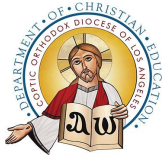


Does Jesus Exist in Reality (Writings)?

Department of Christian Education



Ancient Historian: Tactius



Tactius' Passage

Tacticus was known as “greatest historian” of ancient Rome He composed the Annals and the Histories. He wrote in the Annals in AD 115: Concerning the great FIRE in Rome during the reign of Nero:

“Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; ...then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.”

Tactius' Passage (Break Down)

Conclusions from Passage:

- (1) Christians were named for their founder, Christus (from the Latin)
- (2) who was put to death by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilatus (also Latin)
- (3) during the reign of emperor Tiberius (AD 14– 37).
- (4) His death ended the “superstition” for a short time,
- (5) but it broke out again,
- (6) especially in Judaea, where the teaching had its origin.
- (7) His followers carried His doctrine to Rome.
- (8) When the great fire destroyed a large part of the city during the reign of Nero (AD 54– 68), the emperor placed the blame on the Christians who lived in Rome.

Tactius' Passage (Break Down)

- (9) Tacitus reports that this group was hated for their abominations.
- (10) These Christians were arrested after pleading guilty,
- (11) and many were convicted for “hatred for mankind.”
- (12) They were mocked and
- (13) then tortured, including being “nailed to crosses” or burnt to death.
- (14) Because of these actions, the people had compassion on the Christians.
- (15) Tacitus therefore concluded that such punishments were not for the public good but were simply “to glut one man’s cruelty.”

Of interest is the historical context for Jesus’ death, as he is linked with both Pilate and Tiberius.

Is Tacitus Referring to the Resurrection?

Additionally, J.N.D. Anderson sees implications in Tacitus' quote concerning Jesus' resurrection.

- It is scarcely fanciful to suggest that when he adds: *"A most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out"*
 - bearing indirect and unconscious testimony to the conviction of the early church
 - the Christ who had been crucified had risen from the grave.
- Must be careful not to press this implication too far
 - Possibility: Tacitus may have indirectly referred to the Christians' belief in Jesus' resurrection
 - His teachings "again broke out" after His death.

Tactius mention of the mode of torture against Christians

- Mode of torture employed against the early Christians.
 - Besides burning, a number were crucified by being “nailed to crosses.”
 - Not only is this the method used with Jesus, but tradition reports that Nero was responsible for crucifying Peter as well, but upside down.
 - The compassion aroused in the Roman people is also noteworthy.

Is there Another Reference to Jesus in Tacitus Writings?

The second reference to Jesus in the writings of Tacitus is found in the Histories.

- While the specific reference is lost, as is most of this book, the reference is preserved by Sulpicus Severus.
 - He informs us that Tacitus wrote of the burning of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in AD 70
 - destroyed the city
 - The Christians are mentioned as a group that were connected with these events.

Is there Another Reference to Jesus in Tacitus Writings?

All we can gather from this reference is that Tacitus was also aware of the existence of Christians other than in the context of their presence in Rome.

- The facts that Tacitus (and most other extra-biblical sources) report about Jesus are well known in our present culture.
- We find significance in the surprising confirmation for the life of Jesus.

Ancient Historian: Josephus



Josephus: Background

Flavius Josephus (AD 37 or 38 - AD 97)

- *Born into a priestly family*
- *Pharisee at the age of nineteen.*
- *After the battle against the Romans: commander Vespasian in Jerusalem.*
- *After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, he moved to Rome,*
 - *Became the court historian for emperor Vespasian.*

Josephus: Background

The Antiquities (AD 90-95):

- *Valuable but disputed evidence concerning Jesus*
- *Earlier than the testimonies of the Roman historians*
- *Persons/events of first century Palestine and makes two references to Jesus.*
 - **First:**
 - *Reference to James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”*
 - *Close connection between Jesus and James*
 - *Jesus was the Messiah.*
 - **Second:**
 - *Most important*
 - *Most debated*
 - *Text results from Christian interpolation.*

Quotation Report

“Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats. . . . He was (the) Christ . . . he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.”

The Debate on Josephus

Josephus was a Jew, so it is unlikely that he would have written about Jesus in this way.

- **Origen:** Josephus did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah
- **Eusebius quotes the debated passage:**
 - Commentators: a portion of the citation is a Christian interpolation.
- Other scholars supported the original ending.
- **A mediating position taken by many holds:**
 - The passage itself is written by Josephus
 - Questionable words either deleted or modified.

