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Ancient Non-Christian Sources

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Chapter IX

Ancient Non-Christian Sources

Continuing our historical investigation into the early sources for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we turn next to the ancient non-Christian sources. We will move, successively, from ancient historians, to government officials, to other Jewish and Gentile sources, to early gnostic sources and then to lost works that speak of Jesus.

Ancient Historians

Tacitus. Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 55-120 A.D.) was a Roman historian who lived through the reigns of over a half dozen Roman emperors. He has been called the "greatest historian" of ancient Rome, an individual generally acknowledged among scholars for his moral "integrity and essential goodness."⁽¹⁾

Tacitus is best known for two works — the *Annals* and the *Histories*. The former is thought to have included eighteen books and the latter to have included twelve, for a total of thirty.⁽²⁾ The *Annals* cover the period from Augustus' death in 14 A.D. to that of Nero in 68 A.D., while the *Histories* begin after Nero's death and proceed to that of Domitian in 96 A.D.

Tacitus recorded at least one reference to Christ and two to early Christianity, one in each of his major works. The most important one is that found in the *Annals*, written about 115 A.D. The following was recounted 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 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 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.⁽³⁾

From this report we can learn several facts, both explicit and implicit, concerning Christ and the Christians who lived in Rome in the 60s A.D. Chronologically, we may ascertain the following information.

(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 (14-37 A.D.). (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 (54-68 A.D.), 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."⁽⁴⁾

Several facts here are of interest. As F. F. Bruce has noted, Tacitus had to receive his information from some source and this may have been an official record. It may even have been contained in one of Pilate's reports to the emperor, to which Tacitus would probably have had access because of his standing with the government.⁽⁵⁾ Of course, we cannot be sure at this point, but a couple of early writers do claim to know the contents of such a report, as we will perceive later.

Also of interest is the historical context for Jesus' death, as he is linked with both Pilate and Tiberius. 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.(6)

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.

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.

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.(7) He informs us that Tacitus wrote of the burning of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., 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.

Suetonius. Another Roman historian who also makes one reference to Jesus and one to Christians is Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. Little is known about him except that he was the chief secretary of Emperor Hadrian (117-138 A.D.) and that he had access to the imperial records.(8) The first reference occurs in the section on emperor Claudius (41-54 A.D.). Writing about the same time as Tacitus,(9) Suetonius remarked concerning Claudius:

Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city.(10)

The translator notes that "Chrestus" is a variant spelling of "Christ," as noted by other commentators as well,(11) and is virtually the same as Tacitus' Latin spelling.

Suetonius refers to a wave of riots which broke out in a large Jewish community in Rome during the year of 49 A.D. As a result, the Jews were banished from the city. Incidentally, this statement has an interesting corroboration in Acts 18:2, which relates that Paul met a Jewish couple from Pontus named Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had recently left Italy because Claudius had demanded that all Jews leave Rome.

The second reference from Suetonius is again to the Christians who were tortured by emperor Nero:

After the great fire at Rome . . . Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief.(12)

Few facts are derived from the two references by Suetonius. The first relates (1) to the expulsion of Jews from Rome, but also makes the claim (2) that it was Christ who caused the Jews to make the uproar in Rome, apparently by his teachings. The second reference is quite similar to the longer statement by Tacitus, (3) including the use of the word "mischievous" to describe the group's beliefs and (4) the term "Christians" to identify this group as followers of the teachings of Christ.

Josephus. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was born in 37 or 38 A.D. and died in 97 A.D. 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 70 A.D., he moved to Rome, where he became the court historian for emperor Vespasian.(13)

The Antiquities, one of Josephus' major works, provides some valuable but disputed evidence concerning Jesus. Written around 90-95 A.D., 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."(14) 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.(15)

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, (16) yet Eusebius quotes the debated passage including the words above. (17) 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. (18) 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. (19) 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. (20)

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. (21)

After an investigation of the question, Charlesworth explains his view that Josephus' original version is "both an interpolation and a redaction." (22) But he provides three reasons why Josephus still wrote most of the passage: some of the words are very difficult to assign to a Christian writer, the passage fits both grammatically and historically, and the brief reference to Jesus in Antiquities 20 seems to presuppose an earlier mention. (23)

Charlesworth concludes that the Arabic rescension is basically accurate, even if there are still a few subtle Christian alterations. He concludes about 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." (24)

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. (25)

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.

Thallus. At least the death of Jesus was mentioned in an ancient history composed many years before Tacitus, Suetonius or Josephus ever wrote and probably even prior to the Gospels. Circa 52 A.D. Thallus wrote a history of the Eastern Mediterranean world from the Trojan War to his own time.(26) This work itself has been lost and only fragments of it exist in the citations of others. One such scholar who knew and spoke of it was Julius Africanus, who wrote about 221 A.D. It is debated whether Thallus was the same person referred to by Josephus as a wealthy Samaritan, who was made a freedman by Emperor Tiberius and who loaned money to Herod Agrippa I.(27)

In speaking of Jesus' crucifixion and the darkness that covered the land during this event, Africanus found a reference in the writings of Thallus that dealt with this cosmic report. Africanus asserts:

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 reason, an eclipse of the sun.(28)

Julius Africanus objected to Thallus' rationalization concerning the darkness that fell on the land at the time of the crucifixion because an eclipse could not take place during the time of the full moon, as was the case during the Jewish Passover season.(29) But Wells raises a fair question about this testimony. Africanus only implies that Thallus linked the darkness to Jesus' crucifixion, but we are not specifically told if Jesus is mentioned in Thallus' original history at all.(30)

If this brief statement by Thallus refers to Jesus' crucifixion we can ascertain that (1) the Christian gospel, or at least an account of the crucifixion, was known in the Mediterranean region by the middle of the first century A.D. This brings to mind the presence of Christian teachings in Rome mentioned by Tacitus and by Suetonius. (2) There was a widespread darkness in the land, implied to have taken place during Jesus' crucifixion. (3) Unbelievers offered rationalistic explanations for certain Christian teachings or for supernatural claims not long after their initial proclamation, a point to which we will return below.

