, epilepsy ran in the family. Julius Caesar was given to epileptic fits. Uncle Caligula was always having fits, and everyone knew how mad he was.

Suetonius did not believe the cause of death was an epileptic fit and accused Nero of homicide.

Had Nero wanted to murder his step brother, at least three poisons were well know. Cyanide, a component commonly found in fruit pits, strychnine, and hemlock.
Since Britanicus drank wine mixed with water, whatever poison was used could not be detected with water. Cyanide, found in peach pits, could not have been used for such pits are not easily discovered. Because strychnine is extremely bitter, it was probably not used. That leaves water hemlock, a highly toxic plant. It is clear, it dissolves in water, and it acts quickly.

Without much pomp and ceremony, as would have been befitting a person of his status, Britanicus was buried the next day after his death.

With Britanicus no longer a threat to his reign, Nero moved to eliminate his mother. She had taught him well. Nothing was going to stop him now. It was only a matter of time.

**Attempted Murder**

In AD 59, five years into his reign, Nero, age 23, made a momentous decision. He was going to kill his mother. She is the only person standing between him and absolute power. It would not to be easy to kill Agrippina, for it had to look like an accident.

According to the historian Suetonius, in the Bay of Naples, while celebrating the feast of Nirvana, Agrippina was in a small boat, which had been rigged with a laded canopy (sandbags) designed to fall on her, and crush her to death. For the
canopy to fall, help was needed to cause it to fall at the right time, and then keep quiet.

While reclining on a royal couch on the deck watching the celebrations on shore, the rigging fell. Agrippina survived with only a shoulder injury, probably due to the shape of the royal couch which had high sides that would have absorbed the force of the blow. According to Tacitus, the injured Agrippina swam ashore and fled to the safety of her villa.

While Agrippina probably perceived that Nero had tried to kill her, she deflected any accusation and sent Nero a note saying she believed it was an accident.

Her attempt at reconciliation was to no avail. Nero issued an order to kill Agrippina claiming, of all things, self-defense. Members of the Praetorian Guard were sent to the villa to finish the job. Agrippina caressed her stomach and told the Guards to strike the womb that gave birth to Nero. They do and she died.

A Reign of Terror

That night, Nero is plagued with nightmares, but in the morning he is calm again. Nero declares, “Today is the first day of my rule.” He has absolute power.
Romans begin to wonder what Nero will do, especially those in the upper echelons of society. A man who can kill his own mother is capable of anything.

With Agrippina eliminated, Nero turns to the next distraction in his life, his wife, Octavia. Though she is very popular with Roman citizens, Nero does not care. He is enamored with his mistress, Poppaea Sabina (AD 30 – 65), the now pregnant ex-slave girl. Nero divorced Octavia and sent her away.

In AD 58, Poppaea divorced her husband, Otho, to become Nero's second wife. The historians of antiquity describe her as a beautiful woman who used intrigues to become empress.

The actions of Nero against Octavia outraged the Roman citizens. The people rioted. Nero decided that Octavia needs to be more than divorced, she needs to be dead. Once more the Praetorian Guard is sent on a bloody errand. Octavia is told that she can take her own life, or it will be taken for her. The guards returned to Rome with the severed head of Octavia.

The Ravings of a Narcissist

Feeling secure in his position of power, according to Suetonius, Nero turned his attention to the theater. He wanted to play before a live audience. He wanted to
sing, play as a musician, and recite poetry. To do this he would have to associate with the lowest forms of society, for actors were notorious for their profanity and immorality. Respectable Romans did not normally go to the theater, let alone perform there.

Nero did not care. What Nero did care, is that people look at him, for he was a supreme egotist. The Narcissist has no boundaries. Any amount of adulation is never enough. Psychologically, he needs the applauding, fawning, crowd. The desire of Nero for attention spiraled out of control, just when one of Rome's greatest disasters occurs.

The Great Fire of Rome

Ten years into his rule, the 27 year old Nero was settled as the emperor of Rome. He ruled with bloodthirsty terror. Anyone who disagreed, or displeased him, was brutally dispatched with the sword, imprisoned. Banished, or fined. No one dared to speak against him or plot to overthrow his rule. When Romans were not fearing for their lives, they were ashamed at Nero's public performances on stage.

