

## Response to Christopher Jones: The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution\*

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In the *Journal of Roman Studies* of 2015, I argued that the evidence in Tacitus for a state-directed punishment of Christians in Rome in 64 CE was too weak to sustain the historical interpretation of it as a persecution. In a reply in this journal last year, Christopher Jones argued that knowledge of Christians under that name could well have reached Rome by the mid-60s, that the *vulgus* of the city could well have accused such persons, and that the Tacitean account is therefore generally credible. While admitting the justice of some of his criticisms, I attempt in this reply to clarify some of my arguments and to restate my original claim that a persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero in connection with the Great Fire of 64 seems improbable given the context of the relations between officials of the Roman state and Christians over the first century CE.

**Keywords:** Christians, Nazoreans, Nero, Paul, persecution, Peter, Tacitus

The following essay attempts to answer some of the criticisms made in the pages of this journal by Christopher Jones in his critique of my analysis of a well-known passage in the *Annales* of the Roman historian Tacitus concerning the punishment of Christians by the emperor Nero.<sup>1</sup> I might begin my reply by dividing such responses into two different types. In the first, where the data are numerous and relatively manifest in their meaning, a fairly decisive answer is usually possible. One can say with a reasonably high degree of probability that an event did or did not happen or, at least, did or did not happen in the fashion described. In a second kind of reply, which I believe to be the case here, where the data are dubious, obscure in meaning and very few in number, a response

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<sup>1</sup> The original is B. D. Shaw, 'The Myth of the Neronian Persecution', *JRS* 105 (2015) 1–28; for the response in this journal, see C. P. Jones, 'The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution: A Response to Brent Shaw', *NTS* 63 (2017) 146–52.

must assume the form of a discussion of possibilities. Although the latter type of reply is the best that I can offer, I think that the issues at stake are sufficiently important to justify further discussion.

The single specific datum that bears directly on the question at hand is testimony of Tacitus that has been taken to confirm a persecution of Christians by the Roman state in the year 64 CE. I take the core problem with this text to be a specifically historical one. The question is not if sundry persons, either then or later known as Christians, were swept up in accusations of those whom the emperor Nero wished to make responsible for setting the Great Fire at Rome. The focus must be on the problem of persecution. To be a useful term of historical analysis, I would argue that persecution must designate a type of action where an agency uses force to harass and punish a specific group (often, as in this instance, a religious one) which it recognises and wishes to repress for being that group. In these terms, for example, no one would reasonably quibble with the assertion that there was a targeted repression of Bacchanalian cultists by the Roman state in the mid-180s BCE. My question, therefore, is whether there was an event that happened in 64 that is definable in these terms. Was there a conscious targeting of individuals known as 'Christians' and their deliberate punishment by the Roman state for the name? However emic or perceptual it might have been, one cannot necessarily accept an *ex post facto* construction of what had happened in 64 as constituting a 'persecution' of Christians. An action that the officials of the Roman state did not intend to be a disciplining of persons known as Christians *for that identity* was simply an action that fell under the normal punishment of criminal acts undertaken by the state. I further understand the Roman state's persecution of Christians as a strongly dialogical act. Not only must the Christians have perceived that they were being attacked for 'the name', but the officials of the Roman state must have been intending to punish them for this identity. The one action must be linked with the other. It should be emphasised that persecuting actions can occur where indirect means are exploited with the intent of entrapping and harming the persecuted group. That, too, as long as the intent is behind it and is perceived, would surely count as persecution. This is what I understand to have happened in the Decian persecution of 250, although I hardly need point out that there are dissenters.<sup>2</sup>

Before I proceed to the specifics of Jones' comments, I feel that a few preliminary remarks should be made about the qualities of our principal documents. In the case under investigation, we have to confront fundamentally different types of

2 For example, J. Rives, 'The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire', *JRS* 89 (1999) 135–54 has interpreted Decius as only intending to compel the subjects of the empire to make a public demonstration of piety to the traditional deities of the state. The entrapment of Christians was therefore an accidental side effect of the state's actions; they were just collateral damage. I do not find the argument persuasive, but this is not the place for a detailed reply.

