

Paul: Apostle of Christ-Critique

(Version 2)

Problems with the movie; the story line and historical accuracy.

The movie begins with the subtitle that the year is 67.

It is based on the report of the Roman historian Tacitus. (*Annals* 15:44)

1. The Great Fire occurred in the year 64 NOT 67.

In the movie the fire is blamed on Christians but that was three years ago. It is more likely that scapegoats would have been found immediately in 64 not 3 years later. In fact Tacitus implies that the punishment and seeking out of Christians was immediate, and short-lived.

2. Jewish-Christians

The first Christians in Rome were Jewish Christians. What happened to them? Jewish Christians continued to practice the Law of Moses, the food laws, circumcision and keeping the Sabbath. The movie portrays Gentile Christians as if this was the only form of Christianity.

It is established that there were Jews living in Rome in the times of the Apostles, and that those Jews who had believed [in Christ] passed on to the Romans the tradition that they ought to profess Christ but keep the law [Torah] ... One ought not to condemn the Romans, but to praise their faith, because without seeing any signs or miracles and without seeing any of the apostles, they nevertheless accepted faith in Christ, although *according to a Jewish rite*.

Ambrosiaster (late 4th Century)

Paul says to the Romans—in favour of Gentile Christianity,

For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. (Romans 2:28-29)

It is unreasonable to expect that all the Jewish Christians in Rome would have converted to Gentile Christianity on the word of Paul. Elsewhere it is reported that Paul was hated by the Ebionites, a form of strict Jewish Christianity, who were also present in Rome. (Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Book 1.30.16.8-9, 18.1)

3. Christians in Rome in 67?

There is no corroborating evidence of any kind for the existence of Christians in Rome in the year 67. In his *Natural History* published in the year 77, Pliny the Elder mentions the Jewish sect, the Essenes but *not the Christians*. The elder Pliny's only explicit statement regarding the fire of 64 holds Nero to blame for it and, in consequence, for the destruction of an important rare species of tree. But nowhere in the more than 20,000 facts collected from 2,000 books and 100 different authors in his *Natural History* does Pliny so much as refer to any people called Christians or Chrestiani, much less does he make any connection of them with the fire that destroyed large parts of the imperial metropolis.¹ Tacitus, writing 50 years later, is the only historian to mention this event

4. The Christians in Rome met in private houses.

There is no evidence that the Christians in Rome inhabited a secret compound and lived a communal existence such as is portrayed in the movie.

Paul says,

Greet also the church in *their house*. (Romans 16:5)

¹ Shaw, B. (2015). *The myth of the neronian persecution*. *Journal of Roman Studies*, 105, 73-100. doi:10.1017/S0075435815000982

In other cities, house churches are named.

The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with *the church in their house*, greet you warmly in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 16:19)

Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and *the church in her house*. (Colossians 4:15)

The writers of the movie seem to have conflated the alleged experience of the Jerusalem church with that at Rome.

All who believed were together and had all things in common. (Acts 2:44, and 4:32)

5. The flight from Rome.

At the end of the movie, the movie Christians flee. There is no evidence in the church fathers or the church historian Eusebius that Christians escaped from Rome and fled to Ephesus or anywhere else (as far as I know). Once again the writers of the movie seem to have conflated the alleged experience of the Jerusalem church with that at Rome. (Acts 8:1)

6. The Christians in Rome were afraid?

The movie Christians are fearful and secretive.

But Paul says that his imprisonment in Rome *encouraged the Christians to speak out*.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard [*whole praetorium*] and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word *with greater boldness and without fear*.

7. The Christians in Rome were divided on the question of Paul.

The movie Christians all support Paul even those that proposed a violent confrontation with the Romans in order to forcibly free him.

Paul says that not all Christians were on his side.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.

These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to *increase my suffering in my imprisonment*.

8. What about the slaves?

These movie Christians all appear to be freemen or are they escaped slaves as well as freemen? Slaves made up about half the population of the city (total about 1 million inhabitants). Christian slaves were encouraged to *obey their masters* as per Paul's command. (Ephesians 6:5) Also their Roman masters would have been loathe to hand them over for punishment or death because they were expensive and useful. So searching for and finding these Christians would have been very unpopular with the populace.

9. Early Christians studied the Jewish holy books

Early Christians studied the Jewish Tanakh to find evidence of Christ's coming. Nowhere in the movie is there any mention or allusion to this. The movie Christians seem to have no holy books except Paul's letters and Luke's gospel. They take everything on Paul's word.