Government Officials

Pliny the Younger. A Roman author and administrator who served as the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Pliny the Younger was the nephew and adopted son of a natural historian known as Pliny the Elder. The younger Pliny is best known for his letters, and Bruce refers to him as "one of the world's great letter writers, whose letters . . . have attained the status of literary classics."(31)

Ten books of Pliny's correspondence are extant today. The tenth book, written around 112 A.D., speaks about Christianity in the province of Bithynia and also provides some facts about Jesus.(32) Pliny found that the Christian influence was so strong that the pagan temples had been nearly deserted, pagan festivals severely decreased and the sacrificial animals had few buyers. Because of the inflexibility of the Christians and the emperor's prohibition against political association, governor Pliny took action against the Christians. Yet, because he was unsure how to deal with believers, if there should be any distinctions in treatment or if repentance made any difference, he wrote to Emperor Trajan to explain his approach.

Pliny dealt personally with the Christians who were turned over to him. He interrogated them, inquiring if they were believers. If they answered in the affirmative he asked them two more times, under the threat of death. If they continued firm in their belief, he ordered them to be executed. Sometimes the punishment included torture to obtain desired information, as in the case of two female slaves who were deaconesses in the church. If the person was a Roman citizen, they were sent to the emperor in Rome for trial. If they denied being Christians or had disavowed their faith in the past, they "repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration . . . to your [Trajan's] image." Afterwards they "finally cursed Christ." Pliny explained that his purpose in all this was that "multitudes may be reclaimed from error."(33)

Since Pliny's letter is rather lengthy, we will quote the portion which pertains directly to an account of early Christian worship of Christ:

They (the Christians) were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food — but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.(34)

At this point Pliny adds that Christianity attracted persons of all societal ranks, all ages, both sexes and from both the city and the country.

From Pliny's letter we find several more facts about Jesus and early Christianity. (1) Christ was worshiped as deity by early believers. (2) Pliny refers late in his letter to the teachings of Jesus and his followers as "excessive superstition" and "contagious superstition," which is reminiscent of the words of both Tacitus and Suetonius. (3) Jesus' ethical teachings are reflected in the oath taken by Christians never to be guilty of a number of sins mentioned in the letter. (4) We find a probable reference to Christ's institution of communion and the Christian celebration of the "love feast" in Pliny's remark about their regathering to partake of ordinary food. The reference here alludes to the accusation on the part of non-Christians that believers were suspected of ritual murder and drinking of blood during these meetings, again confirming our view that communion is the subject to which Pliny is referring. (5) There is also a possible reference to Sunday worship in Pliny's statement that Christians met "on a certain day."

Concerning early Christianity, (6) we see Pliny's method of dealing with believers, from their identification, to their interrogation, to their execution. For those who denied being Christians, worship of the gods and the emperor gained them their freedom. (7) Interestingly, Pliny reports that true believers could not be forced to worship the gods or the emperor. (8) Christian worship involved a pre dawn service, (9) which included singing hymns. The early time probably facilitated a normal working day. (10) These Christians apparently formed a typical cross section of society in Bithynia, since they were of all classes, ages, localities and of both sexes. (11) There were recognized positions in the church, as illustrated by the mention of the two female deaconesses who were tortured for information. While Pliny does not relate many facts about Jesus, he does provide a look at a very early example of Christian worship. Believers were meeting regularly and worshipping Jesus.

Emperor Trajan. Pliny's inquiry received a reply which is published along with his letters, although Emperor Trajan's response is much shorter:

The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our Gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Informations without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age.(35)

Trajan responds that Pliny was generally correct in his actions. If confessed Christians persist in their faith, they must be punished. However, three restrictions are placed on Pliny. (1) Christians should not be sought out or tracked down. (2) Repentance coupled with worship of the gods sufficed to clear a person. Pliny expressed doubts as to whether a person should be punished in spite of repentance and only recounts the pardoning of persons who had willingly given up their beliefs prior to questioning. (3) Pliny was not to honor any lists of Christians which were given to him if the accuser did not name himself.

These conditions imposed by emperor Trajan give us some insight into early official Roman views about Christianity. While persecution was certainly an issue and many Christians died without committing any actual crimes, it is interesting that, contrary to popular opinion, the first century was not the worst period of persecution for believers. Trajan's restrictions on Pliny at least indicate that it was not a wholesale slaughter. Nonetheless, the persecution was real and many died for their faith.

Emperor Trajan. The existence of trials for Christians, such as the ones held in the time of Pliny, is confirmed by another historical reference to Christians. Serenus Granianus, proconsul of Asia, wrote to emperor Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), also in reference to the treatment of believers. Hadrian replied to Minucius Fundanus, the successor as Asian proconsul and issued a statement against those who would accuse Christians falsely or without due process. In the letter, preserved by third century church Historian Eusebius, Hadrian asserts:

I do not wish, therefore, that the matter should be passed by without examination, so that these men may neither be harassed, nor opportunity of malicious proceedings be offered to informers. If, therefore, the provincials can clearly evince their charges against the Christians, so as to answer before the tribunal, let them pursue this course only, but not by mere petitions, and mere outcries against the Christians. For it is far more proper, if any one would bring an accusation, that you should examine it.(36)

Hadrian explains that, if Christians are found guilty, after an examination, they should be judged "according to the heinousness of the crime." Yet, if the accusers were only slandering the believers, then those who inaccurately made the charges were to be punished.(37)

From Hadrian's letter we again ascertain (1) that Christians were frequently reported as lawbreakers in Asia and were punished in various ways. (2) Like Trajan, Hadrian also encouraged a certain amount of temperance, and ordered that

Christians not be harassed. (3) If Christians were indeed guilty, as indicated by careful examination, punishments could well be in order. (4) However, no undocumented charges were to be brought against believers and those engaged in such were to be punished themselves.

