

The Evidence of Early Gentile Writers

by F.F Bruce

The sermon explores the evidence of early Gentile writers that supports the historicity of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 27:45, Luke 2:1, John 20:30, Acts 26:26, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Historical Jesus", "Apologetics Evidence"

Description

F.F. Bruce delves into early Jewish and Gentile writings to explore references to Christianity in the first century, highlighting the attempts to refute Christian traditions with naturalistic interpretations. He discusses the disappearance of certain writings like those of Thallus and the intriguing letter from Mara Bar-Serapion mentioning Jesus. Bruce also touches on the lack of references to Christianity in classical literature due to its initial obscurity and disreputable nature in imperial Rome. He concludes by emphasizing the historical character of Jesus, supported by evidence from various non-Christian sources.

Transcript

So much, then, for the information we can gather from early Jewish writings; we turn now to the Gentiles.

The first Gentile writer who concerns us seems to be one called Thallus, who about AD 52 wrote a work tracing the history of Greece and its relations with Asia from the Trojan War to his own day. He has been identified with a Samaritan of that name, who is mentioned by Josephus (Ant. xviii. 6. 4) as being a freedman of the Emperor Tiberius. Now Julius Africanus, a Christian writer on chronology about AD 221, who knew the writings of Thallus, says when discussing the darkness which fell upon the land during the crucifixion of Christ: 'Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun-unreasonably, as it seems to me' (unreasonably, 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).'

From this reference in Julius Africanus it has been inferred (a) that the gospel tradition, or at least the traditional story of the passion, was known in Rome in non-Christian circles towards the middle of the first century; and (b) that the enemies of Christianity tried to refute this Christian tradition by giving a naturalistic interpretation to the facts which it reported.'

But the writings of Thallus have disappeared; we know them only in fragments cited by later writers. Apart from him, no certain reference is made to Christianity in any extant non-Christian Gentile writing of the first century. There is, indeed, in the British Museum an interesting manuscript preserving the text of a letter written some time later than AD 73, but how much later we cannot be sure. This letter was sent by a

Syrian named Mara BarSerapion to his son Serapion. 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 instances the deaths of Socrates, 'Pythagoras and Christ:

'What advantage did the Athenian, 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.'

This writer can scarcely have been a Christian, or he would have said that Christ lived on by being raised from the dead. He was more probably a Gentile philosopher, who led the way in what later became a commonplace-the placing of Christ on a comparable footing with the great sages of antiquity.

The reason for the paucity of references to Christianity in first century classical literature is not far to seek. From the standpoint of imperial Rome, Christianity in the first hundred years of its existence was an obscure, disreputable, vulgar oriental superstition, and if it found its way into official records at all these would most likely be the police records, which (in common with many other first century documents that we should like to see) have disappeared.

Justin and Tertullian believed that the record of the census of Luke ii. 1, including the registration of Joseph and Mary, would be found in the official archives of the reign of Augustus, and they referred their readers who wished to be reassured of the facts of our Lord's birth to these archives. This need not mean that they themselves had consulted the archives, but simply that they were quite sure that the records were preserved in them.

We should especially like to know if Pilate sent home to Rome any report of the trial and execution of Jesus, and, if so, what it contained. But it is not certain that he must have done so; and if he did, it has disappeared beyond trace.

Certainly some ancient writers believed that Pilate did send in such a report, but there is no evidence that any of them had any real knowledge of it. About AD 150 Justin Martyr, addressing his Defence of Christianity to the Emperor Antoninus Pius, referred him to Pilate's report, which Justin supposed must be preserved in the imperial archives. 'But the words, "They pierced my hands and my feet," ' he says, 'are a description of the nails that were fixed in His hands and His feet on the cross; and after He was crucified, those who crucified Him cast lots for His garments, and divided them among themselves; and that these things were so, you may learn from the "Acts" which were recorded under Pontius Pilate.' Later he says: 'That He performed these miracles you may easily be satisfied from the "Acts" of Pontius Pilate.'

Then Tertullian, the great jurist-theologian of Carthage, addressing his Defence of Christianity to the man authorities in the province of Africa about AD 197, says: 'Tiberius, in whose time the Christian name first made its appearance in the world, laid before the Senate tidings from Syria Palestina which had revealed to him the truth of the divinity there manifested, and supported the motion by his own vote to begin with. The Senate rejected it because it had not itself given its approval. Caesar held to his own opinion and threatened danger to the accusers of the Christians.'

It would no doubt be pleasant if we could believe this story of Tertullian, which he manifestly believed to be true but a story so inherently improbable and inconsistent with what we know of Tiberius, related nearly 170 years after the event, does not commend itself to a historian's judgment.

