

TACITUS AND NERO and Jesus

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

It was because Tacitus was discussing how Nero hated Christians and used them as scapegoats, that he seemed to mention both Christ and his death under Pilate. We will see that this calls the reliability of the passage and the legitimacy of saying he said Jesus existed into serious question.

Tacitus stated that the Emperor Nero persecuted Christians. There is not a scrap of evidence that Nero did and there should have been tons. Origen the great apologist for Christianity stated in his Contra Celsum (Book 3, Chapter 8) that it was not hard to number the Christian martyrs (The Martyrdoms of Peter and Paul; How Did the Apostles Die?). There is no evidence that Nero started the fire in Rome and blamed the Christians. There were plenty of more suitable sects to choose from as scapegoats (see The Jesus of History, A Reply to Josh McDowell, Gordon Stein).

There is no evidence that Nero persecuted Christians and there were only a few Christians in Rome at that time – indicating that there was no point in a persecution. This makes the reliability of the passage doubtful. Perhaps it is an interpolation or a lie. I would be happy enough if the passage was unreliable or doubtful for then you can't use it to prove Jesus. Whether unreliable or an interpolation it still destroys the evidence for the existence of Jesus.

Skeptic Gordon Stein's belief that since Christian was not a common term in the first century and that Nero did not care what religions came to Rome is unfairly dismissed as irrelevant by Christians just because it destroys their case. When Tacitus is okay everywhere else except here an interpolation is the most probable implication. It's the simplest explanation. The pro-authenticity argument is that the record is anti-Christian but it did not do the Christians any harm for it only repeated the gossip that was rife about them anyway. And it would have been too obvious the passage was forged if it was more positive. The way the passage fits the story proves nothing for you can put a new sentence or two in any text so that no awkwardness or anything gives you away.

One thing is certainly true, if Nero did attack Christianity it was for political reasons and not religious ones. The later Christian boast that he hated the Christians he killed because he wanted to destroy their faith just on religious grounds makes no sense for the Empire knew it had to tolerate many widely differing and eccentric cults and there is no evidence that Nero was that bigoted. The early Church liked to turn murdered Christians into martyrs for propaganda purposes. But there is as much difference as day and night as being murdered for your religion and being a martyr.

Nothing like persecution happened to the Christians until the time of Diocletian (The Martyrdoms of Peter and Paul). And Rome tolerated tolerant religions so if Christianity was persecuted it was because it stressed that other religions were all of the Devil and so the martyrs deserve to be regarded as fruitcakes rather than as heroes of God.

We conclude that Tacitus is no real help if you want good enough evidence that Jesus lived.