
WHO IS THE BEAST OF REVELATION?

By Kenneth N Higgs

The book of Revelation is not meant to be a closed, arcane secret. The opening words, in the original Greek manuscripts, read: "ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ" (apokalypsis Iesou Christou) meaning "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1). That's why our English title is "**REVELATION**" not "obscure mystery". The book was addressed to believers (saints) in seven real, historical churches of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 2 & 3). They were the "primary audience"... the first people to read the vision.

With this in mind, let us examine the book's description of one dramatic and colourful figure: the "beast" from the sea.

Was the "beast" imagery intended to scare people at some vague future date, maybe thousand of years later? Or was it meant to be a serious and relevant warning to real churches in the 1st Century AD, about a real, dangerous character, who was about to unleash great havoc and persecution on them? I think the latter explanation is more plausible, as it parallels what Jesus said previously about the coming "great tribulation" (Matthew 24:21). Jesus also urged his disciples to be ready to "flee to the mountains", **when THEY SAW the troubles approaching**. (Note: Jesus never said that unspecified people, thousands of years later, should "flee to the mountains")

1. "THE BEAST FROM THE SEA"

"And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. ... And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation." (Revelation 13:1,5-7).

This passage is describing a real, living threat to the early "saints"... a great evil force, which **WAS ABOUT TO inflict persecution and suffering UPON THEM**. It would be "allowed to exercise authority for 42 months" (v.5), and "allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them" (v.7), which seems to indicate that the persecution would last for 42 months.

Various scholars, including Russell ⁱ, Gentry ⁱⁱ and Reasoner ⁱⁱⁱ view this "beast" as a real person, not an animal, spirit, angel, or abstraction.

"WORSHIP OF THE BEAST"

This "beast" would also demand pagan worship, of both Satan and the beast.

'... the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"' (Revelation 13:3,4).

"and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain" (Revelation 13:8).

"NUMBER OF THE BEAST - 666"

At this point, John's readers would be anxious to know who, or what, the "beast" might be. John does not keep them in suspense. He wants them to know who it is.

"This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666" (Revelation 13:18).

Gentry explains that "666" is a Hebrew cryptogram, known as a "gematria" ^{iv}. 'John clearly says "the number of the beast" is "the number of a man"' ⁱⁱ. Russell points out that John "meant not to puzzle, but to enlighten his readers"... "St John was a Hebrew... and his thoughts were Hebrew" ^v. John was familiar with the Hebrew form of a certain person's name, ie: the Roman emperor, **Nero Caesar**.

Gentry explains how to decode the "666" gematria. 'An ancient Hebrew or Aramaic spelling of "Nero Caesar"... was "Nrwn Qsr" which can be enumerated as follows:' ^{vi}. Here is the numerical value of "**Nrwn Qsr**":

n=50, r=200, w=6, n=50, q=100, s=60, r=200; which results in: Total = 666.

So we now perceive that the "number of the beast" actually matches a real person's name. Russell notes that: "St. John veils his meaning under a disguise, which the heathen Greek or Roman would probably fail to penetrate, but which the instructed Christian of Judea or Asia Minor would readily see through" ^{vii}. Mounce also notes that: "John intended only his intimate associates to be able to decipher the number" ^{viii}.

John states that he "was on the island called Patmos" (Revelation 1:9), most likely as a prisoner of the Romans. His correspondence would have been scrutinised carefully by the Roman guards, and it would have been impossible for him to describe the Roman Emperor as a beast, in plain Greek text. Such treason would have been fatal, so John had no choice, but to disguise the beast's identity, using a cryptogram. However, his educated readers would have no trouble recognising that "666" matched the reigning "king" of Rome.

2. NERO CAESAR

History records that Nero Caesar was one of the most significant and powerful figures in the Roman Empire, especially during John's life. Nero reigned from AD 54 to 68, and we find a hint about him in Revelation 17:

*"they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, **one is**, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while" (Revelation 17:10).*

This passage indicates that, at the date of writing, five kings had already fallen, and one king was still reigning, ie: the sixth king, designated by the phrase: "ONE IS". The most prominent and powerful rulers, during the John's life, were the Caesars: the rulers of Rome. John and other Jews recognised them as "kings".