Paul says,

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to *the revelation of the mystery* that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and *through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles*, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 16:25-27

Acts says,

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them *from the scriptures*, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead.

Acts 17:2-3

Apocryphal writings say that Jesus was discovered in the holy texts.

“But we, unrolling the books of the prophets which we possess, who name Jesus Christ, partly in parables, partly in enigmas, partly expressly and in so many words, *find* His coming and death, and cross, and all the rest of the tortures which the Jews inflicted on Him, and His resurrection and assumption to heaven previous to the founding of [the new] Jerusalem. *As it is written*, These things are all that He behoves to suffer, and what should be after Him. Recognising them, *therefore, we have believed in God in consequence of what is written respecting Him.*”

Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, Book 6.15

10. What about the miracles?

The movie Christians seem to have seen no miracles, or even heard of Paul's miracles, despite Paul saying he performed them, as proof of his divine standing.

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, *by the power of signs and wonders*, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

Romans 15:18-19

11. Severe and widespread persecution under Nero or any other emperor of the time?

Pliny the Younger, a contemporary and friend of Tacitus, in 111 has heard of Christians, but *knows nothing of their beliefs or practices*. If the story of Tacitus were true, Christianity as a sect would have been widely known. Such widespread persecution could not have gone unnoticed.

12. Paul spent 3 years in Damascus not Arabia.

See Galatians 1:18.

13. Nero, the epitome of evil?

—Nero himself was absent when the fire started and suffered personal loss in the fire.

Nero at this time was at Antium [about 50km south of Rome, on the coast], and did not return to Rome until the fire approached his house, which he had built to connect the palace with the gardens of Maecenas. It could not, however, be stopped from devouring the palace, the house, and everything around it.

—Short-term relief was provided by Nero.

... to relieve the people, driven out homeless as they were, he [Nero] threw open to them the Campus Martius and the public buildings of Agrippa, and even his own gardens, and raised temporary structures to receive the destitute multitude. Supplies of food were brought up from Ostia and the neighbouring towns, and the price of corn was reduced to three sesterces a peck.

—Long-term planning

Nero instituted changes to building regulations to prevent further serious fires in the city, or at least mitigate the damage that they could cause. He also facilitated the removal of debris, appointed fire wardens and ensured that water was available to fight any future outbreaks.

14. Why Tacitus is mistaken.

Publius Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman historian and senator writing about the year 110, some *50 years after the event* under consideration.

The Nero story is not quoted by any *early* church fathers. There is no mention by Justin Martyr. There is no mention by Irenaeus despite discussing the subject of persecution. (Book 2.30) Origen mentions Nero and persecution, but never recalls any persecution under Nero. It is not mentioned in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which discusses Roman emperors.

Clement, bishop of Rome, writing about 97 describes persecution as if it is *a new development* (recent “sudden and successive calamitous events,” 1.) and despite naming Peter and Paul, and some women as recent distinguished martyrs (5,6) *makes no reference to Nero or any martyrs under Nero.*

Why were Christians *universally hated as enemies of mankind* if their numbers were so small while Jews with similar beliefs and who were much more numerous were tolerated? *Anti-Semitism was well established throughout the Empire.* The

Jews in Palestine were also at this time (67) *in open insurrection against Roman rule*, and diaspora Jews were in a precarious position. (The Roman-Jewish War started in 66) It is more probable that the entertainment provided by Nero, if in fact it occurred at all, was really a punishment inflicted on *Roman Jews*, who are described elsewhere by Tacitus as being *haters of mankind*.

15. Paul was not in Rome in 67.

Jerome says that Paul was in Galilee or Tarsus at that time.

Paul, formerly called Saul, an apostle outside the number of the twelve apostles, was of the tribe of Benjamin and the town of Gischalis in Judea. When this was taken by the Romans he removed with his parents to Tarsus in Cilicia.

De Viris Illustribus, 5.

Gischala was the last of the fortress-towns of Galilee which held out against Rome, and was taken in the year 67 or 68.

16. A prison dungeon? Not so, says Acts.

Luke ends Acts with Paul under house arrest, not suffering in a prison dungeon as portrayed in the movie.

When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Acts 28:16

He lived there [Rome] two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Acts 28:30-31

17. Why didn't Luke chronicle these momentous events in Acts?

The omission of these significant events from Acts is incomprehensible. Despite Luke being physically present, the movie does not explain why this omission happened in a convincing way. (In fact the contradictions and errors in Acts would indicate that Luke was not the author of that book or the gospel named after him.)