

THE EVIDENCE FOR CHRISTIANITY IN EARLY NON-CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

I. Jewish Writings

II. Gentile Writings

I. JEWISH WRITINGS

A. The Rabbinical Writings

1. Yohanan ben-Zakkai

First president of the reconstituted Sanhedrin after the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. With head-quarters at Jabneh or Jamnia, in the south-west of Palestine, this group began to codify the "the tradition of the elders" mentioned in the New Testament which had been previously only handed down orally from generation to generation, increasing with the years.

2. Rabbi Akiba

Began arranging the codified traditions according to subject-matter. After his heroic death in AD 135 on the defeat of Bar-Kokhba's rebellion against Rome, his work was revised and continued by his pupil Rabbi Mier.

3. Rabbi Meir

Pupil to Rabbi Akiba who carried on the work of Rabbi Akiba upon his death.

4. Codification of oral traditions completed by Rabbi Judah

President of the Sanhedrin from 170 - 217 AD. The completed code of religious jurisprudence is known as the Mishnah. The commentaries on the Mishnah are called the Gemaras and together they are usually known as the Talmud.

The Jerusalem Talmud c. 300 AD. (Not made in Jerusalem, but in the Palestinian schools in the south and in Galilee was completed about AD 300).

The Babylonian Talmud c. 500 AD. The much larger Babylonian Talmud continued to grow for two more centuries before it was reduced to writing about AD 500.

Jesus of Nazareth according to early Rabbis

(There is little occasion in these writings for references to Christianity, and what references there are hostile. But such as they are these references do at least show that there was not the slightest doubt of the historical character of Jesus.)

1. He was a transgressor in Israel
2. He practiced magic
3. He scorned the words of the wise
4. He led the people astray
5. Said he had not come to destroy the law but to add to it. (cf.. Matt. 5:17)

6. He has hanged on Passover Eve for misleading the people

Terms used by the writers to refer to Him.

1. Ha Taluy "The Hanged One"
2. Ben-Pantera "Son of the Virgin" (so-called)

Controversy in Jewish circles about the end of the first century over the "*Euangelion*." Debate whether some Christian writings should be recognized as canonical and added to their Jewish Bible or not. This writing was most probably the Gospel according to Matthew, the favorite Gospel of the Jewish Christians in Palestine.

B. Josephus --

1. Born AD 37 to a priestly family, joined the Pharisees at nineteen, lived in Rome a while (AD 63) and observed Roman military style and methods, etc.
2. Commander of Jewish forces in Galilee AD 66 at the outbreak of the Jewish/Roman war. Defended courageously the first season. Finally captured at Jotapeta, the final great stronghold in Galilee.
3. Was attached to the Roman general head-quarters during the siege of Jerusalem, even acting as interpreter for Titus, Vespasian's son and successor in the Palestinian command, when he wished to make proclamation to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
4. Author of several works:
 - a. After the fall of Jerusalem Josephus settled down comfortably in Rome as a client and pensioner of the emperor, whose family name Flavius he assumed, being afterwards known as Flavius Josephus.
 - b. This treatment by the Romans did not make him popular with his fellow-countrymen in Judah who looked upon him as a traitor.
 - c. However Josephus used his years in Rome to write the history of his nation and in some way to reclaim his nations' gratitude.

History of the Jewish War 170 BC - AD 73

Written first in Aramaic for the benefit of the Jews and then published in a Greek version.

Autobiography

Josephus defended his conduct during the war against another Jewish historian, Justus of Tiberias.

Against Apion (2 books)

A defense of his nation against anti-Semitic prejudices of Apion, an Alexandrian schoolmaster, and other writers.

Antiquities of the Jews (20 books)

Recording of the history of the his nation from the beginning of Genesis down to his own day.

In the works of Josephus we meet these NT figures:

The Herods

The Roman Emperors

Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius and Nero
Qirinius governor of Syria;

The Roman Governors

Pilate, Felix, Festus

The High Priestly families of

Annas, Caiphas, Ananias,

The Pharisees and Sadducees, etc.

In Josephus we read of:

. **Judas** the Galilean (Gamaliel spoke of him in Acts 5:27)

. The famine of **Claudius' day** (Acts 11;28)

While Luke tells us how the Christian in Antioch sent help to the Jerusalem church on this occasion, Josephus tells how Helena, a prominent wealthy Jewess had corn brought in Alexandria and figs in Cyprus to relieve the hunger of the Jerusalem population on the same occasion.

