

HANK  
HANEGRAAFF ✝ BROUWER



THE  
LAST  
DISCIPLE

✝ *Determined to save a crumbling empire... from itself*

† *Determined to save a crumbling empire . . . from itself*



HANK  
HANEGRAAFF

SIGMUND  
BROUWER

THE  
LAST  
DISCIPLE



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

Visit Tyndale online at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com).

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

*The Last Disciple*

Copyright © 2004 by Hank Hanegraaff. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of man taken by Stephen Vosloo. Copyright © by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of Colosseum copyright © calvio/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of tree copyright © Maciej Laska/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of sky copyright © Yarik Mishin /SXC. All rights reserved.

Cover image of bronze embellishment copyright © Dusko Jovic/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Designed by Daniel Farrell

Edited by James H. Cain III

Some Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Some Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,<sup>®</sup> *NIV*.<sup>®</sup> Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.<sup>™</sup> Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com).

This novel is a work of fiction. With the exception of historical persons and facts as noted on the website, names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons in the present day is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the authors or the publisher.

---

**The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:**

Hanegraaff, Hank.

The last disciple / Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8423-8437-7 (hc) — ISBN 978-0-8423-8438-4 (sc)

1. Bible. N.T. Revelation XIII—History of Biblical events—Fiction. 2. Church history—Primitive and early church, ca. 30–600—Fiction. 3. Rome—History—Nero, 54–68—Fiction. 4. End of the world—Fiction. I. Brouwer, Sigmund, date.

II. Title.

PS3608.A714L37 2004

813'.6—dc22

2004010713

---

Repackage first published in 2012 under ISBN 978-1-4143-6497-1

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Ten Months after the Beginning of the Tribulation*

AD 65  
ROME

*Capital of the Empire*



*Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. . . . And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. . . . After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. . . . After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left.*

— DANIEL 7:3-7



# INTEMPESTA

IN THE ROYAL GARDENS beneath a full moon, Vitas stealthily pursued the man he had once vowed to serve with loyalty or death. His emperor.

It was a night unnaturally still and hot, heavy with the unseen menace of a building storm, with the moon above Rome and the seven hills that guarded the city—a moon that bounced mercury light off the placid lake of the royal gardens into thinly spaced trees along its shore.

Nero was fifty paces ahead of Vitas, lurching beneath an elaborate costume that impeded his progress. The costume had been pieced together from animals imported to the arenas to kill convicted criminals. Head to foot, Nero was draped in a leopard's skin. Two pairs of eagles' wings were sewn onto the back of the costume. A lion's head from a massive male had been attached to the top, and Nero's head fit completely inside the skull, allowing him to see through the empty sockets. His arms and legs were covered by the skin from a bear's legs, which had also been sewn to the leopard skin that covered the bulk of Nero's body. In the quiet of the night, the bear claws rattled with each of Nero's steps.

Another man walked beside Nero. Helius. Nero's secretary and confidant. Helius—along with a man named Tigellinus—had been a companion since Nero was a teenage emperor, when the three of them roamed the streets of Rome at night to bully and rob strangers, like common thugs.

Helius held aloft a torch, which illuminated the dull iron chain in his right hand, and it dragged along the ground, rattling in odd unison with the bear claws of Nero's costume.

Because of the noise and the apparent focus on their destination, Vitas was not worried that his emperor would notice his pursuit. He was far more worried about Nero's intentions. There had been times when Nero dressed in wolf skins and attacked slaves chained to stakes, but that had been part of very public celebrations.

This was too different. Too eerie. Vitas needed to know why.

Vitas was the single man in Nero's inner circle whom the Senate trusted. There were times when Vitas felt he was a thin string holding the Senate and emperor together. If Vitas lost his awareness of Nero's actions, he would lose the Senate's trust that gave him such value to both sides. The string would snap. If that happened, the inevitable war would be disastrous for the empire.

Ahead of Vitas, the roar of a real lion thundered from the inside of a gardener's hut, roiling through the heat and stillness back toward Nero's palace.

Vitas wondered if the echoes of the roar clawed into the dreams and nightmares of the slaves in their various quarters. If those who woke to the roar pretended sleep or silently held their children and whispered prayers to their gods.

The slaves knew there was danger in the roar. But, like Vitas, it wasn't the lion they feared.



Helius had been instructed by Nero to make no noise when they reached the hut. Just outside the closed door, Helius nodded when Nero stopped and pointed at the chain Helius carried.