literary sources. On the one hand, there are individually authored texts by well-attested writers. These writings were fixed in a relatively permanent form by a given author. Tacitus' *Annales* and the letters of the younger Pliny are manifestly in this category. Although such sources are biased from the perspective of the author, and are capable of revision, these troublesome aspects are confined within fairly strict limits. Written sources of this type are reasonably contained in time and space by their internal coherence, by author and creative process, and can be handled in conventional ways that have been developed for their interpretation. On the other hand, especially on the Christian side, we are often faced with texts that, even if attributed to a single writer, circulated in a manner that left them open to additions and revisions instituted by different 'authors' until some authority fixed them in a relatively static canonical form. For the lack of a better metaphor, I call these texts 'sedimentary'. They are marked by varying layers of composition and by occasional deliberate intrusions into the text. Other texts are interstitial between these extremes. Although it is an allowable convenience to speak of 'Luke' as though he were the single author of a single coherent text of Luke-Acts, these same difficulties are present.<sup>3</sup> The interpretative problem with the second type of sources that is particularly relevant to this inquiry is that they are manifestly more open to intervention and reshaping by interested parties. In the case of Christian sectarian texts, the motives and impulses to intervene in them were manifestly strong. Even nominally single-authored texts such as the genuine letters of Paul were subject to interventions of this kind.<sup>4</sup>

The text of Luke-Acts shares some of the layered nature of the sedimentary kind. There appear to be two divergent textual families of the Book of Acts as we have it.<sup>5</sup> The *earlier* of the two versions has been dated to about 115 CE or, to be more cautious, at some point between 110 and 120 CE.<sup>6</sup> The other major

3 See, for example, the studies of a new papyrus fragment of Acts: D. C. Parker and S. R. Pickering, 'P.Oxy. 4968: Acta Apostolorum 10-12, 15-17', *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. LXXIV (Graeco-Roman Memoirs 95; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2009) 1-45; for a study: G. Gäbel, 'The Text of P<sup>127</sup> (P.Oxy. 4968) and its Relationship with the Text of Codex Bezae', *NT* 53 (2011) 107-52.

4 There seems to be a consensus, for example, that 16.17-10 and 16.25-7 in Paul's letter to the Romans are such later interpolations: R. Jewett, 'Romans', *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (ed. J. D. G. Dunn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 91-104, at 91.

5 The different textual clusters have been grouped under the headings 'western' and 'eastern', although these terms tend to be avoided now. Some have come to the conclusion that there were in fact several free-floating versions of Acts: see Parker and Pickering, 'P.Oxy. 4968', 6-8, a view shared by others, as e.g. Gäbel, 'P.Oxy. 4968', 150-1.

6 See R. I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006), at exhaustive length, considering just about every contextual piece of evidence; and, more briefly, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 5-7: the general force of the sum of his arguments stands, I think, despite the obvious objections that can be posed to each of them individually: see the survey of opinion in C. S. Keener,

textual group is thought to date to a later time, possibly much later. Even with the accretion of material through the latter decades of the first century, a source put together in these years could still contain, as Jones notes, reasonably accurate information about events taking place some sixty years or more earlier. But we must also consider the possibility that there were strong contemporary forces at work that would have provoked authors writing in the first decades of the second century to stake out a special primal age of the faith, especially at Antioch, and to lay claim to the antiquity of the name of Christian at that place, as the writer of Acts 11.26 asserts. The first firmly attested contemporary use of the name 'Christian' was by Ignatius, who was bishop at Antioch. He was also the first writer known to use the concept noun 'Christianity', in part because of his interest in contrasting Χριστιανισμός with Ιουδαϊσμός.<sup>7</sup> The first contemporarily attested connection between being a Christian and martyrdom is also specific to Ignatius. Although the description of his desire willingly to suffer official punishment antedates the first appearance of the term 'martyr' in its technical Christian sense by some decades, his writings nevertheless present a clear concept of such witnessing.<sup>8</sup> Both the name of Christian and the timing of its general use are significant to the argument here since 'being a Christian' was the charge on which Christians were tried and punished.<sup>9</sup> We can be almost certain, however, that whatever summary procedure was employed at Rome in 64 CE (Jones rightly doubts that there was much of it), it almost certainly did not include a question of whether or not the defendant was a 'Christian'. In 64, this concern was *not* one of the Roman state, but rather, according to Tacitus, a prejudice of the crowd, the *vulgus*, who were moved to accuse certain persons

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*Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 383–401, esp. 394–400.