Other Jewish Sources

The Talmud. The Jews handed down a large amount of oral tradition from generation to generation. This material was organized according to subject matter by Rabbi Akiba before his death in 135 A.D. His work was then revised by his student, Rabbi Meir. The project was completed about 200 A.D. by Rabbi Judah and is known as the Mishnah. Ancient commentary on the Mishnah was called the Gemaras. The combination of the Mishnah and the Gemaras form the Talmud.(38)

It would be expected that the most reliable information about Jesus from the Talmud would come from the earliest period of compilation — 70 to 200 A.D., known as the Tannaitic period. A very significant quotation is found in Sanhedrin 43a, dating from just this early period:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!(39)

Here we have another brief account of the death of Jesus. These two references to Jesus being "hanged" certainly provide an interesting term to describe his death. But it should be noted that the New Testament speaks of crucifixion in the same way. Jesus is said to have been "hanged" (Greek kremámenos in Gal. 3:13), as were the two males killed at the same time (Greek kremasthenton in Luke 23:39). While the term "crucified" is a much more common reference to this event, (40) "hanged" is a variant expression of the same fate.

From this passage in the Talmud we learn about (1) the fact of Jesus' death by crucifixion and (2) the time of this event, which is mentioned twice as occurring on the eve of the Jewish Passover. We are surprisingly told (3) that for forty days beforehand it was publicly announced that Jesus would be stoned. While not specifically recorded in the New Testament, such is certainly consistent with both Jewish practice and with the report that this had also been threatened on at least two other occasions (John 8:58 59; 10:31 33, 39). It is related (4) that Jesus was judged by the Jews to be guilty of "sorcery" and spiritual apostasy in leading Israel astray by his teaching. (5) It is also stated that since no witnesses came forward to defend him, he was killed.

It is interesting that there is no explanation as to why Jesus was crucified ("hanged") when stoning was the prescribed punishment. It is likely that the Roman involvement provided the "change of plans," without specifically being mentioned here.

Another early reference in the Talmud speaks of five of Jesus' disciples and recounts their standing before judges who make individual decisions about each one, deciding that they should be executed. However, no actual deaths are recorded.(41) From this second portion we can ascertain only (6) the fact that Jesus had some disciples and (7) that some among the Jews felt that these men were also guilty of actions which warranted execution.

There are various other references to Jesus in the Talmud, although most are from later periods of formulation and are of questionable historical value. For instance, one reference indicates that Jesus was treated differently from others who led the people astray, for he was connected with royalty.(42) The first portion of this statement is very possibly an indication of the fact that Jesus was crucified instead of being stoned. The second part could be referring to Jesus being born of the lineage of David, or it could actually be a criticism of the Christian belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Another possible reference to Jesus states that he was either thirty three or thirty four years old when he died.(43) Many other allusions and possible connections could be mentioned, such as derision of the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth(44) and references to Mary, Jesus' mother,(45) but these depend on questions of identification of pseudonyms and other such issues.

Because of the questionable nature and dates of these latter Talmudic references, we will utilize only the two earlier passages from the Tannaitic period in our study. While the latter references are interesting and may reflect older traditions, we cannot be sure.

Toledoth Jesu. This anti Christian document not only refers to Jesus, but gives an interesting account of what happened to Jesus' body after his death. It relates that his disciples planned to steal his body. However, a gardener named Juda discovered their plans and dug a new grave in his garden. Then he removed Jesus' body from Joseph's tomb and placed it in his own newly dug grave. The disciples came to the original tomb, found Jesus' body gone and proclaimed him risen. The Jewish leaders also proceeded to Joseph's tomb and found it empty. Juda then took them to his grave and dug up the body of Jesus. The Jewish leaders were greatly relieved and wanted to take the body. Juda replied that he would sell them

the body of Jesus and did so for thirty pieces of silver. The Jewish priests then dragged Jesus' body through the streets of Jerusalem.(46)

It is true that the *Toledoth Jesu* was not compiled until the fifth century A.D., although it does reflect early Jewish tradition. Even though Jewish scholars scorn the reliability of this source,(47) the teaching that the disciples were the ones who removed the dead body of Jesus persisted in the early centuries after Jesus' death. As reported in Matt. 28:11-15, this saying was still popular when the gospel was written, probably between 70-85 A.D. Additionally, Justin Martyr, writing about 150 A.D., states that the Jewish leaders had even sent specially trained men around the Mediterranean, even to Rome, to further this teaching,(48) which is confirmed by Tertullian about 200 A.D.(49) In other words, even if the *Toledoth Jesu* itself is too late or untrustworthy a source, in spite of its early material, the idea that the tomb was empty because the body was moved or stolen was common in early church history, as witnessed by other sources.

Other Gentile Sources

Lucian. A second century Greek satirist, Lucian spoke rather derisively of Jesus and early Christians. His point was to criticize Christians for being such gullible people that, with very little warrant, they would approve charlatans who pose as teachers, thereby supporting these persons even to the point of making them wealthy. In the process of his critique he relates some important facts concerning Jesus and Christians:

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 faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property.(50)

From the material supplied by Lucian we may derive the following data concerning Jesus and early Christians. (1) We are told that Jesus was worshiped by Christians. (2) It is also related that Jesus introduced new teachings in Palestine (the location is given in another unquoted portion of Section II) and (3) that he was crucified because of these teachings. Jesus taught his followers certain doctrines, such as (4) all believers are brothers, (5) from the moment that conversion takes place and (6) after the false gods are denied (such as those of Greece). Additionally, these teachings included (7) worshiping Jesus and (8) living according to his laws. (9) Lucian refers to Jesus as a "sage," which, especially in a Greek context, would be to compare him to the Greek philosophers and wise men.