Helius was a man of arrogance and certainty except in the presence of Nero; he hated himself for fumbling with the chain as he tentatively attached it to a collar around the neck of the animal costume. Bowed meekly when Nero slapped him once across the face for his clumsiness.

Nero pointed at the door of the hut.

Heliuss opened it, and by the chain, led Nero inside.

Two men and two women were shackled to the stone of an interior wall, each sagging against the irons, each stripped to sack-cloth rags.

They faced three cages. One held the lion. Another held a bear. And the third a leopard.

Heliuss stepped inside, leading the disguised Nero. He jammed the torch into an iron band bolted to the wall for that purpose. He fastened one end of the chain that held the beast to a bar of the lion's cage.

Heliuss turned to the first man.

They were the same height but obviously different ages. The captive was nearing sixty; Heliuss was in his twenties. Daylight would have shown the smooth and almost bronzed skin of Heliuss's features. His hair was luxuriously curly, his eyes a strange yellow, giving him a feral look that was rumored to hold great attraction for Nero. Heliuss wore a toga, and his fingers and wrists and neck were layered with jewelry of gold and rubies. There was something catlike about his examination of the captive in front of him.

Heliuss had a knife hidden in his toga. With deliberate slowness, he pulled it up and placed the edge of it against the man's face with sinister gentleness.

"The emperor wishes for you to bow down and worship the beast," Heliuss said. His fumbling fear was gone in service of Nero. Temporary as it might be, with Nero in the costume, Heliuss was now the one in control.

"No," the man said quietly.

"No?"

Heliuss moved to the woman beside the man. He drew the knife downward from her ear to her chin. A narrow line of blood followed the path of the knife and streamed onto her neck.

"Leave the woman alone," the first captive said. "Turn your attention to me." His hair matched his beard—greasy with days

of unwashed sweat from being in captivity, gray hairs far outnumbering the remainder of black ones. His torso and arms were corded with muscle, suggesting a long life of physical labor.

"Then worship the beast," Heliuss answered.

"I cannot."

"Cannot?" Heliuss asked softly, waving the knife in front of the woman. "Or will not?"

"I will not betray my Master."

"Nor will I," said the woman. "I am not afraid."

"Listen to me, you Jews," Heliuss said. "If you bow to the beast and worship him as divine, I have been given authority to spare you this."

With his knife, Heliuss cut a piece of the rags that covered the first captive. He turned to the woman and used the cloth to wipe blood from her face.

Heliuss tossed the bloody rag into the lion's cage, and it savaged the cloth, pinning it with its mighty front paws and tearing at it with its teeth. Beside it in their own cages, the bear roared its fury, and the agitated leopard paced back and forth.

Heliuss ignored the cages, letting his eyes caress the face of each captive, searching for fear. Because he knew fear so intimately in himself, he was an expert at finding it in others.

Heliuss smiled his hungry smile. "Let me repeat. Nero wishes for you to worship the beast. Will you accept it as god? Or shall I let the beast loose to destroy you?"

The first man remained silent. Heliuss had expected the resistance. But it did not matter. Either way, Nero would be satisfied by a personal triumph over these Christians. They would worship him, hidden as he was beneath the costume of the beast, or he would take satisfaction in killing them as the beast. This symbolic victory would assure Nero that he truly was in control, that the widespread resistance to him from the Christians of Rome was meaningless.

Heliuss turned to the others, asking one by one if they were willing to bow down and worship the beast. None answered.

“Let me kill them!” The beast that was Nero spoke in a guttural, strangulated voice. “Let me tear their livers from their living bodies! Let me—”

“Silence!” Helius barked at the beast. These had been Nero’s instructions. Play the role of the master of the beast so none of the captives would guess Nero himself was hidden beneath the costume.

To the captives Helius said, “Look at the beast closely. Do you not see it is a bear? a lion? a leopard with wings? Does it mean anything to you?”

The beast began hissing, a frenzy that ended only when Helius grabbed the torch and waved the fire beneath its head. As if it truly were beast, not man. Nero, the amateur actor, was widely known for playing his roles seriously.

After Helius calmed the beast, he spoke to the captives again. Anger tinged his words. “I understand far more about you Jews than you realize. I know of your prophet named Daniel. Hundreds of years ago, he foretold that Rome would be the fourth beast, greater than the kingdoms of Babylon and Persia and Greece. And here is your fourth beast, ready to destroy you.”