Figure 1: Portrait head of Nero on a coin. Reverse side he is playing a lyre

For instance, in John's gospel we find the account of Pontius Pilate saying to the Jews: "Shall I crucify your **King**?", the chief priests answered, "We have no **king** but Caesar" (John 19:15). Also, when Paul was in Thessalonica, some Jews stirred up a rabble and attacked the house of Jason. They dragged Jason and some other Christians before the city authorities (Acts 17:6), and accused them of treason, saying: "they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another **king**, Jesus" (Acts 17:7).

Ancient historian, Suetonius ^{ix}, lists twelve of the Roman Caesars in historical order:

- I... Julius Caesar
- II... Augustus
- III... Tiberius
- IV... Caligula
- V... Claudius
- VI... Nero
- VII... Galba
- VIII... Otho
- IX... Vitellius
- X... Vespasian
- XI... Titus
- XII... Domitian

(from "The Lives of the Twelve Caesars")

Another ancient historian, Dio Cassius ^x, names Julius Caesar as the first of the Roman emperors.

Josephus ^{xi} names the second, third and fourth emperors. He said that Augustus was "the second emperor of Romans, the duration of whose reign was fifty seven years", and ... "upon whose death Tiberius Nero, his wife Julia's son, succeeded. He was now the third emperor". He says that Tiberius "appointed Caius to be his successor". (Note: Caius or Gaius is better known as Caligula.) Josephus recounts that Tiberius died a few days later, "after he had held the government twenty two years five months and three days. Now Caius was the fourth emperor" ^{xii}.

Given this historical context, we can reasonably deduce that the "seven kings" mentioned in John's vision are, in fact, Roman emperors, and that the sixth king is Nero.

Note how the list of kings in Revelation concludes: "the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while" (v.10b). This seventh king was yet to come, after Nero, but he would reign for "only a little while". This description matches Nero's successor, Galba, who was the seventh emperor listed by Suetonius ^{xiii}. Galba was assassinated in the seventh month of his reign.

NERO: A WILD BEAST

Ancient historians have written a great deal about Nero Caesar. Josephus ^{xiv}, Tacitus ^{xv} and Suetonius ^{xvi}, describe him as a vile, "bestly" man, who murdered many innocent people. He had his step-brother (Britannicus) poisoned at a banquet (AD 55). His mother (Agrippina) was brutally murdered by his soldiers (AD 59). His first wife (Octavia) was imprisoned and brutal murdered (AD 62). He physically kicked to death his second wife (Poppaea) who was pregnant at the time (AD 65). He also killed his aunt (Domitia) and "many other illustrious persons".

Nero was also sexually depraved and immoral. He raped Rubria, a vestal virgin, debauched married women and violated boys, including one boy (Sporus) whom he castrated and then raped as though he were a woman (AD 67). Tacitus recounts that Nero was: "defiled by every natural and unnatural lust" ^{xvii}. Suetonius recounts that Nero: "so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust, was dispatched" ^{xviii}.

WORSHIP OF NERO

The Sibylline Oracles ^{xviii} record that Nero "claimed to be God" and was engaged in "making himself equal to God". He claimed the title "Son of Apollon" (ie: the pagan sun god) and mobs everywhere greeted him with shouts of "Nero Apollo" ^{xix}. His portrait appears on Roman coins as Apollo playing a lyre, or with rays of the Sun radiating from his head ^{xx}

Tacitus ^{xxi} records that, circa AD 55, the Roman Senate erected a statue of Nero, portrayed as Apollo, of the same size as the statue of Mars and in the same temple ^{xx}. Inscriptions in Ephesus and Salamis reveal that Nero was called blasphemous names, such as "Almighty God" and "Saviour" ^{xx}. Nero demanded divine honours, and those who refused to praise and worship him were executed ^{xxii}. "He arrogated to himself the prerogatives of deity, and claimed and received the worship due to God" ⁱ.

The bottom line is this: "Thenceforward there were but two religions in the Roman world — the worship of the Emperor and the worship of the Saviour." ^{xxiii}.

"PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS"

John was writing to the seven churches, to warn them of a SOON, ABOUT TO COME tribulation. The "beast" ... "was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them" (Revelation 13:7), possibly for some 42 months.

Russell elaborates: "The duration of that first and bitter persecution accords with the period of forty and two months, or three years and a half, mentioned in the vision. (If we adopt the reading of the Codex Sinaiticus, 'it was given unto him to do what he will for forty and two months,' it would evidently imply that his cruel policy of persecution would be limited to that period. Now, as a matter of fact, the persecution by Nero began in November A.D.64, and ended with his death in June A.D.68, that is as nearly as possible three years and a half.)" ^{xxiv}.