. Sudden death of **Herod Agrippa** (Acts 12)

These two independent accounts agree with one another and each supplies interest information.

This story as told by Josephus:

"When Agrippa had reigned three full years over all Judea, he came to the city of Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower. There he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, inaugurating this as a festival for the emperor's welfare. [Possibly on Claudius' birthday, which fell on August 1st.] And there came together to it a multitude of the provincial officials and of those who had been promoted to a distinguished position. On the second day of the shows he put on a robe all made of silver, of altogether wonderful weaving, and arrived in the theater at break of day. Then the silver shone as the sun's first rays fell upon it and glittered wonderfully, its resplendence inspiring a sort of fear and trembling in those who gazed upon it. Immediately his flatterers called out from various quarters, in words which in truth were not for his good, addressing him as a god, and invoking him with the cry, Be propitious! if

hitherto we have revered thee as a human being, yet henceforth we confess thee to be superior to mortal nature.' "The king did not rebuke them, nor did he repudiate their impious flattery. . . . There came also a severe pain in his belly, beginning with a violent attack. . . . So he was carried quickly into the palace, and the news sped abroad among all that he could certainly die before long. . . . And when he had suffered continuously for five days from the pain in his belly, he departed this life in the fifty-fourth year of his age and the seventh of his reign."

. John the Baptist

In Antiques xviii.5.2. we read how Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee was defeated in battle by Aretas, king of the Nabatean Arabs, the father of Herod's first wife, whom he deserted for Herodias. Joseph goes on to say:

"Now some of the Jews thought that Herod's army had been destroyed by God, and that it was a very just penalty to avenge John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had killed him, though he was a good man, who bade the Jews practice virtue, be just one to another and pious toward God, and come together in baptism. He taught that baptism was acceptable to God provided that they underwent it not to procure remission of certain sins, but for the purification of the boy, if the soul had already been purified by righteousness.* And when the others gathered round him (for they were greatly moved when they heard his words), Herod feared that his persuasive power over men, being so great, might lead to a rising, as they seemed ready to follow his counsel in everything. So he thought it much better to seize him and kill him before he caused any tumult, than to have to repent of falling into such trouble later on, after a revolt had taken place. Because of this suspicion of Herod, John was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fortress which we mentioned above, and there put to death. The Jews believed that it was to avenge him that the disaster fell upon the army, God wishing to bring evil upon Herod."

F.F. Bruce places this comment on Josephus' quote about John the Baptist:

"There are striking differences between this and the Gospel account: according to Mark 1:4, John's proclaimed a baptism of repentance for remission of sins', whereas Josephus says that John's baptism was not for the remission of sin; and the story of John's death is given a political significance by Josephus, whereas in the Gospels it resulted from John's denunciation of Herod's marriage to Herodias. It is quite likely that Herod thought he could kill two birds with one stone by imprisoning John; and as for the discrepancy about the significance of

John's baptism, the independent traditions which we can trace in the New Testament are impressively unanimous, and besides being earlier than the account in Josephus (the Antiquities were published in AD 93), they give what is a more probable account from the religious-historical point of view. Josephus, in fact seem to attribute to John the baptismal doctrine of the Essenes, as known to us now from the Qumran texts. But the general outline of the story in Josephus confirms the Gospel record. The Josephus passage was known to Origen (c. 230) and to Eusebius (c. 326)."

. Death of **James** "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ."

Later in the Antiquities (xx. 9. 1) Josephus describes the high-handed acts of the high priest Ananus after the death of the procurator Festus (AD 61) in these words:

"But the younger Ananus who, as we said, received the high priesthood, was of a bold disposition and exceptionally daring; he followed the party of the Sadducees, who are severe in judgment above all the Jews, as we have already shown. As therefore Ananus was of such a disposition, he thought he had now a good opportunity, as Festus was now dead, and Albinus was still on the road; so he assembled a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as law-breakers, he delivered them over to be stoned."

(Death of James also told in greater detail by Hegesippus, a Christian writer, c. AD 170.)