- 7 Ignatius of Antioch, *Magnesians* 4.1: Πρέπον οὖν ἔστιν μὴ μόνον καλεῖσθαι Χριστιανούς; 10.1: μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ γενόμενοι, μάθωμεν κατὰ Χριστιανισμόν ζῆν, cf. 8.1–2 and 10.3: ὁ γὰρ Χριστιανισμός οὐκ εἰς Ἰουδαϊσμόν ἐπίστευσεν, ἀλλ' Ἰουδαϊσμός εἰς Χριστιανισμόν. 1 Pet 4.16 is perhaps a near-contemporary use, but the dating is uncertain in the extreme: P. J. Achtemeier, *A Commentary on First Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 43–9; others appear to be later.
- 8 When he mentions the identity of being a Christian, *Romans* 3.2: ἵνα μὴ μόνον λέγωμαι Χριστιανός, he also makes a brief allusion to Peter and Paul (4.3); otherwise, in his exhortations and prayers on martyrdom, he never once appeals to the example set by the Roman Christians.
- 9 G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?', *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (ed. M. Whitby and J. Streeter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 105–52 [reprint of *Past & Present* 26 (1963) 6–38], at 110–13, has not been surpassed in having established this basic fact; on the relation of the name to the behaviour, see G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 6.

of complicity in setting the fire because they 'knew' that these persons were *Chrestiani*.

I shall now take Professor Jones' observations in turn. His first point is that the stories of the executions of Peter and Paul should not be collated with the events of 64 CE. Unless I misunderstand his intent, we seem to be arguing at cross-purposes. Although it is true that I did analyse the evidence for the deaths of Peter and Paul in connection with the Great Fire of 64, I did so explicitly *not* to have them integrated with the conflagration. Since these two deaths are still frequently cobbled together with the episode of the fire to produce a picture of a general Neronian persecution, the whole purpose of my analysis was permanently to separate them from whatever it was that the emperor Nero did in 64. My argument therefore supports what I take to be the position advocated by Jones: whatever events at Rome might or might not have involved Peter and Paul, they were *not* connected with the Great Fire or with a persecution of Christians by Nero. It is, of course, a good point to say that the dubious nature of some post-Tacitean sources does not necessarily undermine the validity of Tacitus' words. I agree that it might be illegitimate to do so. The whole point of my argument in the first section of my analysis, however, was to detach these other incidents permanently from an historical analysis of a Neronian persecution of Christians precisely in order to isolate the passage in Tacitus as the only explicit and credible literary evidence that we possess on what happened in 64. So far, I think, we agree on the general context of the Tacitean testimony.

I now turn to Jones' second and third points. His second point pertains to the naming of early Christians as 'Christians' and 'Nazoreans', and his third concerns the nature of the Christian community in Rome in the mid-60s CE. Firstly, as for the dialogue between King Herod Agrippa and Paul (Acts 26.1–32) where the word 'Christian' is used, I must stand by my judgement as an historian. The *ipsisima verba* as they are reported in Acts are surely a piece of invented rhetoric whose provenance and meaning are so uncertain as to render them almost useless for our purposes. The dialogue stands in the tradition of speeches and speech-like materials composed by historians and biographers of the time.<sup>10</sup> The discussions that philosophers and saints are reputed to have had with rulers, including emperors and their agents, especially concerning conversions, are always somewhat suspect. The words uttered by the king, 'Do you think that ... you can make me a Christian?' (Acts 26.28), surely bear suspicious

<sup>10</sup> See the lengthy summary of almost all possible perspectives in Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 258–319 (ch. 8, 'Speeches in Acts'), who is somewhat of an optimist in these matters. He still does not hold much more than that the writers of 'Luke' acted more or less like most historians of their time: they felt free to use rhetoric to effect and, at best, preserved 'the gist' of what might have been demanded by the occasion (while admitting that it is extremely improbable that they could have had anything like access to conversations held 'behind closed doors').