Soon, Roman citizens will have something else to worry about, fire. Ancient Rome was made of wooden structures built close together. If a fire broke out, it
could leap from one building to the next very easily. Fires broke out frequently and spread quickly.

The Great Fire of Rome was an urban fire, that occurred beginning 19 July AD 64. Before it was brought under control, a large portion of the city was destroyed by the flames. According to Tacitus, the fire spread quickly and burned for six days. Only four of the fourteen districts of Rome escaped the fire; three districts were completely destroyed, and the other seven suffered serious damage. A myth arose that while Rome burned, Nero played his lyre and sang.

It is possible that Nero actually returned back to Rome to organize a relief effort, which he paid for from his own funds. He opened his palaces to provide shelter for the homeless, and arranged for food supplies to be delivered in order to prevent starvation among the survivors.

What is more certain is that following the fire, Nero promoted a new urban development plan. Houses after the fire were spaced out, built in brick, and faced by porticos on wide roads. Nero also built a new palace complex known as the *Domus Aurea* (Latin, Golden House) in an area cleared by the fire. The size of this complex is debated (from 100 to 300 acres).

The Golden House was an extravagant edifice in every way. It boasted of stuccoed ceilings, which were applied with semi-precious stones and ivory veneers. The walls were frescoed, coordinating the decoration into different
themes in each major group of rooms. There was gold everywhere. Outside the
gilded Golden House was a palatial park with a manmade lake. Beautiful trees and
flowers decorated the grounds. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

To find the necessary funds for the massive reconstruction efforts, and to
pay for the Golden House, heavy tributes were imposed on the provinces of the
empire, resulting in unnecessary economic hardships, in addition to those brought
by The Great Fire.

While all of this was taking place, the rumors persisted that Nero had played
while Rome burned. It was said that he play a lament to the fall of Troy. Nero was
not gloring in the fire of Rome, but was morning it in the depths of his soul.

At least, that is a charitable interpretation of his behavior.

**Descent into Moral Decadence**

What is indisputable is that Nero was rapidly going quite mad after AD 64.
Not only did he burden the people with excessive financial hardships after the fire,
largely for his own personal vanity, but his bloodlust was about to surface once
more with a vengeance.
After the fire, Roman citizens wanted someone punished when arsonists were blamed for starting the fire. Nero found the perfect scapegoat in the Christian community.

The Christians were a new sect in AD 64. Their Leader had been called a revolutionist, a traitor, and He had been crucified in Palestine thirty years early. The Leader had said He would return, a second time, for all who believed. He said that when He returned the world would perish by fire. Surely, the Christians started the fire in anticipation of the second coming of the Messiah. What was even worse, it was said of the Christians that they ate the flesh and drank the blood of humans. They were unpatriotic because they did not worship Caesar, and they were atheists because they did not worship the gods of Rome.

The Christians were a perfect gift to Nero, who was looking for someone to blame and to divert attention from himself. Nero ordered the Christians to be rounded up and subjected to a savage form of punishment.

Many were scourged. The Latin word means literally, “to flay the skin.” A typical scourge had several leather thongs fastened to a handle. When the straps were flung across the body of a person, there was great pain. The flesh was ripped apart because the whip was netted with spiked metal balls.

The widespread use of the scourge produced in Nero, and the public, a growing appetite for a greater spectacle in the Roman arena.
Christians were taken to the arena and dressed in animal skins. This assured they would be torn apart, limb from limb by hungry wild beasts, deliberately turned lose upon them. There was no place to escape.

The atrocities grew. At night, Nero had Christians tied to a stake and coated with tar. While his guests ate and drank, the Christians were set on fire, alive. They were turned into human torches. The leaders of the Christian community did not escape Nero's persecution. Paul was beheaded on the Apian Way. Peter was crucified upside down. The bloodlust was insatiable.

Financial Manipulation

Returning to the area of finances to support his many enterprises, Nero took the Roman denarius, made of pure silver, and devalued it. He intimidates the makers of the silver coins to water down the silver content by inserting copper into the center. As much as twenty percent of a denarius was copper which saved the administration a lot of money, but it deceived the public. The root of money is faith that is has intrinsic value. When that is lost, the economy collapses.

