



ANCIENT HISTORIANS

TACITUS' PASSAGE

Tacitus 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.”

Conclusions from Tacitus 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.
- (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? Let’s see...

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

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

Tacitus’ mention of the mode of tortures against Christians

- Also interesting is the 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, an event which destroyed the city. The Christians are mentioned as a group that were connected with these events.

- **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.**

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

JOSEPHUS

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was born in AD 37 or 38 and died in AD 97. He was born into a priestly family and became a Pharisee at the age of nineteen. After surviving a battle against the Romans, he served commander Vespasian in Jerusalem. After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, he moved to Rome, where he became the court historian for emperor Vespasian. The Antiquities, one of Josephus’ major works, provides some valuable but disputed evidence concerning Jesus. Written around AD 90–95, it is earlier than the testimonies of the Roman historians. Josephus speaks about many persons and events of first century Palestine and makes two references to Jesus. The first is very brief and is in the context of a reference to James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”



Here we find a close connection between Jesus and James and the belief on the part of some that Jesus was the Messiah. The second reference is easily the most important and the most debated, since some of the words appear to be due to Christian interpolation. For instance, a portion of the quotation reports:

- *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.*

Since Josephus was a Jew, it is unlikely that he would have written about Jesus in this way. Origen informs us that Josephus did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah, yet Eusebius quotes the debated passage including the words above. Therefore, probably the majority of commentators believe that at least a portion of the citation (the distinctly “Christian” words, in particular) is a Christian interpolation. Yet, other scholars have also supported the original ending. A mediating position taken by many holds that the passage itself is written by Josephus with the questionable words either deleted or modified.

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

- There are good indications that the majority of the text is genuine. There is no textual evidence against it, and, conversely, there is very good manuscript evidence for this statement about Jesus, thus making it difficult to ignore.
- Additionally, leading scholars on the works of Josephus have testified that this portion is written in the style of this Jewish historian. Thus we conclude that there are good reasons for accepting this version of Josephus’ statement about Jesus, with modification of the questionable words. In fact, it is possible that these modifications can even be accurately ascertained.

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.*

Of the three disputed portions, none remains unchanged.

- The initial problematic statement “*if it be lawful to call him a man*” has been dropped completely, recounting only that Jesus was a wise man.
- The words “*he was a doer of wonderful works*” have also been deleted.
- Instead of the words “*He was (the) Christ*” we find “*he was perhaps the messiah.*” The phrase “*he*



appeared to them the third day” now reads “they (the disciples) reported that he had appeared to them,” which is an entirely true statement which was voiced by the first century eyewitnesses.

- Lastly, the statement that “the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him” has been drastically reduced to “concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders,” which concerns the messiah and possibly not even Jesus, according to Josephus.

Therefore, 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, it is quite 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, which is included in the original reading.

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 which were probably interpolated by Christian sources.

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
- 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.

There is nothing really sensational in such a list of facts from a Jewish historian. Jesus' ethical conduct, his following, and his crucifixion by the command of Pilate are what we would expect a historian to mention. Even 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, would simply be repeating the claims, which were 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.

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.