Concerning Christians, we are told (10) that they are followers of Jesus who (11) believe themselves to be immortal. Lucian explains that this latter belief accounts for their contempt of death. (12) Christians accepted Jesus' teachings by faith and (13) practiced their faith by their disregard for material possessions, as revealed by the holding of common property among believers.

The portion of Lucian not quoted presents some additional facts. (14) The Christians had "sacred writings" which were frequently read. (15) When something affected their community, "they spare no trouble, no expense." (16) However, Lucian notes that Christians were easily taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals.(51) From Lucian, then, we learn a number of important facts about Jesus and early Christian beliefs. Many of these are not reported by other extra New Testament beliefs.

Mara Bar Serapion. The British Museum owns the manuscript of a letter written sometime between the late first and third centuries A.D. Its author was a Syrian named Mara Bar Serapion, who was writing from prison to motivate his son Serapion to emulate wise teachers of the past: (52)

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 the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.(53)

From this passage we learn (1) that Jesus was considered to be a wise and virtuous man. (2) He is addressed twice as the Jews' King, possibly a reference to Jesus' own teachings about himself, to that of his followers or even to the wording on the *titulus* placed over Jesus' head on the cross. (3) Jesus was executed unjustly by the Jews, who paid for their misdeeds by suffering judgment soon afterward, probably at least as reference to the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies. (4) Jesus lived on in the teachings of the early Christians, which is an indication that Mara Bar Serapion was almost certainly not a Christian. Rather, he follows Lucian and others in the popular comparison of Jesus to philosophers and other wise men in the ancient world.

As Bruce notes, some of Mara Bar Serapion's material concerning Athens and Samos is quite inaccurate.(54) Yet the statements about Jesus do not appear to be flawed and thus add to our extra New Testament data about him.

Gnostic Sources

This category of extra New Testament sources is different from all the others in that these works often at least make the claim to be Christian. Although scholars still debate the question of the origin of gnosticism, it is generally said to have flourished mainly from the second to the fourth centuries A.D. It is from four, second century documents that we get the material for this section. While it is possible that there are other gnostic sources as old or older than the four used here, these have the advantage both of being better established and of claiming to relate facts concerning the historical Jesus, many of which are not reported in the Gospels.

However, it must be admitted that this group of writers was still more influenced by the New Testament writings than the others in this chapter. Yet, although many of the ideas in these four books are Christian, gnosticism in many of its forms and teachings was pronounced heretical and viewed as such by the church. Hence we are discussing such material in this chapter.

The Gospel of Truth. This book was possibly written by the gnostic teacher Valentinus, which would date its writing around 135-160 A.D. If not, it was probably at least from this school of thought and still dated in the second century A.D.(55) Unlike some gnostic works, The Gospel of Truth addresses the subject of the historicity of Jesus in several short passages. It does not hesitate to affirm that the Son of God came in the flesh. The author asserts that "the Word came into the midst . . . it became a body."(56) Later he states:

For when they had seen him and had heard him, he granted them to taste him and to smell him and to touch the beloved Son. When he had appeared instructing them about the Father For he came by means of fleshly appearance(57)

From these two quotations this book indicates (1) that Jesus was the Son of God, the Word and (2) that he became a man and took on an actual human body which could be perceived by all five senses. (3) We are also told that he instructed his listeners about his Father. According to The Gospel of Truth, Jesus also died and was raised from the dead: Jesus was patient in accepting sufferings . . . since he knows that his death is life for many . . . he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict of the Father on the cross. . . . He draws himself down to death through life . . . eternal clothes him. Having stripped himself of the perishable rags, he put on imperishability, which no one can possibly take away from him.(58)

Here and later (18:23) the author states (4) that Jesus was persecuted and suffered and (5) that he was "nailed to a tree," obviously referring to his crucifixion. (6) We are also told of the belief that it was Jesus' death that brought salvation "for many," which is referred to as the imparting of Light to those who would receive it (30:37; 31:12-20). It is also asserted (7) that Jesus was raised in an eternal body which no one can harm or take from him. The theological overtones in The Gospel of Truth (as well as in other gnostic writings) present an obvious contrast to the ancient secular works inspected above. Yet, even allowing for such theological motivation, these early gnostic sources still present us with some important insights into the historical life and teachings of Jesus.

The Apocryphon of John. Grant asserts that this work is closely related to the thought of the gnostic teacher Saturninus, who taught around 120-130 A.D.(59) The Apocryphon of John was modified as it was passed on and was known in several versions. Irenaeus made use of one of these versions as a source for his treatment of gnosticism, *Against Heresies*, written ca. 185 A.D. Thus, by this time, at least the major teachings of The Apocryphon of John were in existence.(60)

In a largely mythical treatise involving esoteric matters of gnostic theology, this book does purport to open with a historical incident. We are told:

It happened [one day]when Jo[h]n, the brother] of James,—who are the sons of Ze[bed]ee—went up and came to the temple, that a [Ph]arisee named Arimanius approached him and said to him, "[Where] is your master whom you followed?" And he [said] to him, "He has gone to the place from which he came." The Pharisee said to him, "[This Nazarene] deceived you (pl.) with deception and filled [your ears with lies] and closed [your hearts and turned you] from the traditions [of your fathers]." (61)

This passage relates (1) that John the disciple, in response to a question from Arimanius the Pharisee, stated that Jesus had returned to heaven, a possible reference to the Ascension. (2) The Pharisee responded by telling John that Jesus had deceived his followers with his teachings, which is reminiscent of the Talmud's statements about Jesus. Whether such an encounter between John and Arimanius actually occurred or not, such is apparently a typical view of Jesus' teachings from the standpoint of the Jewish leaders.

The Gospel of Thomas. This book describes itself in the opening statement as "the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke."(62) Grant notes that this collection of teachings thereby purports to be the words of the risen Jesus, thus accounting for the almost complete absence of statements concerning his birth, life and death.(63)

The text is usually dated from around 140-200 A.D., although it reflects thought of even earlier periods.(64) As such it could present some accurate facts concerning Jesus.