“Death cannot destroy us,” the first captive said. “Through my Lord and Master, it is a fate that we greet with peace. If you would believe in His love and—”

Helius slashed at the captive with his knife, a slash of rage. The blade flashed across the man’s right bicep, instantly cutting through to muscle. Blood dripped down the man’s elbow and onto the dirt floor. This had not been part of Nero’s instructions, but Helius was at heart a coward and could not resist the power he’d been given for this role.

“You refuse to worship the beast?” Helius jeered. “Then tonight he will be the beast to destroy you! And in the next years, he will continue to destroy all the followers until the very last disciple is wiped from this earth. The name of Christos will be forgotten, but Nero will be revered forever!”

Helius spun, taking hold of the chain that held the upright beast to the lion's cage. "Ravage these men and women and destroy them," he spoke to the beast. "Leave their remains for the bear and the leopard and the lion!"

The beast howled.

"Yes," Helius told the beast. "Tonight you will sleep in peace, knowing the power of the fourth beast is greater than the power of their God. You will triumph!"

Helius was forced to yell above the roars of the animals and the high-pitched screaming of Nero playing the beast.

Then Helius froze as a lone man walked into the hut.

Gallus Sergius Vitas.



Vitas had heard enough from outside to decide to stop this madness. And he knew how he would do it.

He'd made his decision to enter the hut based on a well-known story about Nero. During those years as a teenage emperor Nero had dressed himself as a slave and would roam the streets at night to loot shops and terrorize strangers. He and his friends, including Helius and Tigellinus, had attacked a rich senator and his wife. The senator was unaware that Nero was among the hoodlums and fought well, landing several punches directly in Nero's face. Nero and his friends fled.

While Nero had recognized the man as a senator, he made no plans to take action against him, realizing the senator had been perfectly justified in protecting himself from a mere slave. Unfortunately, when someone told the senator whose eyes he had blackened, he sent Nero a letter of abject apology. Because Nero could no longer pretend he'd been an anonymous slave and it was now publicly known that the senator had committed a treasonous act against the emperor, the senator was forced to open his veins in a suicide that prevented the trial and conviction that would have ruined the senator's family.

Yes. Nero was, first and foremost, an actor. Vitas counted on that.

Without hesitation, Vitas marched forward and yanked the chain from Helius. “If the emperor knows you are involved in illegal torture, he will have you destroyed!”

For Vitas, it was an all-or-nothing bluff, pretending he did not know Nero was inside the costume. Trusting that Nero would be too ashamed to admit it. Now. Or later.

Vitas shoved Helius hard toward the doorway of the small hut. “Outside! Now!”

Without hesitation, Vitas grabbed the chain and jerked it hard, treating the man in the beast costume as lower than a slave. “Don’t move. I’ll be back to deal with you.”

Vitas forced himself to pretend outrage. But this was the moment. If Nero decided he would no longer play the role, Vitas was dead.

The beast snarled at him, an echo from inside the lion’s skull. But the beast did nothing else.

Vitas knew he was safe. Temporarily.

Vitas spun on his heels and marched outside to Helius.



“You feed his delusions,” Vitas said to Helius.

The two of them stood outside the hut in the shadows of an olive tree.

Helius shrugged, a smirk visible on his face in the moonlight.

Vitas had learned in battle in Britannia how to detach himself from the emotions of the moment. Yet it took immense willpower to restrain himself from withdrawing his short sword from his toga and charging at Helius. But it would not serve the empire for Helius to die, for Nero clung to the man with a neediness that barely kept Nero stable.

“Of course I feed his delusions.” Helius continued smirking, unaware of how closely the ghost of his own murder had passed by. “That is the whole point. His power. And how I survive.”

“How does this serve Nero?” Vitas demanded, pointing at the hut behind them.

Vitas was not particularly large, but he was tall and carried himself the way a man with solid compact muscles does. He was also cloaked in his family's well-documented patrician background of generations of Roman purity, and by the stories, almost legendary, about his bravery in battles against the Iceni in Britannia. In daylight, his flat, almost black eyes made his thoughts unreadable to his opponents, and without a smile, his face was implacable, like unweathered stone. Here, his face hidden in the shadow cast by the moonlight, Vitas was that much more intimidating. Much as Nero needed Helius, Nero revered Vitas. Only Vitas could speak to Helius in this way and not fear later punishment in the stealthy form of poison or an assassin.