hallmarks of a later self-interested composition.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the Tacitean speech of Claudius to the Senate in 48 CE, there is no good reason to believe that there was a written record to which the writer of this mini-segment in the Acts could have referred. Even in the case of the Claudian speech, for which the historian, Tacitus, did have a written record that he could consult, it would be dangerous to take the Tacitean Latinity of the emperor, the specific terms of reference or even the general gist of the speech as an accurate reflection of the original words spoken by the emperor. The original was different in all these respects. The speech in Tacitus in fact reflects the contemporary second-century concerns of the historian.<sup>12</sup> In texts that I have categorised as sedimentary, such rhetorical passages are especially open to manipulation, as we see from the addition found in the so-called ‘western’ text of Acts at the end of another piece of rhetoric, the trial dialogue between the rhetor Tertullus, the legal representative of Paul’s accusers, and the Roman provincial governor.<sup>13</sup> The additions are manifestly those of a later writer who wished to insert *his* own point into the text.

The specific statement in Acts (11.26) about the followers of Jesus in Antioch in the early 40s CE and the name ‘Christian’ assumes real significance in this context. It stakes a claim to the origin of ‘Christian’ as an identity. The assertion has the plausible patina of a reported fact. But what did the claim mean and how are we to understand it? As Jones notes, the interpretation rests in part on the precise meaning of the Greek verb *χρηματίζειν*.<sup>14</sup> The problem is that the verb has no good parallels in the other books of the New Testament that can serve as check on its meaning. We therefore have to look to different literary and epigraphical sources to divine its meaning in Acts. I admit that in my original essay, I was inordinately attracted by one of the arguments proffered by Elias Bickerman, namely that later native speakers of Greek understood the verb in this sentence to mean that this was the time when the apostles first began to call themselves Christians.<sup>15</sup> Like Jones, however, I had always understood the origin of the term (which I took to explain its hybrid nature) as a piece of Latinised Greek

11 For the text as I accept it, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (London/New York: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1994<sup>3</sup>) 439.

12 M. Griffin, ‘The Lyons Tablet and Tacitean Hindsight’, *CQ* 32 (1982) 404–18 is a sufficient exposition.

13 See e.g. the NA<sup>28</sup> text at Acts 24.1–9 for 24.6b–8a in the *apparatus criticus*. The additional lines do not logically cohere with the main text of which they are part; in fact, they constitute a further ‘layering’ that is usually rejected by modern editors.

14 On which, as far as I can see, the most recent detailed analysis of the evidence outside the New Testament, especially in the important epigraphical texts, is C. P. Jones, ‘*Ἐπιγραφικά*’ (Part I: ‘*Χρηματίζειν*’), *ZPE* 139 (2002) 108–16, at 108–11 (I must confess here, a very important study that somehow escaped my notice).

15 See E. Bickerman, ‘The Name of Christians’, *HThR* 42 (1949) 109–24, esp. 113 n. 27 = *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, vol. III (Leiden/Boston, Brill, 1986) 139–51, at 142–3 nn. 27–8;

produced as *officiales* for Roman courts and imperial governors – a verbal confection created by persons who wished to accuse certain persons with a formal label, in this case as adherents of a man known as Chrestos or Christos.<sup>16</sup>

The verb *χρηματίζειν* goes through sometimes striking, if generally logical, permutations in meaning. The meaning ‘to be registered as’ or ‘to be known as’ (i.e. in the sense of being recognised with a given title or name by others) is indeed richly attested in the formal epigraphy of the time. Examples come mainly from the Greek-speaking city-states of Asia Minor and relate to the bestowal of civic honours in which benefactors were being ‘recognised’ by their beneficiaries. Some doubt remains, however, about its meaning in the somewhat different language in Acts. And that problem takes us back to what the sentence embedded in Acts meant to its writer. It is surely within the realm of probability that someone might have wished to establish a claim to the first use of the identity-name ‘Christian’ and to assert that this first happened at Antioch.<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, the first person known to make this distinction, and precisely in this fashion, was Ignatius, who was, not surprisingly, the bishop of Antioch. The whole debate over a precise meaning, however, might well be a moot one, since to sustain the Tacitean text all that one requires is that persons in Rome in the mid-60s CE were capable of using this hostile label to single out persons whom they disliked in order to provide the emperor with the guilty parties that he needed. Even so, certainty about the significance of the evidence in Acts is difficult to obtain. I can only quote Jones’ conclusion to his excellent analysis: ‘In what sense the author of the Acts used it, whether he thought that the “disciples” took the name themselves or were given it by others, is beyond conjecture.’<sup>18</sup> Perhaps that is where the matter must remain.