In an incident similar to Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi,(65) reported in the synoptic Gospels, The Gospel of Thomas also presents Jesus asking his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell Me whom I am like." They respond by describing him as an angel, a philosopher and as an indescribable personage.(66) In a later passage the disciples refer to Jesus as the consummation of the prophets (42:13-18).

Jesus is said to have partially answered his own question on several occasions. He describes himself as the Son of Man (47:34-48:4), which is also the name most commonly reported in the Gospels. On other occasions he speaks of himself in more lofty terms. To Salome, Jesus states "I am He who existed from the Undivided. I was given some of the things of My father."(67) Elsewhere he speaks of himself as the Son in The Gospel of Thomas.(68) In another instance Jesus speaks in more specifically gnostic terminology:

Jesus said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the All. From Me did the All come forth, and unto Me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find Me there.(69)

In these passages which concern the identity of Jesus, we are told (1) that Jesus asked his disciples for their view. (2) Their responses were varied, with the comparison of Jesus to a philosopher being especially reminiscent of the references by Lucian and Mara Bar Serapion. Jesus then identified himself as (3) the Son of Man, (4) the Son of His Father and (5) as the All of the Universe.

The Gospel of Thomas also records a parable concerning the death of Jesus (45:1-16) and relates his subsequent exaltation (45:17-19). Again, Jesus is identified as "living" or as the "Living One," a reference to his post resurrection life (see Rev. 1:17-18).(70) These references relate (6) the death of Jesus and (7) his exaltation as a result of his resurrection from the dead.

The foregoing references in The Gospel of Thomas require further comment. Initially, they often appear to be dependent on gospel testimony, especially in the question of Jesus' identity and in the parable of the vineyard. Additionally, the overly obvious gnostic tendencies, such as those found in the identification of Jesus with the "Undivided" and with the "All," including monistic tendencies, certainly cast doubt on the reliability of these reports.(71)

The Treatise On Resurrection. This book is addressed to an individual named Rheginos by an unknown author. Some have postulated that Valentinus is the author, but most scholars object to this hypothesis. The ideas are somewhat Valentinian, which could point to the presence of earlier ideas, but it is probably better to date the work itself from the late second century A.D.(72)

For the author of The Treatise of the Resurrection, Jesus became a human being but was still divine: {From the typesetter: is it "Treatise on" or "Treatise of the"?—Consistency!}

The Lord . . . existed in flesh and . . . revealed himself as Son of God . . . Now the Son of God, Rheginos, was Son of Man. He embraced them both, possessing the humanity and the divinity, so that on the one hand he might vanquish death through his being Son of God, and that on the other through the Son of Man the restoration to the Pleroma might occur; because he was originally from above, a seed of the Truth, before this structure (of the cosmos) had come into being.(73)

In this passage we find much gnostic terminology in addition to the teachings (1) that Jesus became flesh as the Son of Man in spite of (2) his true divinity as the Son of God who conquers death.

So Jesus came to this world in the flesh of a man, died and rose again:

For we have known the Son of Man, and we have believed that he rose from among the dead. This is he of whom we say, "He became the destruction of death, as he is a great one in whom they believe." Great are those who believe.(74)

In less esoteric language we are told (3) that Jesus died, (4) rose again and (5) thereby destroyed death for those who believe in him.

We are told of Jesus' resurrection in other passages as well:

The Savior swallowed up death. . . . He transformed [himself] into an imperishable Aeon and raised himself up, having swallowed the visible by the invisible, and he gave us the way of our immortality.(75)

Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth. Indeed, it is more fitting to say that the world is an illusion, rather than the resurrection which has come into being through our Lord the Savior, Jesus Christ.(76)

These two quotations even present an interesting contrast on the subject of Jesus' death and resurrection. While the first statement is mixed with gnostic terminology, the second assures believers that the resurrection was not an illusion, which reminds us of some gnostic tendencies to deny the actual, physical death of Christ.(77)

Since Jesus has been raised the author counseled Rheginos that "already you have the resurrection . . . why not consider yourself as risen and (already) brought to this?" Thus he is encouraged not to "continue as if you are to die."(78) The resurrection of Jesus thereby provides practical considerations in causing the believer to realize that he already has eternal life presently and should not live in fear of death. This teaching is similar to that of the New Testament (Col. 3:1 4; Heb. 2: 14 15) and gives added significance to Lucian's report of Christians who believed that they are immortal and thus unafraid of death.

Once again, these previous four sources are theologically oriented, freely incorporating many gnostic tendencies, in addition to being generally later than most of our other sources. While these two qualifications do not necessitate unreliable reporting of historical facts about Jesus, we are to be cautious in our use of this data.

Other Lost Works

Acts of Pontius Pilate. The contents of this purportedly lost document are reported by both Justin Martyr (ca. 150 A.D.) and Tertullian (ca. 200 A.D.). Both agree that it was an official document of Rome. Two types of archives were kept in ancient Rome. the Acta senatus were composed of minutes of the senatorial meetings. These contained no discussions of Christ or Christianity as far as is known. The Commentarii principis were composed of the correspondence sent to the emperors from various parts of the empire. Any report from Pilate to Tiberius would belong to this second group.(79)

Justin Martyr reported around 150 A.D. in his First Apology that the details of Jesus' crucifixion could be validated from Pilate's report"

And the expression, "They pierced my hands and my feet," was used in reference to the nails of the cross which were fixed in His hands and feet. And after he was crucified, they cast lots upon his vesture, and they that crucified Him parted it among them. And that these things did happen you can ascertain the "Acts" of Pontius Pilate.(80) {Capitalization or not of He/Him/His needs to be consistent throughout quote}

Later in the same work Justin lists several healing miracles and asserts, "And that He did those things, you can learn from the Acts of Pontius Pilate."(81)

