

TACITUS – DID HE USE ARCHIVES OR WAS HIS WORK ALTERED?

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus who died in 117 AD condemned Christianity. In 115 AD Tacitus wrote his Annals.

Tacitus has two years missing from his history. The time of the ministry of Jesus is missing as if the Christians took something out. See Nailed by David Fitzgerald. It is possible that he wrote something very incriminating about Christianity - perhaps that some people were reporting visions of a being called Jesus who was never heard of before. Or that Jesus was a real man and murdered somebody. Some think Christ could have been invented and Tacitus said that.

Tacitus in the Annals declared that Christ – he doesn't call him Jesus - had been made to face the supreme penalty (?) under Pontius Pilate, lived in Judaea and created a new system of pernicious superstition.

ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Chrestianos appellabat. auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat; repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursus erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocitas aut pudenda confluent celebranturque. igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt.

Translation: 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 Judæa, 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.

Christians say that since Tacitus was senator that he must have had access to the best records and been using them to back up what he said about Christ. They were not very good records when he did not use more of them and to get Christians despised by accusing Christ of being a rascal. This suggests that the records were either lost or never existed. What would records about Christ be doing in Rome? They were probably destroyed in Palestine if they existed at all. But we have no reason to believe that Tacitus depended on gossip for his data on Christ. We have no reason at all to think he had records.

The Christian hope that the Roman historians like Tacitus had studied the records which the Romans scrupulously kept is a false one. There must have been no Jesus in the records when the Church kept none. And when Christ was the founder of a sect that the Romans hated they would have had records for he was important but only if he had existed.

Christians argue that Tacitus complained of conflicts in his sources for other things and that he condemned absurd statements in them and when he reported a rumour he just said things like, "It is said". So they think then he would have written "it is said" if he had been recording a rumour about Christ's death. But why would he? It is said can mean a rumour yes but it can also mean something the historical sources say. With history it is just a matter of what is said in records and by people who remember. All history books have a pile of rumour in them too. That's life. Tacitus could not possibly have said it is said before reporting everything he thought was just a story that could be false.

The Christian story was more than a rumour by that stage and one can understand a historian taking it for granted that a Christ was crucified by Pilate if some books say so no matter how silly the books are for he would take that as a kernel of truth even if he never saw the books but only got good testimony about them.

It is a fact that Tacitus did make records of events that never happened. He only occasionally referred to something as hearsay when he knew for sure that it was. Like all historians Tacitus would have intended to update his work when new information came to light. If he erred on Christ perhaps he never got the chance. Tacitus made up a story to smear Livia and Tiberius (Josh McDowell's Evidence for Jesus: Is it reliable?). And if Tacitus had been wrong about Christ it did not matter for he was only writing about Nero's treatment of the Christians and their origin in Christ. That was the main point and the others including the existence and (supposedly) the crucifixion of Jesus were merely incidental. That was why he might never have checked them out. It was too hard in those days to check out everything so it is most probable that Tacitus was just reported what he heard or thought he heard about Christ and was not consulting any records. He hated Christians and would have written a bit more had he been using records. The standards of the time made allowances for a certain amount of assumption being incorporated into historical discussions and records. They had to. Tacitus might tell us when he thought something was a rumour but that was only when he knew for sure and it was obviously a false report. He would have taken rumours as true when they were good ones. Since he did make up things to incriminate people he might have

been willing to say that Christ was tortured/crucified which was as good as incriminating Christ because the Romans would have thought, "Gee the wretch must have done something awful to deserve that." Why would Tacitus investigate the existence of Christ when it was not an issue in his day? No historian investigates everything. Nobody cared but the Christians if Jesus or Christ lived.

Tacitus did not like Christians and would have had no interest in the details about their Christ so he did not go to the records and why would he when he only wrote two or three things about him? You don't visit the library in the next town looking for the whole life story of John F Kennedy when you just want to write when he was shot and where. Tacitus wrote that Christians were dying for being Christians which Christians use as proof that there was a Jesus but there is no evidence at all that they freely died for Jesus (Josh McDowell's Evidence for Jesus: Is it reliable?). Moreover, some say that Tacitus' interest in a man who claimed to be the resurrected Emperor Nero and who had great success in Parthia would have led Tacitus to investigate Jesus (See A Reply to J.P. Holding's "Shattering" of My Views on Jesus, GA Wells). But this is speculation. Christians are often interested in religion but not in anybody else's religion so Tacitus being interested in the new Nero does not imply he would have investigated Jesus too.

Christians are keen on what he wrote about Christ but not so eager to accept his account of a miracle worked by the divine Emperor Vespasian (His. Lib. IV. C.81, Opp. Ed. Paris, 1819, III, p.490).

Tacitus called Pilate the procurator and some believe that this title was too uncommon before the middle of the first century to have been used by a man depending on written records. Wells argued that it shows that Tacitus got his data about Christ from Christian hearsay. He Walked Among Us observed that he called another man procurator and that he even called the Emperor something that was not his proper title (page 51). It says he was only using the layman's vocabulary for it was for a lay readership. If so then why did he write so little about Christ? The public would have wanted to know what this Christianity was about and who started it. And to say that using the wrong title for Pilate would mean that it came from hearsay and to say that doing this two or three more times means he wasn't is simply ludicrous.