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re-looking at his proof passages, I must admit that I am no longer as convinced by them as I first was at the time of the writing of my original article.

- 16 It might be useful to refer the reader here to my original words (Shaw, ‘Myth’, n. 71) in discussing the positions held by Bickerman (internal ascription) and Taylor (external labelling): ‘My interpretation is interstitial between these two polarities: that the word was probably used first by persons who were hostile to the Christians as a formal legal-like term that they could use to specify such persons before Roman officials (hence the Latinized form) and which was then adopted by the Roman officials as a mode of identifying such accused persons (as, for example, with Pliny, later).’
- 17 It should be noted, however, that there are other possibilities that have been canvassed: see e.g. P. Townsend, ‘Who Were the First Christians? Jews, Gentiles and the *Christianoī*’, *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (ed. E. Irichinschi and H. M. Zellentin; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 212–52: mainly used at first to distinguish non-Jewish groups of Jesus followers, as at Rome.
- 18 Jones, ‘*Χρηματίζειν*’, 111, continuing: ‘Perhaps the question mattered less to him than that it first came into use at Antioch, the fruit of Paul’s and Barnabas’ success as teachers of the Word.’

As for accusatory labels, the use of the name 'Nazorean' for the early followers of Jesus, and specifically for those with whom Paul was connected, is subject to the same problems of chronology and context. I am rightly called to task for an 'odd method' in my use of the evidence in one rhetorical piece while at the same time rejecting a similar datum in another passage of rhetoric. Setting that problem aside, however, we still have to confront the problem of by what name early followers of Jesus were called, by whom and when. Jesus is specifically identified as 'the Nazorean' (ὁ Ναζωραῖος) in every gospel except that of Mark, who uses 'the Nazarene' (ὁ Ναζαρηνός) for the same purpose.<sup>19</sup> And it is under this name (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι or equivalent) that miraculous acts and healings were performed.<sup>20</sup> Unpacking the accusation of being a Nazorean is perhaps more complicated than holding that the use of the term 'Christian' was so loaded with the implicit recognition of a Messiah that it was purposefully avoided by Paul's Jewish accusers. The most likely persons who would have known who the disciples of Christ were at Antioch in the 40s CE, and their most likely accusers, were fellow Jewish sectarians. And such hostile Jewish sectarians must have had terms of accusation when they brought charges against Paul and his followers at Thessalonika and Corinth, for example.<sup>21</sup> We are told by Paul (of the Acts account), no less, that Christ called himself by the term: 'I am Jesus the Nazorean.'<sup>22</sup> Since there must have been large numbers of Yeshuas in Judaea of the time, the epithet was probably used to distinguish a particular Yeshua.<sup>23</sup> As for official attitudes, Jesus 'the Nazarene' is the name under which the Temple officials and armed police went searching for him, the name under which he self-identified at his arrest, and the name that he was apparently identified in the caption or *titulus* placed on the cross.<sup>24</sup> None of this, admittedly, can be conclusive evidence that Christians did not call themselves or were not also known as Christians by the early 60s. Different namings in different circumstances

19 Matt 2.23, explaining the epithet's origin as specifically linked to Nazareth; 26.71; Luke 18.37; John 18.5 & 7; Mark 1.24 (having identified Jesus at 1.9 as Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας) consistently uses Ναζαρηνός instead, but with the same significance; cf. Mark 10.47, 14.67 and 16.6.

20 See Acts 3.6 and 4.10.

21 See Acts 17.6–9 and 18.12–17; this seems concordant with the run of the evidence: see de Ste. Croix, 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?', 107–8.

22 Acts 22.8: ἐγὼ εἶμι Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος.

23 It is not certain that the epithet is derived from the village of Nazareth (unattested before the gospel accounts and not found in Josephus): see the discussion in J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke x–xxiv* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1985) 1215. I take it that some of the same dynamic lies behind the creation of *Christianus* – namely that there were so many Yeshuas that one selected instead an identifier peculiar to the person and added the *-ianus* suffix to it. Similarly in Roman instances it was often the specificity of the *cognomen* that was exploited, as in the Pisoniani and Caesariani of the *SC de Cn. Pisonis patre* (lines 55–6).