Justin Martyr relates several facts, believing them to be contained in Pilate's report. The chief concern is apparently Jesus' crucifixion, with details such as (1) his hands and feet being nailed to the cross and (2) the soldiers gambling for his garments. But it is also asserted (3) that several of Jesus' miracles were also included in Pilate's report. Tertullian even reports that Tiberius acted on the report:

Tiberius accordingly, in whose days the Christian name made its entry into the world, having himself received intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ's divinity, brought the matter before the senate, with his own decision in favour of Christ. The senate, because it had not given the approval itself, rejected his proposal. Caesar held to his opinion, threatening wrath against all accusers of the Christians.(82)

Tertullian's account claims (4) that Tiberius actually brought details of Christ's life before the Roman Senate, apparently for a vote of approval. The Senate then reportedly spurned Tiberius' own vote of approval, which engendered a warning from the emperor not to attempt actions against Christians. As noted by Bruce, this incident, which Tertullian apparently accepts as accurate, is quite an improbable occurrence. It is difficult to accept such an account when the work reporting it is about 170 years later than the event, with seemingly no good intervening sources for such acceptance.(83)

It should be noted that the Acts of Pilate referred to here should not be confused with later fabrications by the same name, which may certainly have been written to take the place of these records which were believed to exist.

There may well have been an original report sent from Pilate to Tiberius, containing some details of Jesus' crucifixion. In spite of this, it is questionable if Justin Martyr and Tertullian knew what any possible report contained. Although the early Christian writers had reason to believe such a document existed, evidence such as that found in the reference to Thallus is missing here. In particular, there are no known fragments of the Acts of Pilate or any evidence that it was specifically quoted by another writer. Additionally, it is entirely possible that what Justin thought original was actually a concurrent apocryphal gospel.(84) At any rate, we cannot be positive as to this purported imperial document. Like the gnostic sources, we therefore are cautious in our use of this source.

Phlegon. The last reference to be discussed in this chapter is that of Phlegon, whom Anderson describes as "a freedmen of the Emperor Hadrian who was born about A.D. 80."(85) Phlegon's work is no longer in existence and we depend on others

for our information.
Origen records the following:

Now Phlegon, in the thirteenth or fourteenth book, I think, of his Chronicles, not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events (although falling into confusion about some things which refer to Peter, as if they referred to Jesus), but also testified that the result corresponded to His predictions. (86)

So Phlegon mentioned that Jesus made predictions about future events that had been fulfilled.

Origen adds another comment about Phlegon:

And with regard to the eclipse in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the great earthquakes which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his Chronicles. (87)

Julius Africanus agrees on the last reference to Phlegon, adding a bit more information: "Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth to the ninth hour." (88)

Origen provides one other reference, this time actually quoting Phlegon on the subject of the resurrection: "Jesus, while alive, was of no assistance to himself, but that he arose after death, and exhibited the marks of his punishment, and showed how his hands had been pierced by nails." (89)

From Phlegon we therefore learn the following items: (1) Jesus accurately predicted the future. (2) There was an eclipse at the crucifixion from the sixth to the ninth hours, (3) followed by earthquakes, (4) all during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. (4) After his resurrection, Jesus appeared and showed his wounds, especially the nail marks from his crucifixion.

Synopsis: Jesus and Ancient Christianity

When the combined evidence from ancient sources is summarized, quite an impressive amount of information is gathered concerning Jesus and ancient Christianity. It is our purpose in this section to make a brief composite picture of the historical data. We have investigated a total of seventeen sources that present valuable material with regard to the historical Jesus and early Christianity. As noted above, not all of these records are equally good documents, but even minus the questionable sources, this early evidence is still very impressive. (90) Few ancient historical figures can boast the same amount of material.

The Life and Person of Jesus. According to the sources which we have investigated above, the ministry of Jesus, the brother of James (Josephus), was geographically centered in Palestine (Tacitus, Lucian, Acts of Pilate). Jesus was known as a wise, virtuous and ethical man (Josephus, Mara Ben Serapion), who was reported to have both performed miracles (Acts of Pilate) and made prophecies which were later fulfilled (Phlegon, cf. Josephus). A result of his ministry was that he had many disciples, from both the Jews and the Gentiles (Josephus, Talmud).

Of the sources which we studied, the gnostic works, in particular, comment on the person of Jesus. They relate that on one occasion he asked his disciples who they thought he was (Gospel of Thomas). Although there were varied answers to this question, these works agree that Jesus was both God and man. While he was a flesh and blood person (Gospel of Truth, Treatise on Resurrection), as indicated by the title "Son of Man" (Gospel of Thomas), he is also said to be the Son of God (Treatise on Resurrection, Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Thomas), the Word (Gospel of Truth) and the "All" (Gospel of Thomas).

As pointed out earlier these gnostic works are somewhat questionable sources for the historical Jesus because of their late and theological character. However, some secular sources for the historical Jesus report similar beliefs. They assert that Jesus was worshiped as deity (Pliny, Lucian), and that some believed he was the Messiah (Josephus) and even call him "King" (Mara Bar Serapion). At least these beliefs on the part of certain persons are a matter of historical record.

The Teachings of Jesus. An interesting tendency among some ancient authors was to view Jesus as a philosopher with some distinctive teachings (Lucian, Mara Bar Serapion, cf. Gospel of Thomas). Lucian lists some of Jesus' teachings as the need for conversion, the importance of faith and obedience, the brotherhood of all believers, the requirements of abandoning the gods of other systems of belief and the worship of himself, which was either taught or at least the result of his teaching. It might also be inferred that the Christian belief in immortality and lack of fear of death reported by Lucian is also due to Jesus' teaching.

Pliny's report that believers took oaths not to commit unrighteousness is probably due to Jesus' warnings against sin. The Gospel of Truth adds that Jesus taught his listeners about his Father and that Jesus realized that his death was the means of life for many.

The Death of Jesus. The Jewish leaders judged that Jesus was guilty of teaching spiritual apostasy, thereby leading Israel astray (Talmud, cf. Apocryphon of John). So the Jews sent a herald proclaiming that Jesus would be stoned for his false teaching and invited anyone who wished to defend him to do so. But none came forth to support him (Talmud).

After suffering persecution (Gospel of Truth) and as a result of his teachings (Lucian), Jesus was put to death (Gospel of Thomas, Treatise on Resurrection). He died at the hands of Roman procurator Pontius Pilate (Tacitus), who crucified him (Josephus, Talmud, Lucian, Gospel of Truth, Acts of Pilate) during the reign of Emperor Tiberius (Tacitus, Phlegon).

Even some details of the crucifixion are provided. The event occurred on Passover Eve (Talmud) and included being nailed to a cross (Phlegon, Gospel of Truth, Acts of Pilate, cf. Tacitus), after which the executioners gambled for his garments (Acts of Pilate). There were signs in nature, too, as darkness covered the land for three hours due to an eclipse of the sun (Thallus, Phlegon), and great earthquakes occurred (Phlegon). One writer (Mara Bar Serapion) asserted that Jesus was executed unjustly and that the Jews were judged accordingly by God.

The Resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus' death it is recorded that his teachings broke out again in Judea (Tacitus, cf. Suetonius, Pliny). What was the cause for this new activity and spread of Jesus' teachings after his death? Could Jesus have been raised from the dead? Various answers are mentioned. Mara Bar Serapion, for example, points out that Jesus' teachings lived on in his disciples.

According to the Toledoth Jesu, the disciples were going to steal the body, so Juda the gardener reburied it and later sold the body of Jesus to the Jewish leaders, who dragged it down the streets of Jerusalem. Justin Martyr and Tertullian object, asserting that the Jews sent trained men around the Mediterranean region in order to say that the disciples stole the body. The earliest of the sources, Matt. 28:11-15, claims that after Jesus was raised from the dead, the Jewish leaders bribed the guards in order to have them say that the disciples stole the body, even though they did not.

But we are also told that Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to his followers afterwards. Josephus seems to record the disciples' belief in the resurrection of Jesus, noting that these witnesses claimed to have seen Jesus alive three days after his crucifixion. Phlegon said that Jesus appeared and showed the marks of the nail prints in his hands, and perhaps other wounds, as well.

The resurrection of Jesus is defended especially by The Treatise on Resurrection, but also proclaimed by The Gospel of Truth and The Gospel of Thomas. Afterward, Jesus was exalted (Apocryphon of John, Gospel of Thomas).

Christian Teachings and Worship. Christians were named after their founder, Christ (Tacitus), whose teachings they followed (Lucian). Believers were of all classes, ages, localities and of both sexes, forming a cross section of society (Pliny). For Christians, Jesus' death procured salvation (Gospel of Truth) for those who exercised faith in his teachings (Lucian). As a result, Christians believed in their own immortality and scorned death (Lucian), realizing that eternal life was a present possession (Treatise on Resurrection).

Additionally, Lucian relates several other Christian teachings. Believers had sacred writings which were frequently read. They practiced their faith by denying material goods and by holding common property. They went to any extent to help with matters pertaining to their community. However, Lucian does complain that Christians were gullible enough to be taken advantage of by unscrupulous persons.

Pliny relates that believers met in a pre dawn service on a certain day (probably Sunday). There they sang verses of a hymn, worshiped Christ as deity and made oaths against committing sin. Then they would disband, only to reassemble in order to share food together, which is very probably a reference to the love feast and Lord's supper. Pliny also makes reference to the existence of positions in the early church when he mentions two female deaconesses.

The Spread of Christianity and Persecution. After the death of Jesus and the reported resurrection appearances, the disciples did not abandon the teachings which they had learned from him (Josephus). By the middle of the first century, Christian doctrine, and the crucifixion of Jesus in particular, had spread around the Mediterranean. In fact, skeptics were already offering rationalistic explanations for supernatural claims only some twenty years after Jesus' death (Thallus).

More specifically, Christian teachings had reached Rome by 49 A.D., less than twenty years after the death of Jesus, when Claudius expelled Jews from the city because of what was thought to be the influence of Jesus' teachings (Suetonius). By the time of Nero's reign (54-68 A.D.), Christians were still living in Rome (Tacitus, Suetonius). We are also told that Christians were present during the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (Tacitus).

The spread of Christianity unfortunately involved persecution fairly early in its history. Sometimes it was tempered by a certain amount of fairness, but it was real and serious for many early believers, nonetheless. The Talmud relates an occasion when five of Jesus' disciples were judged to be worthy of death. Tacitus provides much greater detail. After the great fire at Rome, Nero blamed the occurrence on Christians, who are described as a group of people who were hated by the Roman populace. As a result, many believers were arrested, convicted, mocked and finally tortured to death. Being

nailed to crosses and being burnt to death are two methods which are specifically mentioned. Such treatment evoked compassion from the people, and Tacitus blamed these events on the eccentricities of Nero.

Christians were sometimes reported as lawbreakers (Pliny, cf. Trajan, Hadrian) for almost three centuries after the death of Jesus, after which Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Believers were blamed with meeting secretly, burning their children and drinking blood.

For instance, Pliny's letter relates his methodology with Bithynian Christians. They were identified, interrogated, sometimes tortured and then executed. If they denied that they were believers, as demonstrated by their worshiping Caesar and the gods, they were freed. Pliny noted that true believers would never be guilty of such a denial of Christ.

Trajan's response encouraged moderation. Repentance and worship of the gods were sufficient for freeing these people. But they should not be sought out. Hadrian offered similar advice prohibiting the harassment of Christians and even ordered that their enemies be dealt with if they acted improperly against believers. However, if Christians were guilty, they would have to be punished.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that ancient extra biblical sources do present a surprisingly large amount of detail concerning both the life of Jesus and the nature of early Christianity. While many of these facts are quite well known, we must remember that they have been documented here apart from the usage of the New Testament. When viewed in that light, we should realize that it is quite extraordinary that we could provide a broad outline of most of the major facts of Jesus' life from "secular" history alone. Such is surely significant.

Using only the information gleaned from these ancient extra biblical sources, what can we conclude concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus? Can these events be historically established on these sources alone? Of the seventeen documents examined in this chapter, eleven different works speak of the death of Jesus in varying amounts of detail, with five of these specifying crucifixion as the mode. When these sources are examined by normal historical procedures used with other ancient documents, the result is conclusive.⁽⁹¹⁾ It is this author's view that the death of Jesus by crucifixion can be asserted as a historical fact from this data. This conclusion is strengthened by the variety of details which are related by good sources. As mentioned often, a few of the documents may be contested, but the entire bulk of evidence points quite probably to the historicity of Jesus' death due to the rigors of crucifixion.

The ancient references to the resurrection are fewer and somewhat more questionable. Of the seventeen sources, seven either imply or report this occurrence, with four of these works being questioned in our study. Before answering the issue concerning Jesus' resurrection, we will initially address the cognate point of whether the empty tomb can be established as historical by this extra biblical evidence alone. There are some strong considerations in its favor.

First, the Jewish sources which we have examined admit the empty tomb, thereby providing evidence from hostile documents. Josephus notes the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection, while the Talmud specifically acknowledges the empty tomb. Justin Martyr and Tertullian confirm Matt. 28:11-15 by asserting that Jewish leaders were still admitting the empty tomb over a century later. While these Jewish sources (with the exception of Josephus) teach that the body was stolen or moved, they still admit the empty tomb.

Second, there are apparently no ancient sources which assert that the tomb still contained Jesus' body. While such an argument from silence does not prove anything, it is made stronger by the first consideration from the hostile sources and further complements it.

Third, our study has shown that Jesus taught in Palestine and was crucified and buried in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate. These sources assert that Christianity had its beginnings in the same location. But could Christianity have survived in this location, based on its central claim that Jesus was raised from the dead, if the tomb had not been empty?

It must be remembered that the resurrection of the body was the predominant view of first century Jews. To declare a bodily resurrection if the body was still in a nearby tomb points out the dilemma here. Of all places, evidence was readily available in Jerusalem to disprove this central tenet of Christian belief. The Jewish leaders had both a motive and the means to get such evidence if it were available. As expressed by historian of antiquity, Paul Maier, speaking of the birth of Christianity:

But this is the very last place it could have started if Jesus' tomb had remained occupied, since anyone producing a dead Jesus would have driven a wooden stake through the heart of an incipient Christianity inflamed by his supposed resurrection.⁽⁹²⁾

Based on the evidence admitted by hostile documents, the absence of contrary data and the important information concerning the location of the message, we conclude that there is some probability for the empty tomb based on ancient extra biblical sources alone. Maier confirms this:

Accordingly, if all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. (93)

Dealing with different factual data, Michael Grant agrees from a historical viewpoint:

But if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty. (94)

But what about the teaching that the disciples or someone else stole the dead body of Jesus? Does this account for the empty tomb and end the question of Jesus' resurrection?

Contemporary critical scholars, whether skeptical or not, are virtually unanimous in rejecting such hypotheses. (95) If the disciples stole the body, they would not have been willing to die, in all probability, for a known lie or fraud. (96) Liars do not make good martyrs. Additionally, the changed lives of the earliest disciples and their belief that Jesus was raised, both of which are admitted by critics, are unexplained if they stole the body. This charge fails to address the two unbelieving skeptics who saw the risen Jesus, Paul and James the brother of Jesus, who would hardly have been convinced by such fraud. These and several other considerations such as the quality of ethical teachings of the disciples account for the dismissal of this view even by critical scholars. As far as the author knows, it has not been held by a reputable scholar for over 200 years. (97)

Equally faulty is the hypothesis that the body of Jesus was taken or moved by someone other than the disciples. The major problem, among others, is that it does not account for the strongest, critically ascertained fact in favor of the resurrection — the disciples' belief that the risen Jesus had literally appeared to them. Since one must search elsewhere to account for this major fact, this view cannot disprove the resurrection. Not only is this the case with the disciples alone, but even more with Paul and James, who pose additional refutations.

Additionally, such views fail to provide a plausible person(s) to perform such an act, viable motives, a place for Jesus' final burial, or for the fact that the act was never admitted, discovered or otherwise reported. But again, the appearances of Jesus are not even dealt with by these theses, and this constitutes the primary refutation.

Also, it should be remembered that the *Toledoth Jesu*, which purports the view that Jesus' body was dragged down Jerusalem's streets, is a much later source, and it is disdained as nonhistorical even by most Jewish scholars. Its thesis fails because such an act would have killed Christianity centuries ago, when such an act obviously did not occur. Neither does it explain Jesus' appearances. It is no wonder that these fraud hypotheses have also had no reputable supporters in the last two centuries. (98)

However, we still cannot conclude that ancient extra biblical sources, by themselves, historically demonstrate the resurrection, as is true with Jesus' death by crucifixion. The evidence indicates that alternative theories involving a stolen or moved body are invalid, and that the tomb was empty, but the cause of this event cannot be proven at this point alone. Still, the testimony of Josephus and Phlegon, in particular, are very helpful, and supplement the excellent case in Chapter 7 from the New Testament creeds and known facts.

We conclude that ancient extra biblical sources both provide a broad outline of the life of Jesus and indicate that he died due to the effects of crucifixion. Afterwards he was buried and his tomb was later found empty, but the body had not be stolen or moved. While we have this mystery and some factual evidence in favor of Jesus' resurrection, additional data from other sources are needed in order to reach a final position.