"His nightmares," Helius said, finally sensing the deadly anger simmering beneath the calm demeanor of Vitas. "Nero wants to be rid of them."

"By this travesty of justice?"

Helius shrugged. "No worse than anything else Nero has desired in recent years."

Vitas could not argue with that. "He is Caesar, the representative of our great empire. To protect the empire, we must protect our emperor's dignity."

"The empire?" Helius sneered. "You truly believe in the empire?"

That was the question, Vitas thought. Could he continue to believe in the empire? It had once been his whole life. Until that final battle in Britannia. There, he had fought to defend the empire against barbarians. Now, as Nero became more of a megalomaniac every day, Vitas wondered who were the true barbarians and if he needed instead to fight the empire.

"I believe," Vitas answered without betraying his thoughts, "that you enjoy Nero's worst instincts."

Helius smiled. "Nero gets what Nero wants. I do for him as he directs me."

"To secretly torture and kill these Christians."

“His nightmares have worsened.”

Vitas needed no explanation. Nero, who had once shared a bed with his mother, had later ordered her murdered. As he did with his first wife, whose head he demanded as proof of death. His second wife he'd kicked to death while she was pregnant. He'd poisoned his adoptive half brother. The list went on, until the most recent atrocities—the executions of myriad Christians. It was no wonder that demons haunted the man in the dark of each night.

Yet, monstrous as the man was, Vitas well knew that to end Nero's life would likely result in civil war, as Nero had no successor. Civil war would destroy the empire. So Vitas served Nero and did his best as a trusted adviser to lessen the monstrosities.

“He expects this to quiet those nightmares?” Vitas said, gesturing at the hut.

“It's that Greek graffiti,” Heliussaid. “That one senseless word that the Christians have begun to inscribe all across the city in defiance of him.”

Vitas was aware of it. Three Greek letters. With the snake in the middle.

Heliussaid. “Until tonight, their resolution to worship their Christos despite Nero's persecution had begun to shake Nero's belief in his own divinity.”

“A man posing as beast is hardly divine.”

“I've convinced him that if he defeats them as the Beast that their own prophet Daniel foretold of, he will break this curse upon himself. He has taken some potions to delude himself further.”

The constriction around Vitas's chest eased only a little. If Nero's mind had been influenced by potions tonight, he would be all the more determined to remain in the role of the beast instead of giving orders to execute Vitas.

“I know about the Jewish rabbi you consulted,” Vitas said. “So I also know of these Scriptures.”

“How?” Heliussaid. “Who told you that I sent for—?”

“Secrets are difficult to keep in the palace,” Vitas said wearily.

“How I know is of far less concern than what I know. The prophet Daniel also prophesied that the fourth beast would be destroyed. You’ve kept that from Nero?”

“I’m not suicidal,” Helius said. “Of course I did. It’s what he believes that matters, not the nonsense of a Jewish prophet from six hundred years ago. Nero will never be destroyed and certainly never by a God of the Jews. Nero is convinced if they worship the beast or if the beast kills them, he is the victor. It’s superstition, of course, but you know full well how superstitious fear rules him.”

Vitas did know full well Nero’s dread of the gods and of omens. He also knew that Nero, with his absolute power, had performed far stranger acts than this with far less motivation. In a twisted way, this horrible parody made sense. But could Vitas allow himself to stand by yet one more time?

“You think this will remain a secret?” Vitas argued. “That Nero is so afraid of the Christians he must dress up as a beast and kill them himself?” Every day Vitas was more fully aware of how the Senate would view Nero’s actions. “Think of how the tongues of the mobs will wag further when they hear this.”

“What Nero wants, Nero gets.”

“If he continues like this, there will come a point when he will no longer be tolerated. The empire will revolt against him. And you will lose your own power.”

“We are here and it is too late to stop this,” Helius snapped. “Do you expect some sort of divine intervention to save those inside? to save you from the act of defiance you have just committed against Caesar?”

Images of the final battle in Britannia flashed through the mind of Vitas. Of the power of the empire unleashed on the innocent. He spoke quietly. “The persecution must stop.”

“That’s the real reason you’re here tonight, isn’t it?” Teeth gleamed in the moonlight as Helius smiled. “Your constant and tedious arguments to save the Christians. Perhaps you are one yourself?”

“Hardly. You and I both know they are innocent of treason. The empire cannot survive if it does not serve justice equally to all.”

Helius shrugged. “Give me power over principles any day. It’s a pity you won’t learn that lesson.”