24 See John 18.5–7; 19.19 (the last two items admittedly found only in the Gospel of John).



were quite possible. From all the evidence, however, it seems that the appellation 'Nazorean' is logically and historically prior to 'Christian'. The latter emerged out of imperial Roman circumstances and became the Mediterranean-wide name that made most sense when the movement was reaching far outside its local origins.

As Jones says, the evidence in Tacitus, if accepted, is coherent with *outsiders* in Rome using the label *Chrestiani* for them.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, either fellow Jewish sectarians in Rome or ordinary Romans could have used the term to designate persons in the city whom they much disliked. This raises the question of what sort of Christian community there was in the imperial metropolis by the 60s CE. There is no reasonable doubt that there were Jewish sectarians in Rome. Some of them, probably, were followers of a Chrestos, whatever the name meant to those who used it. I still think that it bears repeating, however, that except for Paul's letter there is virtually no other independent contemporary evidence bearing on their presence. The question therefore becomes: how much does this one letter tell us? Paul did indeed write a letter to a community (or rather communities) in Rome in the later 50s, although, of course, he never once addresses them by using the term Christian. In his introduction, he suggests that he is addressing the letter not to a Jewish community as such, but rather to a group of non-Jewish or 'ethnic' believers.<sup>26</sup> It is truly difficult to judge from this letter – in which Paul states that he intends to stay briefly in Rome to garner support for his mission to Spain (Acts 15.22–4, 28) – how large the new 'Christian' communities in Rome were, what they called themselves or, more important for present purposes, to what degree they were recognised by Roman authorities as a distinctive group known by the name of Christians. This was the situation only six or seven years before the Great Fire.

Even if there were substantial groups of Jewish or non-Jewish sectarians in Rome in the 50s and early 60s CE popularly known as *Chrestiani*, serious interpretative problems remain for the idea of a 'persecution' in 64, the specific purpose of my investigation. What might such a conclusion suggest for the overall arguments that I have made? Let us accept, for the sake of argument, that Christians were being called by this name by others in Antioch as early as the 40s and that this knowledge and identity had made its way to the imperial metropolis where it was shared by other non-Christian outsiders. What is the significance of this fact for a persecution of the Christians by the Roman state? This is where I return to the need for a workable definition of persecution. Such a definition requires that basic conditions be met. The agents of the Roman state had to be

25 Paul's actions at Cenchræe in Acts 18.18, and statements at Acts 21.20–4, seem to be connected with the accusatory term in Acts 24.5–18; the connection of the term 'Nazorean' either to the village or to the sect seems undecidable on the basis of the present evidence; perhaps it had links with both: see Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 1215–16.

26 Rom 1.5–6: ἐν πάσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ... ἐν οἷς ἐστε καὶ ὑμεῖς; cf. 1.13–14: Paul hoped to work 'among you' as he had done καὶ ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσιν.

able to designate certain persons as Christians and had to be motivated to pursue punitive actions against them *as Christians*. If some persons who were Christians happened to be caught up in actions taken by Roman officials on grounds other than their Christian identity and were punished for different reasons, this is surely not sufficient to count as a persecution of Christians. What is required is consistent evidence that Roman officials, like provincial governors, knew who Christians were and were willing to accept charges made against them by their accusers on the grounds of this identity. This scenario, I argue, is far more consistent with the situation that we find in the 100s and 110s than with that in the mid-first century.