. The "Testimonium Flavianum" regarding **Jesus**

1. Jesus lived at time ascribed to Him
2. Brother of James who was well know in Jerusalem.
3. Reputed to be more than a mere man
4. A doer of marvelous deeds
5. A teacher of men, a wise man
6. Led away man Jews and Greeks
7. Reputed to be the Christ
8. Condemned to the cross by Pilate upon the impeachment of the chief Jews.
9. He appeared to his followers alive on 3rd day
10. The tribe of Christians named after him have not yet died.

"And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who received the truth with pleasure. He led away man Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man

was the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him; and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out."

[This text from Josephus is the same as it was in Eusebius' day, for he quotes it twice.]

One reason why many have thought this passage a Christian interpolation is that Origen says that Josephus did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah nor proclaim Him as such. We can be certain that Josephus was no Christian. But there no evidence at all against the authenticity of this passage in Josephus. The manuscript evidence is as unanimous and ample as it is for anything in Josephus.

It may be however, if we look closely at this section, that Josephus was writing with his tongue in his cheek, so to speak. "If indeed we should call him a man" may be a sarcastic reference to the Christian's belief in Jesus as the Son of God. "This man was the Christ" may mean no more than that this was the Jesus commonly called the Christ. Even acute critics have found no difficulty in accepting the Testimonium Flavianum as it stands. The passage certainly contains several characteristic features of the diction of Josephus, as has been pointed out by the late Dr. H. St. John Thackeray (the leading British authority of Josephus in recent years) and others.

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II. THE EVIDENCE FROM EARLY GENTILE WRITERS

A. Thallus c. AD 52

A gentile writer who wrote a work tracing the history of Greece and its relations with Asia from the Trojan War to his own day. (A Samaritan by the same name is mentioned by Josephus [Ant. xviii 6. 4] as being a freedman of the Emperor Tiberius. Whether this is the same man we are not sure.)

Thallus wrote several works but they have all disappeared except for fragment quotes. One surviving quote from his third book of history pertains to his discussion of the darkness which fell upon the land during the crucifixion of Christ.

"Thallus, in his third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun--unreasonable, as it seems to me" (Unreasonable, of course, because a solar eclipse could not take place at the time of the full moon, and it was at the season of the Paschal full moon that Christ died.)

Two things we can infer:

1. That the gospel story (i.e the crucifixion and resurrection) was known in Rome in non-Christian circles toward the middle of the first century.

2. That the enemies of Christianity tried to refute the story by giving a naturalistic explanation to the facts which it reported.

B. Letter of Syrian **Mara Ben-Serapion** to his Son in AD 73

This interesting manuscript is preserved in the British Museum and dates to the last quarter of the first century A.D. Mara Bar-Serapion was in prison at the time, but he wrote to encourage his son in the pursuit of wisdom, and pointed out that those who persecuted wise men were overtaken by misfortune. He uses the examples of the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras and Christ.

"What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given."

It is evident that this writer was not a Christian or he would have said the Christ lived on by being raised from the dead. He was more probably a Gentile philosopher, who accepted the thoughts of the Greek philosophers of placing Christ on a comparable footing with the great sages of antiquity.

. . . 1. We see that some gentile philosophers placed Christ on level with the great sages.

C. Justin (c. AD 150) and Turtullian (c. AD 200) told readers to check the census records found in **official archives** of Emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1). They were quite sure that such records told of the census record and of Jesus' family in Bethlehem at the time the New Testament speaks of it.

D. Pilate's Report

1. Justin Martyr AD 150 in "Defense of Christianity"

Written to Emperor Antoninus Pius, Justin Martyr referred him to Pilate's report preserved in the imperial archives.

We do not know if Pilate sent home to Rome any report of the trial and execution of Jesus or not. If he did make a report, what did it contain? If he made such a report it has disappeared.

It is certain that some ancient writers believe that Pilate did send in such a report, but there is no direct quote from them about its contents.

(Later there were 2 spurious "Acts of Pilate" were written and should not be confused with the reference of Justin Martyr to the real Pilate's report.)

E. **Cornelius Tacitus** b. AD 52 History of Rome

The greatest Roman historian in the days of the Empire.

He was born between AD 52 and 54 and wrote the history of Rome under the emperors. At the age of sixty, when writing the history of the reign of Nero (AD 54-68), he described the great fire which ravaged Rom in AD 64 and told how it was widely rumored that Nero had instigated the fire, in order to gain greater glory for himself by rebuilding the city. He goes on to say:

"Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home."