“Take Nero back to the palace. With any luck, he won’t remember this.”

“It’s too late,” Helius said. “What’s begun must be finished.”

“No.”

“No?” Helius echoed. “I doubt you’ll stop me. You’ve become too soft, Vitas. Nero might not know it. But I do. The great warrior Vitas is a toothless lion. But what should one expect of one who married a barbarian?”

His neck muscles tightened, but Vitas held himself back.

“Tell me,” Helius said, still taunting Vitas. “Is it true? Was it your sword that —?”

“Enough!”

“Enough or you’ll kill me?” Helius said.

Vitas froze.

“See?” Helius said. “The great warrior Vitas would never have meekly accepted such an insult.”

Helius turned his back on Vitas and hurried back into the hut.



“No!”

Helius had just taken the chain off the bars to the lion’s cage. The beast with the wings and head of a lion was pulling at the chain, reaching with bear claws to tear at the first of the four captives in shackles.

Vitas had made his decision. Over the last six months, he had allowed too much to happen already; his conscience could be pushed no further. He stepped back into the hut. Ready to defy Nero, even if it cost him his life.

“No!” Vitas repeated. He spoke to the beast. “This is enough.”

Nero, addled by lust and anger and the results of whatever

potions he had consumed, continued to hiss and snarl beneath the costume of the beast. "Kill him!" he hissed from inside the lion's head. "Tear his heart out! Vitas must die. I tire of his defense of the Christians!"

In that moment, Vitas knew he'd lost his gamble. Nero had stopped acting, spoken his name. No longer could Vitas pretend that he was unaware of who wore the costume. No longer was Vitas protected by his value as the only man of Nero's inner court respected by the Senate.

"Kill him!" Nero's voice became higher and unnatural. It goaded the real beasts in the cages into a frenzy of roars, a rumble.

"This must stop!" Vitas answered, resolute. If this was his final stand, he would not flee.

"Kill him!"

The noise of the beasts changed. Subtly at first. Then the low rumble became a distinct noise in itself, which slowly began to build and build.

The ground beneath them shook.

Heliuss swayed. Nero in his beast costume staggered. Vitas shifted his feet wider to keep his balance.

The cages rattled and shook back and forth.

As Vitas realized that the earth itself was quaking, lightning struck the thatched roof of the hut, and the rumbling was broken by a tremendous peal of thunder.

The roof burst into flames and again lightning struck, deafening them with instant thunder that followed.

Heliuss fell to his knees as the ground continued to shake.

Vitas saw that the cage doors had sprung open. That the animals were lurching out, dazed by their sudden freedom.

The huge lion advanced on Nero. He scrambled backward into the body of the first captive, then fell at that captive's feet, moaning from inside his costume.

Vitas pulled his short sword from his toga and stepped between

Nero and the lion. Nero was emperor. Even though the emperor had ordered him executed, Vitas had his duty.

The lion crouched. It weighed three times what a man did, with teeth longer and sharper than daggers, paws as large as a man's head, and the power to take down an ox.

Vitas waited and watched, ready to fight, hopeless as it was.

Another boom of deafening thunder. The lion sank back, bewildered.

Lightning flashed again.

And the lion fled. The leopard and the bear followed.

Helius remained on his knees, cowering, tears streaming down his face.

In the calm that followed the next burst of lightning, the earthquake renewed itself.

Nero screamed, "The gods speak against me!"

He threw off his costume, dashed past Vitas, and fled the hut, leaving behind the leopard fur with its eagles' wings. Helius, too, retreated, following Nero into the trees as lightning continued to flash upon the grounds of the palace.

Vitas kicked aside remnants of burning straw that fell from the roof of the hut.

All four captives shackled to the wall stared at him in silence.

Vitas advanced on the first one with his sword.

"Please spare the women," the gray-haired captive said, the older one who had faced Helius with so little fear. "They have children."

"What is your name?" Vitas asked him, pressing the flat of his sword up near the man's chest.

"John."

"John," Vitas said, "you do not deserve to die for what you believe."

Vitas leveraged his sword into John's shackles until they separated. One by one, he released each of the other captives.

They made no move to flee.

Vitas turned to the first woman. Her bleeding had lessened.

Vitas tore a strip from his toga and pressed it against her face. He lifted her hand until she held the cloth, then stepped away.

“Go to your children,” Vitas told her. “All of you. Go. Now is the time to make your escape. Before Nero again convinces himself he is god.”