I do admit that it is very difficult, to the point of straining anyone's credulity, to offer persuasive scenarios of how Tacitus came to write the words that he did in *Annales* 15.44. We can only begin with the obvious. The historian himself had come to accept that a group with the specific name of Christians were singled out and punished by Nero as the persons responsible (falsely, Tacitus thought) for the fire of 64. The key to the motivation of the accusations that led to the arrests, I think, are the *flagitia*, the supposed shameful and disgusting acts that excited popular prejudices against the accused. Although the *flagitia* were not criminal charges, they were sometimes a primary cause for the accused being singled out for prosecution.<sup>27</sup> The word often carried with it a suggestion of subversive sexual transgression, as for example in Livy's narrative of the Bacchanalian affair of the mid-180s BCE.<sup>28</sup> But when did such *flagitia* identified with Christians become a staple of popular prejudices, so exposing them to false accusations, prejudices of the sort that we (with Tacitus) imagine might have motivated accusers in 64? None of the attested accusations of outrageous or disgusting acts (as always, in this case, other than the statement in Tacitus) dates to within a quinquennium of the first naming of Christians at Antioch. Up to the 110s CE, other than Tacitus, only Pliny mentions the *flagitia*. Four decades or so after Pliny and Tacitus, around the mid-second century, we begin to get more explicit testimony in Justin Martyr, in whose writings the *flagitia* are spelled out in greater detail.<sup>29</sup> The only specific prejudice that Tacitus notes – the 'hatred of humankind', the *odium generis humani* – was one that was consistently part of anti-Jewish sentiments of the time. If any long-term misunderstanding was involved, imputing to so-called *Chrestiani* accusations that made them liable to false criminal charges, it might have had to do with Jewish residents in Rome who had been the subject of several such popular accusations, one of which had led to their

27 The word is frequently mistranslated as 'crimes', but *flagitia* were not formal charges; they were part of popular moral judgements on the behaviour of others: for the full range of meanings, see *TLL* vi.839–43 s.v. *flagitium*.

28 See e.g. Livy 39.13.10, 14.8, 16.5, 17.7; as often, historically speaking: B. Moore, *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2000.

29 See Justin, 1 *Apol.* 26; 2 *Apol.* 12; and, still later, Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.4 (probably Severan in date).

banishment from the city by Claudius. A parallel dynamic is attested in the accusations launched by mob action against Paul and his followers before Roman magistrates at Philippi in *ca.* 49: 'they are Jews who are advocating customs that we Romans cannot accept or practice' (Acts 16.21–2). Some of these more amorphous Jewish sectarian groups would later more clearly be identified as *Chrestiani*. They were becoming better known to high Roman authorities later in the century more explicitly as 'Christians' whom they were having denounced to them at the time under this name.

As I remarked at the beginning, I can promise no more than a discussion of Professor Jones' objections to the arguments and interpretations that I presented in the *Journal of Roman Studies*. It is possible that the name Christian was used of some of Jesus' adherents at Antioch as early as the 40s CE and had come to be accepted as a form of self-ascribed identification by the later decades of the first century. But this still leaves the modern historian (to my mind) some significant distance from having the Roman state, including high-ranking officials in the Neronian court in the imperial metropolis of the empire in the mid-60s, recognising early Christians as Christians and singling them out for persecution. A persecution is a complex thing. For one to take place, a complicated set of social actors has to move in a coordinated order. Whatever the problematic status of the statement in Tacitus, written in the 110s of the second century, it seems improbable to me that a persecution took place as early as the 60s of the first century.

I am perhaps too unrepentant for my own good, but I still feel that there are grounds for doubting Tacitus' words. Whatever philological expertise Professor Jones or I might be able to marshal, I think that the problem remains not only a matter of assembling specific textual proofs, but also a question of broader historical context. Whereas no contemporary or later witnesses necessarily impugn the evidence in Tacitus (I agree with Jones), the whole range of the evidence, not just on this specific event but also on the general development of the empire and its governmental structures, both before and after Tacitus, forms a vital context within which the historian's testimony must be assessed. What is the probability that such an event actually happened in the metropolis of the empire in the year 64 CE? This will be a matter for each historian to judge.

In the end, because of the state of the evidence, we are faced with two propositions. One, that in 64 CE the emperor Nero did in fact arrest and punish persons then known as Christians, holding them responsible for the setting of the Great Fire. No known state-directed attacks on Christians are then on record for about half a century, followed by the emergence of an official recognition of Christians and the institution of trials 'for the name' around the 110s. Despite this long gap, we are disposed to accept the Tacitean passage at face value. On a more critical view, the fire seems to be the sole reason for which the Roman state punished trumped-up defendants in 64. Had the fire not happened, no one would have been arrested and punished. If some persons labelled

*Chrestiani* were caught up in the dragnet of 64 and suffered punishment, Christians later (mistakenly or deliberately) interpreted these actions as the Roman state having persecuted them *as Christians*. On the basis of a preponderance of the evidence, we might judge that the first alternative presents a *pattern* of behaviour that seems improbable and so begin to entertain doubts about the specific words in the historian.