It does not appear to us that Tacitus got his information from either Christian or Jewish sources for his references to Jesus as Christus. For the pagan Tacitus, Christus was simply a proper name, but for Jews and Christians it was not a name but a title.

If Pilate did send a report to Rome, Tacitus was in such a position to have access to such official information. But his language is too summary to make any such inference certain.

One point is worth noting, however; apart from Jewish and Christian writers, Tacitus is the one and only Roman author to mention Pilate. It may surely be accounted one of the ironies of history that the only mention Pilate receives from a Roman historian is in connection with the part he played in the execution of Jesus!

1. The fire of Rome in AD 64
2. What was his source material about Christians?

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F. **Suetonius** -- Roman historian who wrote about . AD 120.

Wrote the lives of the first 12 Caesars

1. In *Lives of Nero* mentioned the great fire (xvi. 2)

"Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition."

2. *Life of Claudius*

"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome."

. . a. Jews dispelled from Rome because of one "Chrestos"

Most scholars believe that the strife among the Roman Jews at that time was due to the recent

introduction of Christianity into Jewish circles in Rome, and that Suetonius, finding some record of Jewish quarreling over one Chrestus (a variant spelling of Christius in Gentile circles), inferred wrongly that this person was actually in Rome himself in the time of Claudius.

. . b. cf. Acts 18:1

We read of Luke's account of the expulsion of Jews from Rome at this time.

. . c. Another point of contact between Suetonius' Life of Claudius and Acts is the statement (xviii.2) that Claudius' reign was marked by "constant unfruitful seasons." cf. Acts 11:28.

G. C. Plinius Secundus -- (Pliny the Younger) AD 62 - 113

Pliny the Younger was asked by the Emperor Trajan about 111 to accept a mission to Bithynia, in northern Asia Minor as legate and governor. Pliny devoted himself to reorganizing the somewhat run-to-seed province with a touching, if somewhat timorous, zeal.

Governor of Bithynia

1. AD 112 Pliny wrote a Letter to the Emperor Trajan asking his advice on how to deal with the troublesome sect of Christians, who were embarrassingly numerous in his province.

According to evidence he had secured by examining some of them under torture . . .

" . . . It is my custom, my lord, to refer to you all questions about which I have doubts. Who, indeed, can better direct me in hesitation, or enlighten me in ignorance? In the examination of Christians I have never taken part; therefore I do not know what crime is usually punished or investigated or to what extent. So I have no little uncertainty . . . Meanwhile I have taken this course with those who were accused before me as Christians: I have asked them whether they were Christians. Those who confessed I asked a second and a third time, threatening punishment. Those who persisted I ordered led away to execution. For I did not doubt that, whatever it was they admitted, obstinacy and unbending perversity certainly deserve to be punished. There were others of the like insanity, but because they were Roman citizens I noted them down to be sent to Rome. Soon after this, as it often happens, because the matter was taken notice of, the crime became wide-spread and many cases arose. An unsigned paper was presented containing the names of many. But these denied that they were or had been Christians, and I thought it right to let them go, since at my dictation they prayed to the gods and made supplication with incense and wine to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into the court for the purpose, together with the images of the gods, and in addition to this they cursed Christ, none of which things, it is said, those who are really Christians can be made to do. Others who were named by an informer said that they were Christians, and soon afterward denied it, saying, indeed, that they had been, but had ceased to be Christians, some three years ago, some many years, and one even twenty years ago. All these also not only worshiped your statue and the images of the gods, but also cursed Christ. They asserted, however that the amount of their fault or error was this: that they had been accustomed to assemble on a fixed day before day light and sing by turns [i.e. antiphonally] a hymn to Christ as a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but to commit neither theft, nor robbery, nor adultery, not to break their word and not to deny a deposit

when demanded; after these things were done, it was their custom to depart and meet together again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food; . . . For many of every age, every rank, and even of both sexes, are brought into danger; and will be in the future. The contagion of that superstition has penetrated not only the cities but also the villages and country places... At any rate, it is certain enough that the temples, deserted until quite recently, began [again] to be frequented...

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CONCLUSION:

1. The history of Christ is established

. . . . (More so than for Alexander the Great)

. . . . a. Historians don't dispute the facts.

. . . . b. Only some "theologians" propagate the "Christ-myth" theories.

2. The events recorded in the N.T. were "not done in a corner."

3. We can, like Theophilus, know more accurately how secure the basis of our faith is.

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