Gentry quotes Von Mosheim ^{xxv} who says that "This dreadful persecution ceased but with the death of Nero", ie: AD 68.

The "great tribulation" suffered by 1st Century Christians started soon after a massive fire in Rome (circa July AD 64), which destroyed ten of the city's fourteen regions. Nero ghoulishly watched and celebrated, as the fire consumed his capital, according to Tacitus, who recounts: "when Rome was aflame" Nero "mounted his private stage" and "had sung the destruction of Troy" ^{xvii}. Suetonius recounts that "This fire he (Nero) beheld from a tower in the house of Mecaenas, and "being greatly delighted," as he said, "with the beautiful effects of the conflagration," he sung a poem on the ruin of Troy, in the tragic dress he used on the stage" ^{xvi}.

Rumours spread that the fire was started by Nero, because, as Tacitus recounts, he was "seeking the glory of founding a new capital and endowing it with his own name ... Therefore to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight

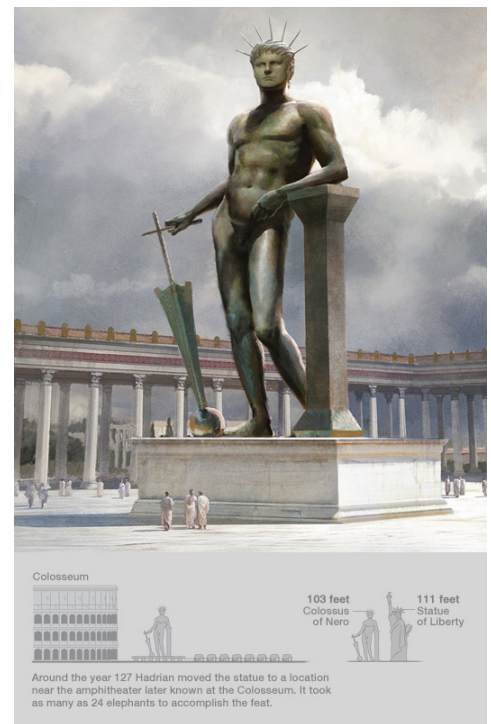


Figure 2: Colossus of Nero as Apollo in Temple of Mars (approx. 98 foot high)
(Artist impression only. Image from National Geographic magazine, September 2014.)

failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. ... they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man" ^{xxvii}.

Russell concludes: "Every point of the description (of the beast) identifies the criminal. It was this execrable tyrant (Nero) who first let loose the hell-hounds of persecution on the unoffending Christians of Rome. ... More like a wild beast than a man..." ⁱ.

3. THE BEAST FROM THE LAND

This apocalyptic imagery continues in Revelation 13, with a second "beast":

"Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth (Gk: τῆς γῆς : the land). It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed." (Revelation 13:11,12).

Russell claims that this second beast "from the land" appears to be "a domestic or home authority, ruling in Judea; while the other is a foreign power" ^{xxvi}. He notes that this second beast has only two horns (compared to ten of the first beast) and only exercises authority as a subordinate of the first beast. Hence "his sphere of government is small, and his power limited, compared with the other". Therefore, this beast "from the land" is most likely the local representative of Nero.

A likely contender for this second beast is **Gessius Florus**, the last Roman procurator of Judea before the Jewish War commenced. Florus was appointed by Nero, in AD 64. He enforced the harsh rule of Rome in Judea, and probably enforced the Imperial cult of offering sacrifices and burning incense before the statue of Nero... "the image of the beast". Florus also plundered money from the Temple, according to Josephus, who recounts that he "sent some to take seventeen talents out of the sacred treasure, and pretended that Caesar wanted them" ^{xxvii}. The people protested and mocked Florus, even passing around a begging basket for "poor Florus", in the streets. As a result, Florus "was more enraged, and provoked to get still more". His avarice and cruelty only served to aggravate religious tensions between the Jews and Rome, which eventually exploded (circa AD 66), into open rebellion and the Jewish War against the Roman occupiers.

Reasoner ^{xxviii} notes that this beast "from the land" is the third figure of a satanic trinity; the other two being the dragon (Revelation 12:3), which is symbolic of Satan; and the first beast (Revelation 13:1), which is symbolic of Nero/Rome.

"MARK OF THE BEAST"

John warns that the beast would force every person "to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name" (Revelation 13:16,17).