The Debate on Josephus

So the major question here concerns the actual words of Josephus.

- Majority of the text is genuine.
- There is no textual evidence against it
 - Very good manuscript evidence for this statement about Jesus.
- **Leading scholars testified:**
 - Style of this is of a Jewish historian.
- **Conclude:** Good reasons for accepting this version
 - Modification of the questionable words (can be ascertained)

Professor Schlomo Pines on Josephus

In 1972 Professor Schlomo Pines of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem released the results of a study on an Arabic manuscript containing Josephus' statement about Jesus. It includes a different and briefer rendering of the entire passage, including changes in the key words listed above:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became His disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become His disciples did not abandon His discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after His crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

Unchanged Disputed Portions

Of the three disputed portions, none remains unchanged.

Original Text	Altered Text
"if it be lawful to call him a man"	Dropped completely
"he was a doer of wonderful works"	Deleted
"He was (the) Christ"	<i>"he was perhaps the messiah."</i>
"he appeared to them the third day	<i>"they (the disciples) reported that he had appeared to them,"</i>
"the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him"	<i>"concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders,"</i>

The Arabic as the Original Text?

While some words are completely deleted, others are qualified by “perhaps” and “reported.”

There are some good reasons why the Arabic version may indeed be the original words of Josephus before any Christian interpolations.

- As Schlomo Pines and David Flusser, of the Hebrew University, have stated:
 - plausible that none of the arguments against Josephus writing the original words even applies to the Arabic text, especially since the latter would have had less chance of being censored by the church.
- In addition, Flusser notes that an earmark of authenticity comes from the fact that the Arabic version omits the accusation that the Jews were to blame for Jesus' death
 - included in the original reading.

Charlesworth's View

After an investigation of the question, Charlesworth explains his view that Josephus' original version is "both an interpolation and a redaction."

But he provides three reasons why Josephus still wrote most of the passage:

1. some of the words are very difficult to assign to a Christian writer
2. the passage fits both grammatically and historically
3. and the brief reference to Jesus in Antiquities seems to presuppose an earlier mention.

Charlesworth concludes that the Arabic recension is basically accurate, even if there are still a few subtle Christian alterations.

He concludes this passage with some strong words: *"We can now be as certain as historical research will presently allow that Josephus did refer to Jesus," providing "corroboration of the gospel account."*

Conclusion

We conclude that:

- Josephus did write about Jesus, not only in the brief statement concerning James, but also in this longer account.
- The evidence points to his composition of this latter passage with the deletion and modification of a number of key phrases
 - Probably interpolated by Christian sources.

Conclusion

What historical facts can be ascertained from the deleted and altered portions of Josephus' statement such as those changes made in the Arabic version?

- (1) Jesus was known as a wise and virtuous man, one recognized for His good conduct.
- (2) He had many disciples, both Jews and Gentiles.
- (3) Pilate condemned him to die,
- (4) with crucifixion explicitly being mentioned as the mode.
- (5) The disciples reported that Jesus had risen from the dead

Conclusion

What historical facts can be ascertained from the deleted and altered portions of Josephus' statement such as those changes made in the Arabic version?

and (6) that he had appeared to them on the third day after His crucifixion.

(7) Consequently, the disciples continued to proclaim His teachings.

(8) Perhaps Jesus was the Messiah concerning whom the Old Testament prophets spoke and predicted wonders. We would add here two facts from Josephus' earlier quotation as well.

(9) Jesus was the brother of James

and (10) was called the messiah by some.

Conclusion

There is nothing really sensational in such a list of facts from a Jewish historian.

- What's expected of a historian to mention?
 - Jesus' ethical conduct
 - His following
 - His crucifixion by the command of Pilate
- The account of the disciples reporting Jesus' resurrection appearances
 - if it is allowed
 - Has an especially authentic ring to it.
- Josephus, like many historians today:
 - Repeating the claims
 - probably fairly well known in first century Palestine.
- That the disciples would then spread His teachings would be a natural consequence.
- Josephus presented an important account of several major facts about Jesus and the origins of Christianity.

Conclusion

In spite of some question as to the exact wording, we can view his statements as providing probable attestation, in particular, of some items in:

- Jesus' public ministry,
- His death by crucifixion,
- the disciples' report of His resurrection appearances,
- and their subsequent teaching of Jesus' message.