Nero went to great lengths to cover up his manipulation of the money supply. However, his scheme was discovered. A few courageous senators gathered to plot his assassination, only to be discovered and exposed. They faced Nero's
wrath. The culprits are branded, scourged, torn apart, and finally put out of their misery with the edge of a sword.

No one is safe around Nero, not even his new wife. One night Nero came home. An argument ensued with Poppaea, who was pregnant with their second child. She was complaining bitterly that Nero was spending too much time at the Colessium and the games. In a fit of uncontrollable rage, Nero reacted. He kicked her. He kicked her to death, killing her and the unborn child.

**A Journey to Greece**

With no one to hold him accountable, the body of Poppaea was buried, after which Nero set off to Greece in order to explore his artistic creative style. In the competition arena, the Greeks pander to his vanity, giving Nero, 1,108 awards, some for which he never participated in.

**Returning to Rome**

When he returned to Rome, Nero found a great surprise. There was rebellion and revolution everywhere. The Roman senate had passed a resolution declaring him an enemy of the state. Nero's cruelty to his family, his persecution of the Christians, his excessive building programs, his lack of social sensibilities, the murder of his wife and baby, the manipulation of the basic currency, and his
murder of prominent citizens had finally been too much for Roman society. His last allies desert him.

Suicide would have been too good a way to depart life for this Beast of a man. His last words were self-centered to the end: “Oh, what an artist dies in me.”

A freed slave helped Nero with the final deed. The curtain fell for the last time. Nero was 30 years old.

With the news of the death of The Beast, there was public rejoicing. But that rejoicing quickly turned to anger when people realized that this young man had bankrupted the empire. Romans do not just want him dead, they want all traces of him annihilated. A new law was passed to wipe him from history called, _Damnatio momoria_.

This Latin phrase literally meaning "condemnation of memory" in the sense of a judgment that a person must not be remembered. It was a form of dishonor that could be passed by the Roman Senate upon traitors, or others, including emperors, who brought discredit to Rome. The name of Nero was carved out of monuments. His statues were destroyed. Rome wanted Nero to cease to exist.

When later emperors wanted to make their predecessors look bad, they compared them to Nero, much like a disliked person today might be compared to Stalin, Hitler, or Benito Mussolini.

Nero poisoned his step brother and had his mother killed.
He had one wife beheaded and kicked his second wife to death while she was pregnant.

He used the scourge on Christians and turned them into human torches.

He killed senators and stole from Romans by debasing the basic currency.

He did not hesitate to kill for personal or political reasons.

He was extremely narcissistic. He needed to be the center of attention.

And then came another rumor called *Nero Redividus*. “Nero is alive!” people said, and were terrified once again. He was spotted singing and playing music.

Americans have experienced this same phenomena. Following the death of JFK, there were reports of people seeing him on an isle in Greece and elsewhere. Elvis Presley has also been spotted.

While we might smile at these incidents, the very idea of someone like Nero being alive again was very frightening, and a lot of people believe it.
Lessons to Learn

1. Nero was a very young man when he came to power at the age of eighteen. Though he only ruled for thirteen years, he did much evil, so much that he is remembered by the early church as The Beast. The Roman Senate tried to expunge his name from memory, but the dark deeds he did lives on into infamy.

- *Ecclesiastes 12:1* Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

2. There is a constant debate in society as to what shapes the character of a person. Is it nature, or nurture? The proper answer is that nature and nurture shape the character of a person. By nature, Nero was born physically alive but spiritually dead. He needed a relationship with the Lord. What an opportunity he had. He could have visited with the leaders of the Christian faith, Peter and Paul, and he might have, if he had not been nurtured by a wicked mother. There is a familiar poem that says in part, “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. In some instances it is literally true.

3. For all the evil he did, Nero was not insane or mad, he was not psychotic. He was self-centered, but he was rational in his actions. He was not delusional. He did not hallucinate. He set goals and achieved those goals. He made plans and
put them into operation. The life of Nero reminds us that men do not have to be mad in order to be evil.

4. The Christians of the early church expected persecution, for they remembered and embraced the words of Christ and the apostles, concerning suffering.

- Jesus. John 16:33 These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

- Paul and Barnabas. Acts 14:22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

- Paul speaking to the believers in Thessalonica. 1 Thessalonians 3:4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.

5. Sometimes death becomes the manifestation of the great mercy of God. Imagine a world where evil men and women in power and authority never die.