Reasoner ^{xxix} notes that this "mark" is an imitation or parody of Revelation 7 and 14, where 144,000 saints of God are sealed, before the great tribulation commences:

"Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads" (Revelation 7:3f).

"Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1).

It seems that the "beast" would "mark" people to show that they had offered sacrifices and worshipped him. Pate ^{xxx} suggests that this was likely a certificate or mark of approval, a **χάραγμα** (charagma). He observes that, in the reign of Emperor Decius (AD 249-251), "those who did not possess the certificate of sacrifice to Caesar could not pursue trades, a prohibition that conceivably goes back to Nero".

The Greek-English Lexicon defines the Greek term *charagma* as "any mark engraved, imprinted, or branded". Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology ^{xxx} explains that: "The Greek term *charagma* was most commonly used for imprints on documents or coins. *Charagma* is well attested to have been an imperial seal of the Roman Empire used on official documents during the first and second centuries."

CONCLUSION:

Nero was "more like a wild beast than a man..." ⁱ. Gentry says: "The beast imagery describes his cruel character, not his physical form" ⁱⁱ. Clearly this depraved Roman Emperor was the Beast of Revelation. The apocalyptic vision is a vital and relevant warning to John's readers, in seven historical churches of Asia Minor, that THEY WERE ABOUT TO suffer great tribulation, "**for the time is near**" (Revelation 1:3).

POSTSCRIPT: In addition to Nero, we should also recollect the barbarity and evil of the Empire and line of kings from which he came. The Caesars personified the ruthless power and brutality of the Roman state. Nero was the inevitable product of such a godless and corrupt regime, which ruled with impunity throughout the οίκουμένη (oikoumene)... the whole Roman Empire. Reuss declares "The beast is, then, at once the Empire and the Emperor" ^{xxxii}.

FURTHER READING:

This article is not an exhaustive survey of historical authorities and sources, on the topic of "the beast". I encourage truth-seekers to undertake further reading, starting with the following scholarly works:

- "Before Jerusalem Fell" by Kenneth L. Gentry
- "Final Decade Before the End" by Edward E. Stevens
- "Fundamental Wesleyan Commentary on Revelation" by Victor P. Reasoner
- "Last Days According to Jesus" by Robert C. Sproul
- "The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming" by James S. Russell

HISTORIANS CITED:

- **James Stuart Russell** (1816-1895) was a minister in the Congregational Church at Great Yarmouth, Tottenham, Edmonton, and Bayswater. He held to a past fulfillment of the Second Advent and in 1878 he published a book on this subject, originally entitled "*The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*".
- **Cornelius Tacitus** (c. AD 56 - 120) was a Roman orator, public official and historian. He wrote "*Annals*": a history of the Roman Empire from the reign of Tiberius (AD 14) to the end of Nero's reign (AD 68). He also wrote "*Histories*": a Roman historical chronicle (written c. AD 100 - 110), covering the period from the fall of Nero (AD 68) to the end of Domitian's reign (AD 96).
- **Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus** (c. AD 69 – 130/140) was the son of a Roman knight who commanded a legion, on the side of Otho, at the battle which decided the fate of the empire in favour of Vitellius. Suetonius was a quiet man who first studied and practised law before becoming a professional scholar. Noted for his writing and poetry, he composed numerous works, including: "The Lives of the Twelve Caesars". In later life, he a director of the imperial libraries and then a private secretary to Hadrian.
- **Flavius Josephus** (c. AD 37-100) was a Jewish priest, scholar, historian and active participant in the final decades of ancient Israel (Judea). He was also an aristocrat, a Pharisee, a military commander and

politician, who wrote extensive accounts of his life and Jewish history, including a detailed account of the Jewish War against the Roman Empire (c. AD 66-70).

- **Dio Cassius** (c. AD 150 – 229/235) was a Roman politician and historian, who had a life-long career in the Roman government. He is best known for his 80-volume Roman History, which follows Rome from its early foundation through to the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus (AD 222 - 235). Only a third now survives. He accused Nero of deliberately setting the fire that destroyed much of the city.

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"Final Decade Before the End: Jewish and Christian History Just Before the Jewish Revolt" by Stevens, Edward E. International Preterist Association, Inc. Bradford, PA 2014.

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"Greek-English Lexicon" by Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott. revised and augmented throughout by. Sir Henry Stuart Jones. with the assistance of. Roderick McKenzie. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1940. viewed 31 August 2020 at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dxa%2Fragma>

"Josephus: The Complete Works", translated by Whiston, William. A.M., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN 1998.

"The Lives of the Twelve Caesars" by C. Suetonius Tranquillus; The Translation of Alexander Thomson, M.D.; Revised and corrected by T.Forester, Esq., A.M.; The Project Gutenberg eBook. Viewed 20 August 2020 at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6400/6400-h/6400-h.htm>

"The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Christ's Second Coming" by Russell, James Stuart. International Preterist Association, Bradford, PA 2003. (Originally published as *"The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming"* by T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1887).

For more information about the timing of the Parousia of Christ (*Second Coming*), please read my article: **"Time Statements"**. You can access it online or download a PDF copy from:

ParousiaFulfilled.com

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- ⁱ *"The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming"*, J. Stuart Russell, p461.
- ⁱⁱ *"Before Jerusalem Fell"*, Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., p198.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *"Fundamental Wesleyan Commentary on Revelation"*, Victor P. Reasoner, p.426.
- ^{iv} Gentry, op. cit. p194.
- ^v Russell, op. cit. pp463,464.
- ^{vi} Gentry, op. cit. p199. NB: "**Nrwn Qsr**" derives from a Greek transliteration of Nero's name into Hebrew. Latin translations of Revelation may have transliterated it as "**Nrw Qsr**" (dropping the second "n"). This then leads to a slightly different calculation:
- $$n=50, r=200, w=6, q=100, s=60, r=200; \text{ with a result: Total} = \mathbf{616}.$$
- Regardless of this variation, the coded number of the beast clearly points to "Nero Caesar".
- ^{vii} Russell, op. cit. p465.
- ^{viii} *"Revelation"*, Robert H. Mounce, p.265; quoted in Gentry, op. cit. p205.
- ^{ix} *"The Lives of the Twelve Caesars"* by C. Suetonius Tranquillus.
- ^x *"Roman History 5"*, Dio Cassius; quoted in Gentry, op. cit. p155.
- ^{xi} *"Antiquities of the Jews"*, Flavius Josephus, in *"Josephus: The Complete Works"*, Whiston, 18.2.2.
- ^{xii} *Antiquities*, Josephus, 18.6.10.
- ^{xiii} Suetonius, op. cit.
- ^{xiv} *Antiquities*, Josephus, 20.8.2.
- ^{xv} *"Annals"*, Tacitus.
- ^{xvi} Suetonius, op. cit. Book 6.
- ^{xvii} Tacitus, op. cit. Book 15.
- ^{xviii} Gentry, op. cit. pp75,77.
- ^{xix} Gentry, op. cit. p275.
- ^{xx} Gentry, op. cit. p272.
- ^{xxi} Tacitus, op. cit. Book 13.
- ^{xxii} Gentry, op. cit. p273.
- ^{xxiii} *"The Life and Epistles of St. Paul"*, Vol. 2, W.J.Conybeare and J.S.Howson; quoted in Gentry, op. cit. p274.
- ^{xxiv} Russell, op. cit. p460.
- ^{xxv} *"History of Christianity in the First Three Centuries"*, John Laurence Von Mosheim; quoted in Gentry, op. cit. p80.
- ^{xxvi} Russell, op. cit. p466.

xxvii *"Wars of the Jews"*, Flavius Josephus, in *"Josephus: The Complete Works"*, Whiston, 2.14.6.

xxviii Reasoner, op. cit. p.356.

xxix Reasoner, op. cit. pp.347,349.

xxx *"A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation"*, C. Marvin Pate, p.159; quoted in Reasoner, op. cit. p.358.

xxxi Baker's further adds: "Branding was practiced in the ancient world, and even in relation to religious concerns. Religious tattooing was observed (cf. Lucian, *Syr. Dea* 59; Herodotus 2.113). Third Maccabees 2:29 records an incident in which Jews were branded by Ptolemy Philopator I (217 b.c.) with the Greek religious Dionysian ivy-leaf symbol."

xxxii Russell, op. cit. p556.

DISCLAIMER: Nothing in this article nor any other article on the ParousiaFulfilled.com website can be construed as blaming or defaming Jews or any other persons today in the 21st Century. No one living since the 1st Century AD has any responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. That act was committed by his contemporaries in Judea circa AD 30. No one today is associated with or part of that 1st Century AD generation and no more guilt for that crime remains. Let there be peace NOW among and between all peoples, to the glory of Christ.