Roman Government Officials: Pliny the Younger



Pliny the Younger: Background

Pliny the Younger

- A Roman author and administrator who served as the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor,
- Nephew and adopted son of a natural historian known as Pliny the Elder.
- The younger Pliny is best known for his letters, and Bruce refers to him as *“one of the world’s great letter writers, whose letters . . . have attained the status of literary classics.”*
 - Ten books of Pliny’s correspondence are extant today.
- The tenth book, written around AD 112
 - Speaks about Christianity in the province of Bithynia
 - Provides some facts about Jesus.

Pliny the Younger: Background

Pliny the Younger

- Pliny found that the Christian influence was so strong
 - pagan temples had been nearly deserted
 - pagan festivals severely decreased
 - sacrificial animals had few buyers
- Because of the inflexibility of the Christians and the emperor's prohibition against political association, governor Pliny took action against the Christians.
- He was unsure how to deal with believers:
 - if there should be any distinctions in treatment
 - if repentance made any difference
 - he wrote to Emperor Trajan to explain his approach.
- Pliny dealt personally with the Christians who were turned over to him.

Explaining to Trajan How he dealt with the Christians

How he dealt with the Christians:

- He interrogated them, inquiring if they were believers.
 - If they answered in the affirmative he asked them two more times, under the threat of death.
- If they continued firm in their belief, he ordered them to be executed.
 - Sometimes the punishment included torture to obtain desired information
 - as in the case of two female slaves who were deaconesses in the church.
- If the person was a Roman citizen, they were sent to the emperor in Rome for trial.
 - If they denied being Christians or had disavowed their faith in the past, they:
 - “repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration . . . to your [Trajan’s] image.”
 - Afterwards they “finally cursed Christ.”

Explaining to Trajan How he dealt with the Christians

Pliny explained that his purpose in all this was that *“multitudes may be reclaimed from error.”*

Since Pliny’s letter is rather lengthy, we will quote the portion which pertains directly to an account of early Christian worship of Christ:

“They (the Christians) were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food – but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. At this point Pliny adds that Christianity attracted persons of all societal ranks, all ages, both sexes and from both the city and the country.”

Conclusion

From Pliny's letter we find several more facts about Jesus and early Christianity.

(1) Christ was worshiped as deity by early believers.

(2) Pliny refers late in his letter to the teachings of Jesus and his followers as “excessive superstition” and “contagious superstition,” which is reminiscent of the words of both Tacitus and Suetonius.

(3) Jesus' ethical teachings are reflected in the oath taken by Christians never to be guilty of a number of sins mentioned in the letter.

(4) We find a probable reference to Christ's institution of communion and the Christian celebration of the “love feast” in Pliny's remark about their regathering to partake of ordinary food.

The reference here alludes to the accusation on the part of non-Christians that believers were suspected of ritual murder and drinking of blood during these meetings, again confirming our view that communion is the subject to which Pliny is referring.

(5) There is also a possible reference to Sunday worship in Pliny's statement that Christians met “on a certain day.”
Concerning early Christianity,

Conclusion

From Pliny's letter we find several more facts about Jesus and early Christianity.

- (6) We see Pliny's method of dealing with believers, from their identification, to their interrogation, to their execution. For those who denied being Christians, worship of the gods and the emperor gained them their freedom.
- (7) Interestingly, Pliny reports that true believers could not be forced to worship the gods or the emperor.
- (8) Christian worship involved a pre-dawn service,
- (9) which included singing hymns. The early time probably facilitated a normal working day.
- (10) These Christians apparently formed a typical cross-section of society in Bithynia, since they were of all classes, ages, localities and of both sexes.
- (11) There were recognized positions in the church, as illustrated by the mention of the two female deaconesses who were tortured for information.

While Pliny does not relate many facts about Jesus, he does provide a look at a very early example of Christian worship: Believers were meeting regularly and worshipping Jesus.

Roman Government Officials: Emperor Trajan



Emperor Trajan

Pliny's inquiry received a reply which is published along with his letters, although Emperor Trajan's response is much shorter:

"The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our Gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Informations without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age."

Emperor Trajan

Trajan responds that Pliny was generally correct in his actions. If confessed Christians persist in their faith, they must be punished.

However, three restrictions are placed on Pliny:

1. Christians should not be sought out or tracked down.
2. Repentance coupled with worship of the gods sufficed to clear a person.
 - a. Pliny expressed doubts as to whether a person should be punished in spite of repentance
 - b. Only recounts the pardoning of persons who had willingly given up their beliefs prior to questioning.
3. Pliny was not to honor any lists of Christians which were given to him if the accuser did not name himself.