When the influence of Christianity was increasing rapidly in the Empire, one of the last pagan emperors, Maximin II, two years before the Edict of Milan, attempted to bring Christianity into disrepute by publishing what he alleged to be the true 'Acts of Pilate', representing the origins of Christianity in an unsavoury guise. These 'Acts', which were full of outrageous assertions about Jesus, had to be read and memorized by schoolchildren. They were manifestly forged, as Eusebius historian pointed out at the time;' among other things, their dating was quite wrong, as they placed the death of Jesus in the seventh year of Tiberius (AD 20), whereas the testimony of Josephus' is plain that Pilate not become procurator of Judaea till Tiberius' Twelfth year (not to mention the evidence of Luke iii. 1, according to which John the Baptist began to preach in fifteenth year of Tiberius). We do not know in detail these alleged 'Acts' contained, as they were naturally suppressed on Constantine's accession to power; but we may surmise that they had some affinity with Toledoth Yeshu, an anti-Christian compilation popular in some Jewish circles in mediaeval time.'

Later in the fourth century another forged set of 'Acts of Pilate' appeared, this time from the Christian side, and as devoid of genuineness as Maximin's, to which they were perhaps intended as a counterblast. They are still extant, and consist of alleged memorials the trial, passion, and resurrection of Christ, recorded by Nicodemus and deposited with Pilate. (They are also own as the 'Gospel of Nicodemus'.) A translation of them is given in M. R. James' Apocryphal New Testament, pp. 94 ff., and they have a literary interest of their own, which does not concern us here.

The greatest Roman historian in the days of the Empire was Cornelius Tacitus, who was born between AD 52 and 54 and wrote the history of Rome under the emperors. About the age of sixty, when writing the story of the reign of Nero (AD 54-68), he described the eat fire which ravaged Rome in AD 64 and told how was widely rumoured that Nero had instigated the fire, in order to gain greater glory for himself by rebuilding the city. He goes on:

'Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty, a class of men, loathes for their vice', whom the crowd stiled 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 Judaea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home."

This account does not strike one as having been derived from Christian sources nor yet from Jewish informants for the latter would not have referred to Jesus as Christus. For the pagan Tacitus, Christus was simply a proper name; for the Jews, as for the first Christians, it was not a name but a title, the Greek equivalent of the Semitic Messiah ('Anointed'). The Christians called Him Christus, because they believed He was the promised Messiah; the Jews, who did not believe so, would not have given Him that honoured title. Tacitus was in a position to have access to such official information as was available; he was the son-in-law of Julius Agricola, who was governor of Britain in AD 80 to 84. If Pilate did send a report to Rome Tacitus was more likely to know of it than most writers, 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 ancient 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 Jesus.

The Great Fire of Rome is also mentioned by Suetonius, who about AD 120 wrote the lives of the first twelve Caesars, from Julius Caesar onwards. In his Life 'Nero (xvi. 2) he says:

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

Another possible reference to Christianity occurs in 'Life of Claudius (xxv. 4), of whom he says:

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

It is not certain who this Chrestus was; but it is most likely 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 record of Jewish quarreling over one Chrestus (a variant spelling of Christus in Gentile circles), inferred wrongly that this person was actually in Rome in the time of Claudius. However that may be, this statement is another claim on our interest, for we read in Acts xviii 1f. that when Paul came to Corinth (probably AD 50) he found there a man named Aquila, with his wife Priscilla, lately come from Rome, for Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome. This couple played a distinguished part in early Christian history; they may well have been foundation members of the church in Rome.

A further point of contact between Suetonius' Life of Claudius and Acts is the statement in the former (xviii. 2) that Claudius' reign was marked by 'constant unfruitful seasons' (*assiduae sterilitates*), which reminds us of the prophecy of Agabus in Acts xi. 28, 'that there should be great dearth throughout all the world; which came to pass in the days of Claudius.'

In AD 112, C. Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger), governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, 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,

'they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath (*sacramentum*) not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all, fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honour it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.'

Whatever else may be thought of the evidence from early Jewish and Gentile writers, as summarized in this chapter and the preceding one, it does at least establish for those who refuse the witness of Christian writings, the historical character of Jesus Himself. Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth', but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories.'

The earliest propagators of Christianity welcomed the fullest examination of the credentials of their message. The events which they proclaimed were, as Paul said to King Agrippa, not done in a corner, and were well able to bear all the light that could be thrown on them. The spirit of these early Christians ought

to animate their modern descendants. For by an acquaintance with the relevant evidence they will not only be able to give to everyone who asks them a reason for the hope that is in them, but they themselves, like Theophilus, will thus know more accurately how secure is the basis of the faith which they have been taught.

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