

Handout Chapter 10: THE OLDEST SECULAR ACCOUNTS & HISTORICAL EVIDENCE ON THE EXISTANCE OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

“No serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus.” Otto Betz

1. **Cornelius Tacitus:** (AD55-120) Roman historian. Most acclaimed works are the Annals and the Histories. The Annals cover the period from Augustus Caesar’s death in AD14 to the death of the Emperor Nero in AD68, while the Histories begin after Nero’s death and proceed to the reign of Domitian in AD96. In the Annals, Tacitus alludes to the death of Christ and to the existence of Christians at Rome. See Annals XV,44: *But not all the relief that could come from man, not all the bounties that the prince could bestow nor all the atonements which could be presented to the gods, availed to relieve Nero from the infamy of being believed to have ordered the conflagration, the fire of Rome. Hence to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with 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.”* (The misspelling of Christ as “Christus” was a common error made by pagan writers).

It is interesting that Pilate is not mentioned in any other pagan document that has survived. It is an irony of history that the only surviving reference to him in a pagan document mentions him because he passed sentence of death on Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (Messiah).

2. **Suetonius:** Roman historian and court official during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian. Suetonius wrote in his Life of Claudius: *“As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”* (Life of Claudius 25.4). Chrestus is a misspelling of Christus; the spelling probably assumes that the spelling of Jesus’ title “Christos” was the same as the ChiRho symbol which was also a literary device which indicated a quote “worthy of note” = the ‘chrestus’ symbol. Claudias’ expulsion of the Christians from Rome is mentioned in Acts 18:2. This event took place in 49AD

In his work Lives of the Caesars, Suetonius also wrote: *“Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.”* Assuming Jesus was crucified in the early thirties, Suetonius places Christians in the Roman capital less than 20 years later and he reports that they were suffering for their faith and dying for their conviction that Jesus had really lived, died and that He had risen from the dead!

3. **Pliny the Younger:** Roman governor in Bithynia AD112 wrote to Emperor Trajan to seek advice as to how to treat the Christians. He recounts that he had been killing Christian men, women, and children. He is concerned that so many have chosen death over simply bowing down to a statue of the emperor or being made to *“curse Christ, which a genuine Christian cannot be induced to do.”* (Epistles X, 96)

4. **Tallus,** a secular writer writing circa AD52 wrote a history of the Eastern Mediterranean from the Trojan War to his own time. The document no longer exists but it was quoted by other writers like the Christian, Julius Africanus, who wrote around AD221. He quotes Tallus’ comments about the darkness that enveloped the land during the late afternoon hours when Jesus died on the cross. Julius wrote: *Tallus, 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.”* Julius Africanus, Chronography, 18.1 The importance of Tallus’ comments is that the reference shows that the Gospel account of the darkness that fell across the

earth during Christ's crucifixion was well known and required a naturalistic explanation from non-Christians.

5. **Phlegon:** Julius Africanus also quoted another secular scholar whose works are now lost. Phlegon wrote a history called Chronicles. Phlegon also comments on the darkness at the time of Christ's crucifixion: "*During the time of Tiberius Caesar an eclipse of the sun occurred during the full moon.*" Julius Africanus, Chronography, 18.1
(The 3rd century Christian apologist Origen also references Phlegon's record of this event in his work Celsus, 2.14,33,59 as does the 6th century writer Philopon (De.opif.mund. II, 21.

6. **Mara Bar-Serapion:** Syrian stoic philosopher who wrote a letter from prison to his son circa 70AD. He compares Jesus to the philosophers Socrates and Pythagoras.

7. **Josephus ben Mattathias:** 37-100AD, Jewish priest, general and historian. He wrote two great works of Jewish history: The Jewish War, written in the early 70's and Jewish Antiquities, which was finished about AD94. In his work, Jewish Antiquities, there is a passage that has created heated debate among scholars for many decades: "*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 over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day.*" Antiquities, XVIII, 33

8. **Lucian of Samosate:** Greek satirist later half of 2nd century spoke scornfully of Christ and the Christians but never argued that Jesus never existed. "*The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account...*" The Death of Peregrine, 11-13

9. **The Babylonian Talmud:** "*It has been taught: On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu. And an announcer went out, in front of him, for 40 days (saying): 'He is going to be stoned, because he practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his favor, let him come and plead in his behalf.' But, not having found anything in his favor, they hanged him on the eve of Passover.*" Sanhedrin 43a; df.t.Sanh. 10:11; y. Sanh 7:12; Tg. Esther 7:9 (Another version of this text reads: 'Yeshu the Nazaarene.' Yeshu is Hebrew (or Aramaic) for Jesus. Hanged is another way of referring to a crucifixion; see Luke 23:39 and Galatians 3:13

10. **Flavius Josephus:** Jewish historian and Roman citizen. Born c. 37AD, died c. 96AD. He wrote four books but the best know are The Jewish War, the only eyewitness account of the Jewish revolt against Rome that survives, and Antiquities of the Jews, a history of the people of Israel/Judah. In his work Antiquities of the Jews, 18.3.3 (63), Josephus gives this information about Jesus of Nazareth: "*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 f such men as received the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ (Messiah); and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him t the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.*"