Emperor Trajan

These conditions imposed by emperor Trajan give us some insight into early official Roman views about Christianity.

- Persecution was certainly an issue
 - many Christians died without committing any actual crimes
 - the first century was NOT the worst period of persecution for believers.
- Trajan's restrictions on Pliny at least indicate that it was not a wholesale slaughter.
 - The persecution was real and many died for their faith.

Jewish Sources: The Talmud



Handed Down Tradition

The Jews handed down a large amount of oral tradition from generation to generation.

- This material was organized according to subject matter by Rabbi Akiba before his death in AD 135.
- His work was then revised by his student, Rabbi Meir.
 - The project was completed about AD 200 by Rabbi Judah and is known as the Mishnah.
- Ancient commentary on the Mishnah was called the Gemaras.
- The combination of the Mishnah and the Gemaras form the Talmud.
- It would be expected that the most reliable information about Jesus from the Talmud would come from the earliest period of compilation -
 - AD 70 to 200 known as **Tannaitic period**.

Account: Sanhedrin 43a

A very significant quotation found in the Sanhedrin 43a, dating from just this early period:

*“On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, “He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf” But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was **hanged** on the eve of the Passover”*

This quotation was taken from the reading in The Babylonian Talmud transl. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), vol. III, Sanhednn 43a, p.281.

Another Account on the Death of Jesus

Here we have another brief account of the death of Jesus.

- The term “hanged”: provide an interesting term to describe his death.
 - But it should be noted that the New Testament speaks of crucifixion in the same way.
 - Jesus is said to have been "hanged" (Greek kremamenos in Gal. 3:13)
 - As were the two males killed at the same time (Greek kremasthenton in Luke 23:39).
- While the term "crucified" is a much more common reference to this event "hanged" is a variant expression of the same fate.

Lessons from this Passage

- The fact of Jesus' death by crucifixion
- The time of this event, which is mentioned twice as occurring on the eve of the Jewish Passover.
- Surprisingly, that for forty days beforehand it was publicly announced that Jesus would be stoned.
 - **While not specifically recorded in the New Testament, such is certainly consistent with both Jewish practice and with the biblical report that this had also been threatened at least two other occasions:**
 - *“Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.” (John 8:58-59)*
 - *“I and my Father are one. Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me? The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, make yourself God.” (John 10:30-33)*

Lessons from this Passage

- Jesus was judged by the Jews to be guilty "sorcery" and spiritual apostasy in leading Israel astray by his teaching.
- It is also stated that since no witnesses came forward to defend him, he was killed.
- Another passage in Sanhedrin 43a refers to the disciples
 - Another early reference in the Talmud speaks of five of Jesus' disciples
 - Recounts their standing before judges who make individual decisions about each one, deciding that they should be executed.
 - No actual deaths are recorded. (Sanhedrin 43a)
- From this second portion we can ascertain only (6) the fact that Jesus had some disciples
- Some among the Jews felt that these men were also guilty of actions which warranted execution

Gentile Sources: Lucian



Background

Background:

- 2nd Century
- Greek Satirist
- Criticized the Christians: gullible people – they donate money to their teachers.

In his mockery he reveals facts to us concerning Jesus and Christians:

“The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day): - the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account You see these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are Immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then It was Impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, With the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property”

(Lucian, The Death of Peregrine, 11-13, in The Works of Lucian of Samosata, transl. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), vol. 4.)

Conclusions From this Passage about Jesus and early Christians

- We are told that Jesus was worshiped by Christians.
- It is also related that Jesus introduced new teachings in Palestine.
- That he was crucified because of these teachings. Jesus taught his followers certain doctrines:
 - All believers are brothers from the moment they convert to Christianity
 - denying the Greek gods
 - they worship the sage Jesus, who...
 - ...was crucified
 - they live according to his laws

Conclusions From this Passage about Jesus and early Christians

- Lucian says the Christians call Jesus as a “sage”, which in Greek context means a Philosopher or a wise teacher
- Christians are the followers of Jesus,
- They believe they are immortal
- They accepted Jesus’ teaching by faith, and
- They practiced their faith by their disregard for material possessions, by sharing their common property.

Conclusions From this Passage about Jesus and early Christians

A portion of Lucian that is not included here adds more points:

- The Christians had "sacred writings" which were frequently read.
- Then something affected their community, "they spare no trouble, no expense."
- However, Lucian notes that Christians are easily taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals.