

Historical Jesus

A Contemporary Roman Perspective

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1. Thallus 55 A.D.

Thallus was a Greek Historian around 55A.D. who wrote a three volume account of the Eastern Mediterranean area. Although his works have been lost, fragments of it exist in the citations of others.

As quoted by Julius Africanus (160 A.D -240 A.D.)



On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls as appears to me without a reason, an eclipse of the sun. (Donaldson, A. R. (1973). Julius Africanus, Exant Writings, XVIII in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed Vol. VI. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.)

What can we establish from Thallus' writing?

- The Christian Gospel was known in the Mediterranean by the middle of the first century – this is around AD 52, probably prior to the writing of the gospels.
- There was a widespread darkness in the land, implied to have taken place during Jesus' crucifixion.
- Unbelievers offered rationalistic explanations for certain Christian teachings.

2. Pliny the Younger (61 A.D. – 113 A.D.) *Letters 10.96-97*

Pliny was the Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor and is a noted historian with at least 10 volumes. In one letter he writes to the Emperor Trajan seeking counsel as to how to treat Christians.



In the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed.

...worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

[Christians] were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food.

What can we establish from the Historian Pliny the Younger?

- Christ was worshiped as deity by early believers.
- Pliny later calls the teachings of Jesus “excessive superstition” and “contagious superstition.”
- Jesus’ followers took an oath not to commit a number of sins.
- We see the institution of communion - Pliny refers to it as a Love feast.
- Reference to Sunday worship – Pliny states that Christians “met on a certain day.”

3. Emperor Trajan (53 A.D. – 117 A.D.)

In Reply to Pliny the Younger's inquiries for direction regarding how to handle accused Christians.



You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshipping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age. (Younger, Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.96-97)

What Insights can we learn?

- There was a procedure for dealing with Christians.
- Christians were not to be sought out.
- If they are guilty of following Christ they were to be punished.
- A person could denounce his faith by worshipping the Roman Gods and thereby escape from being punished.

4. Suetonius (70 A.D. – 140 A.D)

Suetonius was a lawyer and secretary to Emperor Hadrian. Suetonius is prolific writer. In one of his books, “the lives of the Caesars,” Suetonius addresses the expulsion of the Jews and Christians from Rome under the reign of Claudius in A. D. 49 (see Acts 18:2)



He [Claudius] expelled the Jews from Rome since they were always making disturbances because of the instigator Chrestus.

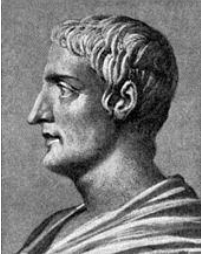
Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief. (Graves, R. (1957). “Introduction” to Suetonius' The Twelve Caesars. Baltimore: Penguin. p. 25)

What can we learn?

- That it was Christ who caused the uproar that led to the expulsion of Jews from Rome.
- The Beliefs of Christians were seen as “mischievous” by the non-believers.
- The term “Christian” identified the people who followed the teachings of Christ.

5. Cornelius Tacitus (56 A.D. – 120 A.D.)

Cornelius is considered to be the greatest Roman historian with 30 books written. Cornelius was a senator under the reign of Vespasian, and from 112 – 113 was proconsul of Asia. Cornelius explains how Nero handled the rumor that he himself set fire to Rome in A.D. 64.



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 Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, and the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre 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 by 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 it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. (Tacitus, The Annals, XV: 44)

What can we learn?

- Christians were named for their founder, Christus,
- who was put to death by the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate,

- during the reign of Tiberius.
- His death ended the “superstition” for a short time.
- It broke out again.
- Followers carried this teaching to Rome.
- When a fire broke out in Rome, the emperor Nero blamed the Christians.
- Christians were hated.
- Christians were arrested and pled guilty.
- Christians were mocked and tortured.
- People felt compassion for the believers who were being killed.

6. Mara bar Serapion (73 A.D.)

While in prison Mara bar Serapion writes a letter to his son explaining that although the life of people may depart from this world, for the wise, “their praises and their virtues go on forever.”



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. (Linder, D. (n.d.). *Non-Christian References to the Trial of Jesus*. Retrieved 10 23, 2012, from <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/jesus/nonchristianaccounts.html>*

What can we learn?

- Jesus was considered to be a wise and virtuous man.
- He is address twice as the Jews’ King.
- Jesus was executed unjustly by the Jews.
- Jesus lived on in the teachings of the early Christians.

7. *Lucian of Samosata (115 A.D. – 200 A.D.)*

Well known Greek Satirist and traveling speaker. Lucian tells the story of a man named Peregrinus who was banished from his city for killing his father. Peregrinus converted to Christianity and shared his new faith with many – only to plunge back into again idolatry and eventually committed suicide.



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 trust, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property. (Samosata, L. o. (n.d.). *The Death of Peregrine*. Retrieved October 25, 2012, from <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lucian/works/chapter59.html>)

What can we learn?

- We are told Jesus was worshipped by Christians.
- Jesus introduced new teachings in Palestine.
- Jesus was crucified because of these teachings.
- Jesus taught new doctrines – all brothers, denying other gods.
- Followers were told to live according to his laws.

8. *Celsus 175 A.D.*

Celsus wrote an attack on Christianity called The Doctrine. The original work perished, but 60 – 90% of it was incorporated into Origen's lengthy response against Celsus in his work *Contra Celsum*, 250 ca.



Book 1 Chap. 28

Celsus accuses Jesus of having “:...*invented his birth from a virgin*” and reproaches Him with being “*born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.*”

Book 1 chap. 39

Was the mother of Jesus beautiful? Did God have sexual intercourse with her because she was beautiful, although by his nature he cannot love a mortal body? It is unlikely that God would have fallen in love with her, since she was neither wealthy nor of royal birth.

Other statements...

Jesus' physical appearance was ugly and small. (6.75)

He gathered only 10 followers and taught them his worse habits, including begging and robbing. (1.62; 2:44)

The reports of his [Jesus] resurrection came from a hysterical female, and belief in the resurrection was the result of Jesus' sorcery... (2.55)

What can we learn?

- Jesus was being described as being born from a virgin and a child of God.
- Born in a Jewish village.
- Jesus was known for doing miracles.
- Jesus proclaimed himself a God.
- Jesus was reported to have been resurrected from the dead.

***An Apologetic's, must have book for every believer: The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict, by Josh McDowell.**

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