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"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

Early Non-Christian Witnesses to Jesus Christ

by Leland M. Haines

Often we think all the witnesses to Jesus Christ are found in the Bible. There are several early statements made by non-Christians that bear witness to Him. These are given below.

1. Emperor Tiberitus (14-37) or Claudius (41-54) issued an edict against grave robbing. An inscription of it was found in Nazareth. It reads:

"Ordinances of Caesar, it is my pleasure that graves and tombs remain undisturbed in perpetuity for those who have made them for the cult of their ancestors or children or members of their house. If however any man lay information that another has either demolished them, or has in any other way extracted the buried, or has maliciously transferred them to other places in order to wrong them, or has displaced the sealing of other stones, against such one I order that a trial be instituted, as in respect of the gods, so in regard to the cult of mortals. For it shall be much more obligatory to honor the buried. Let it be absolutely forbidden for anyone to disturb them, in case of contravention I desire that the offender be sentenced to capital punishment on charge of violation of sepulture."

Before this time punishment would had been mild. Why was it changed to death? We know this decreed was soon after Christ's resurrection. Was it due to a reaction against the turmoil in Israel caused His resurrection?

2. Josephus (A.D. 37-100), the Jewish historian, would wrote a generation after Jesus Christ, makes several references to people well-known to New Testament readers. F. F. Bruce summarized the evidence:

"Here, in the pages of Josephus, we meet many figures who are well known to us from the New Testament; the colorful family of the Herods; the Roman emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and the procurators of Judea; the high priestly families--Annas, Caiaphas, Ananias, and the rest; the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and so on" (F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* p. 104.)

He wrote explicitly about Jesus:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. . . . Pilate condemned Him to be condemned and to die. And 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" (Antiquities, xviii.ch. 3, subtopic 3, Arabic text).

"Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works--a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew ever to him both many of the Jews, and many Gentiles. He was the Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestions of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to be condemned and to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not foesake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and the ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day" (Antiquities, xviii.ch. 3, subtopic 3, Greek text).

Note: The above are disputed passages, especially the second one. Josephus writing were handed down through Christian scribes. No Jew cared for this Jew turned Roman General. Since Josephus was not a Christian it is unlikely statement like "if it be lawful to call him a man," "he was the Christ," etc. Surely words were added to these statements, especially to the second one. No unbelieving Jew would made such statements about Jesus.

Josephus also wrote about James, the brother of Jesus.

"(Ananus) assembled the sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he deliver them to be stoned" (Antiquities XX 9:1).

3. Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 55?-after 117), the Roman Historian, wrote of Nero's attempt to relieve himself of the guilt of burning Rome:

"Hence to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius: but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also" (Annals XV.44).

4. Lucian (second century), Greek Satirist, alludes to Christ in these words:

"The man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world. . . . Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they were all brothers one of another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws" (On the Death of Peregrine).

5. Suetonius (c. A.D. 120), a Roman Historian and court official under Hadrian made two references to Christ. In the *Life of Claudius* (25.4) he wrote

"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chestus [another spelling of Christ or Christ], he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome."

In the *Lives of the Caesars* (26.2) he wrote:

"Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition."

6. Pliny the Younger (c. A.D. 112), when writing to the emperor about his achievements as governor of Bithynia, wrote how he had killed multitudes of Christian men, women, and children. He wrote:

"All who denied that they were or had been Christians I consider should be discharged, because they called upon the gods at my dictation and did reverence, with incense and wine, your [the emperor's] image . . . they curse Christ, which a genuine Christian cannot be induced to do" (Epistles, X.96).

He also wrote in the same letter:

"[Christians] were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse of a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, and never to deny a truth when they should be called upon to deliver it up."

7. Thallus (c. A.D. 52) was a Samaritan-born historian. Julius Africanus (c. A.D. 221) wrote:

"Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness [at the time of the crucifixion] as an eclipse of the sun-unreasonably, as it seems to me."

This was unreasonable, of course, because a solar eclipse could not take place at the time of the full moon, and it was the time of the paschal full moon when Christ died.

8. Mara Bar Serapion (after A.D. 73) wrote a letter that now resides in the British Museum. According to F. F. Bruce it was written by a father to his son in prison. In the letter he compares the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras, and Jesus:

"What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. . . . 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" (Bruce, op. cit., p.14).

9. The Jewish Talmud was completed by A.D. 500. The Babylonian Talmud reference to Jesus:

"On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu (of Nazareth) and them herald went before him for forty days saying (Yeshu of Nazareth) is going to be stoned in that he hath practiced sorcery and beguiled and led astray Israel. Let everyone knowing aught in his defense come and plead for him. But they found naught in his defense and hanged him on the eve of Passover" (Sanhedrin 43a, "Eve of Passover").

R. Shimeon ben' Azzai wrote concerning Jesus:

"I found a genealogical roll in Jerusalem wherein was recorded, Such-an-one is a bastard of an adulteress" (Yeb. IV 3; 49 a).

In summary, there are several reference to Jesus made by non-Christians. Only those made by Josephus are open to question since they were handed down through Christian scribes. The others were handed down through Roman/Latin scribes and are likely accurate copies of these writings.

by Leland M. Haines
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