



[Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* II.22.1-8](#)

Paul in Rome and the reputation of Nero

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: *Ecclesiastical History*

Reference: II.22.1-8

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on [I.6.6-11](#).

This passage describes the events leading up to and surrounding the martyrdom of the apostle Paul, particularly his imprisonment in the city of Rome, during which he wrote the Letters to Timothy found in the New Testament. Eusebius deals with certain chronological issues presented by the account of Paul's life and death in the Acts of the Apostles, but interesting for our purposes is the repeated reference to the emperor Nero, imagined as a lion, and the way in which Eusebius conceives of the emperor's attitude towards the apostle.

First, Paul is questioned by the Roman procurator of Judea, Porcius Festus (see [Acts 25:1-12](#)), the successor to Antonius Felix (see [Acts 24:10-26](#)) before being taken as a prisoner to Rome, where according to the author of the Acts of the Apostles, he was incarcerated for two years. It is here that the narrative of Paul's life in Acts ends, and those wishing to reconstruct Paul's final days and his martyrdom, including Eusebius, are reliant upon extra-biblical sources such as the Acts of Paul, and the hints provided in Paul's letters relating to his belief in the imminence of his own death (for a recent concise survey of the evidence for Paul's imprisonment and martyrdom, see Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles*, p. 95-114; sceptics such as A. N. Wilson, *Paul*, p. 249 argue that we have no substantial evidence at all that Paul was ever martyred). It is not the place here, however, to enter into a detailed discussion of the reliability of the information surrounding the lead up to and occasion of Paul's martyrdom. Eusebius recounts that after giving his defence in Rome and being released, free to preach to the Gentiles once more, he was later imprisoned in the imperial capital a second time, during which he wrote 2 Timothy. It is in this letter that he speaks of his first defence before the Roman authorities and states that his death will not be far away. Eusebius is the first author to state that Paul was released from an initial period of Roman imprisonment and then martyred after a second term of incarceration. The fact that he introduces this statement with ?????? (logos echei, "it is said") perhaps suggests that he was dependent on an oral source for this information, which he then tries to legitimate with his own exegesis of Paul's writings.

At the end of verse 2, Eusebius quotes 2 Timothy 4:17, "I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." As is explained in verse 4, Eusebius interprets this statement directly in relation to the emperor Nero, attributing this leonine allusion to the fact that the emperor had a reputation for savage cruelty. This is a theme which Eusebius picks up again just a few chapters later in II.25.1-5, which deals with Nero's supposed persecution of Christians, understood to be the first imperially sanctioned persecution. Verses 4-5 hypothesise that the fact that Paul does not claim that he will be rescued from Nero ("from the mouth of the lion") a second time is because he suspects that his death is impending. The precise time of Paul's death is not given by Eusebius here (in his *Chronicle* he dates it to 67 CE); he simply concludes from his exegesis of 2 Timothy and Acts that Paul was not executed while Luke (the author of Acts) was with Paul in Rome, the point at which the narrative in Acts ends. Some scholars of Acts have suggested that Luke deliberately does not narrate Paul's martyrdom because he wishes to portray Christianity as compatible with the Roman empire (for the pioneer of this view, see Karl Schrader, *Der Apostel*, p. 573-574, and for a similar argument more recently, Paul Walaskay, *'And so we Came,'* p. 62-63). However, as Troy Troftgruben points out, this is problematic, as arguably the rest of Acts does not portray Rome in an overly positive light (*A Conclusion Unhindered*, p. 17).



Regardless, what is important for Eusebius is the fact that Paul was not initially put to death when he first appeared as a prisoner in Rome, and instead was able to continue preaching for some time afterwards. This is attributed to the gradually worsening disposition of the emperor Nero, whom Eusebius suggests was less vicious in his earlier years of rule, and therefore more tolerant of Paul’s defence. However, as time advanced, the emperor became more and more cruel, committing “lawless deeds,” and it was during this later period of tyranny that he punished the apostles along with many others. That Nero committed numerous murderous, maniacal, and tyrannical acts over the course of his reign is the impression given from ancient authors such as Suetonius, *Nero*, Tacitus, *Annals*, and Dio Cassius, *Roman History* (for references in these sources to Nero causing the deaths of his mother, wife, and brother, see the commentary on *Ecclesiastical History* II.25.1-5; for an example of his “madness” in his later career, see the commentary on his speech announcing the [liberation of Greece](#), by which point he had participated in Olympic games and believed himself to be an inspired poet and singer), and this picture of him as the archetype of a despotic ruler has stuck. These sources also distinguish between the early years of Nero, mostly under the supervision of Seneca, and the later stage of his reign. Eusebius therefore draws on an established historiographical *topos* (for a recent argument considering the bias of the ancient sources in relation to Nero’s behaviour, and the suggestion that common memory of him has been heavily tainted as a result, see Edward Champlin, *Nero*). For Eusebius, and many other authors, Christian and non-Christian, the culmination of Nero’s madness was his persecution of the Christians (which according to Tacitus commenced after the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE). In II.25.1-5 Eusebius locates Paul’s (and Peter’s) martyrdom during this persecution, when Nero had firmly declared himself an “enemy of the divine religion” (II.25.3).

The present passage can therefore be interpreted as functioning as a dramatic build-up to the climactic claims involving the emperor Nero in II.25. After hinting here at the increasing madness and cruelty of the Roman emperor, who is described as a fierce beast, Eusebius then turns to narrate the martyrdom of James, brother of Jesus, where the focus is firmly on the divinely sanctioned punishment of the Jews by the Romans. When he comes back to Nero in chapter 25, the culmination of his tyranny is manifested in his newly avowed hatred for the Christians, and Paul’s martyrdom, only hinted at in the present passage, is finally confirmed. The narrative structure of this section of book II therefore traces the increasing ferocity of the emperor, the climax of which allows Eusebius in II.25 to claim Christianity’s legitimacy and worthiness, as he argues that Nero was known not to have made himself an enemy of anything other than the truly excellent.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Acts of the Apostles](#)
- [Antonius Felix](#)
- [cruelty](#)
- [Nero](#)



- [Paul the Apostle](#)
- [Porcius Festus](#)
- [procurator](#)
- [Roman authorities](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Nero and the Freedom of Greece](#)

Nero proclaims the "freedom" of Greece in a speech during the Isthmian games and the city of Akraiphiai prepares a decree in honour of the emperor, who is referred to as Zeus "the liberator"

- [Read more about Nero and the Freedom of Greece](#)

Text

[Acts 24:10-26](#)

Paul's defence before Felix the procurator

- [Read more about Acts 24:10-26](#)

Text

[Acts 25:1-12](#)

Paul appeals to the emperor

- [Read more about Acts 25:1-12](#)

Text



[Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29](#)

Paul is seized in the Jerusalem Temple, and appeals to his Roman citizenship

- [Read more about Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29](#)

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