If Tacitus were using records he would have said Jesus or Jesus Christ instead of just Christ. Some say if he had said Jesus Christ then he would have had to explain how Jesus is related to Christ because the followers of Jesus were called Christians! This is a ridiculous argument.

If Tacitus had been using Christian testimony he would have been most likely to have called him Jesus or Jesus Christ. The records would have to be specific so they would have been more likely to call him not Jesus or Christ but Jesus called Christ.

Some say that Tacitus would have been likely to use Christ alone for it was common knowledge that a Christ was expected among the Jews and this would incite dislike of Christians. Rubbish. He would have used Jesus Christ in case anybody didn't know who Christ was if that was his motive.

Tacitus not going to the records show there were no records extant in his day.

Wells stated that Tacitus just got his info from the Christians and was biased towards accepting it for it gave Christianity a recent origin and the Romans hated new religions. He Walked Among Us rejects this on the basis that he reported about Christ as a historical fact and not as something he heard (page 50). But history is not just about studying written records but also about oral tradition. The unprofessional historian depends too much on oral tradition but the professional does not turn his back on it and uses it with caution when it is better than nothing. The professional will use it to fill gaps for a lot of history comes from the need to avoid saying nothing. To say that Tacitus would have said if it was hearsay is simply a lie. Then He Walked Among Us says that Justin and others told their readers to research official documents about Jesus. But what has that got to do with Tacitus for we don't know if he was meant? Who would recommend him when he only wrote a line or two? And besides Justin recommended an Acts of Pilate that sounds like a forgery. Justin said that the timetable of the Quirinius census which is reported in Luke still existed in his day (Josh McDowell's Evidence for Jesus: Is it reliable?). Justin even went as far as to tell his readers to consult it. This calls his Acts of Pilate references into question. Justin was not adverse to inventing back-up when he was stuck. He must have lied too that some of his works were written for the Emperor. We know that Pilate's Acts or records would not have been sent to Rome for Jesus lived in a land that was under Rome but was largely an independent jurisdiction (ibid). It may be that Justin just took it for granted that the Acts existed and put two and two together and came up with twenty. I find the title of the alleged document to be suspect. Why call it the Acts of Pilate? A legal document would be unlikely to get an appellation like that. Justin could not recommend the gospels instead of the Acts of Pilate because the gospels were still being censored by the Church or perhaps still even being edited at the time.

Some believe that Tacitus could not have used records about Jesus or Christ because when Rome turned against Pilate it wanted all trace of Pilate forgotten (Wells Without Water). The references to Pilate in Josephus were probably tolerated for Josephus was very unflattering to him and Josephus' writing was commissioned by Rome and it would not have tolerated

any other for Josephus would have been employed to do away with the need for any other memorial. That would have made Pilate the perfect person for the Jesus mongers to blame for the fictitious crucifixion.

Rome of course might not have destroyed all the records of Pilate in Jerusalem for it did not care what the Jews thought. But the likes of Tacitus and the people in Rome would not have been allowed to mention him and there would have been no records in Rome. This would mean both that there were no records and no Christian gospels were tolerated so any gospels would have been kept secret. And above all that somebody interfered with the text about Jesus in Tacitus because it speaks of Pilate. When they went to the bother of putting in an unnecessary reference to Pilate they probably invented the whole thing. A forger would only put in a reference to Christ and perhaps his death if there were a need to fabricate evidence that Jesus lived because he didn't live at all.

The mention of Christ is of no worth even if we cannot rule out it having come from records – which we can. It would have to come from the ancient records to be trusted. Historians have sometimes mistaken fictitious characters for real ones. Records were sometimes muddled up and altered in the copying and sometimes entries were made too late. Sometimes it was impossible to tell if a record had the right information in it.

Some believe the data Tacitus gives about Christ was an interpolation because it calls him Christ and seems to say he was executed which is religious dogma. In response to this it is said that stating Jesus' title and that he existed and was put to death is not religious dogma. Christ was a religious title and to say he was executed when the evidence of Paul indicates that this was revealed through visions means it is a religious dogma. To say it is not is as silly as saying that the existence of Adam and Eve is not a religious dogma. The idea that the Christ material is a statement of dogma cannot be disproved. So its authenticity cannot be proved either. Those who say the Christ material is dogma not history will have to accept that if it is not an interpolation then Tacitus did not access any records for he did not know Christ was a religious title and that the death of Christ was a dogma.

The passage is nearly exactly the same as one in the work of a man called Sulpicius Severus who died in 403 AD. This man was known for his credulity and tall stories. He did not copy from Tacitus because nobody seemed to know of the Tacitus passage in those days. There is no evidence that they knew. It appears then that the copyists copied the passage from Severus's book into Tacitus. There is no evidence for the authenticity of the Tacitus text on Jesus (The Jesus of History, A Reply to Josh McDowell, Gordon Stein). If it is forged then it is proof that the Christians were manufacturing fabricated evidence for the existence of Christ.

The argument that Tacitus used records from Jesus' day is worthless speculation and not only that it makes no sense. We are not sure that Tacitus mentioned Christ at all. If he did was the Christ Jesus? And Tacitus does not clearly say he means the Christ suffered execution under Pilate. His words could fit a man who was tortured and who maybe died from it in time. He does not mention crucifixion. Tacitus is no help when you want secular references to the historical Jesus. All we find is that there was a mystery and the kind of mystery you would expect if Jesus never really lived.