

Tacitus The Annals 15:44

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Introduction

There is a debate in the scholarly community regarding the Roman historian Tacitus and his alleged reference to Jesus in his work called *Annals*. Some scholars argue that the alleged Tacitus reference to Christ was the result of a Christian “interpolation” several centuries later.¹ In other words, some think this reference to Jesus was added later by zealous Christians to help authenticate the historicity of their faith. Other skeptics argue that the reference in *Annals* 15:44 is legitimate in terms of textual criticism, however, it is not referring to Jesus of Nazareth. These two major objections along with several others will be examined. This paper will argue that the reference from Tacitus in question is authentic and it offers historical evidence outside of the New Testament for the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth under Pontius Pilate.

To set the historical context, a brief biography of Tacitus will be given followed by the actual quote from *The Annals*, and then the reasons skeptics use to argue it is fraudulent. Next those reasons will be refuted followed by some closing thoughts. Since it is next to impossible for historians to eliminate all their biases from the study of the past, a plethora of scholars with differing views on this subject will be considered. For after all, “Horizons are of great interest to historians since they are responsible more than anything else for the embarrassing diversity among the conflicting portraits of the past.”² With this caveat in mind, it is wise to gather as much bedrock data (agreement from all sides) on Tacitus and proceed from this accepted information to a conclusion.

¹ Richard Carrier, “The Prospects of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44 264,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no.3 (2014): 262. doi:10.1163/15700720-12341171 (accessed October 23, 2021).

² Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 39.

Tacitus Biography

Tacitus Cornelius was born in A.D.56 and died approximately A.D. 120.³ He was a Roman orator and a historian. Some scholars argue that Tacitus was the ‘greatest historian’ of ancient Rome and was known for his “integrity and essential goodness.”⁴ Tacitus served in a variety of administrative positions and is best known for his correspondence with Pliny the Younger.⁵ Tacitus is known for several works documenting the Ancient Roman world. Although “Roman literary criticism always emphasized the close relation between oratory and history,”⁶ there is general agreement on the character and thoroughness which Tacitus approached recording events. The question to now consider is his famous quote in *The Annals* 15:44 that allegedly references Jesus being put to death under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius.

The Annals 15:44

Before all the arguments can be heard and considered, it is necessary to set the context of the passage and quote it verbatim. In the immediate context of Book 15 verse 44, Tacitus was discussing the fire that ravaged Rome in 64 A.D. He mentioned that Nero blamed the Christians as a scapegoat and gave a passing reference to what appears to be Jesus. The passage says,

But all the human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiation of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations,

³ Everett Ferguson, ed. Michael P. McHugh, Frederick W. Norris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 881.

⁴ Moses Hadas, “Introduction” to *The Complete Works of Tacitus* (New York: Random House, 1942), pp. IX, XIII-XIV.

⁵ Everett Ferguson ed. Michael P. McHugh, Frederick W. Norris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 881.

⁶ B. Walker, *The Annals of Tacitus*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1968), 145.

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 Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.⁷

The earliest manuscript we have of this is dated to the eleventh century.⁸ However, “Sulpicius Severus’s *Chronicle* 2:29 attests to much of it in the early fifth century.”⁹ So, if there was an interpolation, it would have had to take place sometime before the fifth century.

Objections by Skeptics

Anachronism

Concerning *The Annals* 15:44, there are numerous objections to its authenticity. For example, Michael Martin in *The Case Against Christianity* will concede the reference is to Jesus, but he argues it was from unreliable sources in that, “Tacitus did not obtain his information from earlier Roman records. He refers to Pilate by the wrong title, for Pilate was a prefect, not a procurator; the term ‘procurator’ was current in his lifetime, not in Pilate’s.”¹⁰ Martin is arguing that if Tacitus obtained his information from official Roman records, he would have used the term “prefect” in referring to Pontius Pilate. According to Martin, this anachronism is evidence Tacitus is unreliable.

⁷ Cornelius Tacitus, *The Complete Works: The Annals, the History, the Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola, Germany and Its Tribes, A Dialogue on Oratory*. Translated by Alfred John Church. and William Jackson Brodribb, Edited by Moses Hadas, (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), 380.

⁸ Paul Rhodes Eddy & Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 180.

⁹ Robert E. Van Voorst. *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 45

¹⁰ Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 51.

Interpolation

Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd list at least several additional objections among which is the idea that this quote is believed to be a Christian interpolation.¹¹ Richard Carrier argues for the interpolation theory. By interpolation Carrier is arguing Christians in later centuries altered the text. He notes this *possibility* was “reasonably likely.”¹² Carrier bases his assumptions on the rate of interpolations in other literature (Christian and non) during the time of Tacitus. In regards to interpolations, Carrier came to the conclusion that the rate is, “one out of every ten references to Jesus in non-Christian sources.”¹³ After classifying the verses and words in doubt in the New Testament as “interpolations,” Carrier notes,

The rate could appear much higher in non-Christian sources due to the fact that the New Testament already extensively favors what Christians want to have been said, and thus there was less need of inventing witnesses to Jesus there, whereas the temptation to or interest in finding witnesses in non-Christian authors was more compelling and thus would have been more frequent.¹⁴

Basically, Carrier is arguing given the “rate” of interpolation, one “could” assume the passage is inauthentic.

Charge of Arson Never Mentioned

However, Carrier does acknowledge that Tacitus mentions Nero did persecute Christians, but he notes there is no mention of the charge of arson “legitimate or contrived.”¹⁵ The skeptic would argue if Christians were accused of starting the fire in Rome, one would

¹¹ Paul Rhodes Eddy & Gregory A. Boyd *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*, 180.

¹² Richard Carrier “The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, Annals 15.44,” 265.

¹³ Ibid., 265.

¹⁴ Ibid., 266.

¹⁵ Ibid., 269.

think it would be mentioned in their subsequent writings. Carrier argues that Suetonius mentions Nero persecuting the Christians but never brings up the issue of arson being a charge leveled against them.

The Spelling of Christus

After mentioning Michael Martin's "procurator" objection noted above, Eddy and Boyd note another objection, "Tacitus refers to the founder of the Christian movement as 'Christus'"¹⁶ The "Christus" argument tries to posit that Tacitus would never have used that word which was not the *legal* name of Jesus. Christus in Latin means the anointed one and Tacitus was a pagan. So, the argument in essence would be why would a Roman pagan use a religious term such as Christus" meaning "the anointed one?"

Objections Answered

Anachronism Refutation

Michael Martin's allegation that Tacitus had inaccurate sources does *not* hold water. Robert E. Van Voorst has extensively studied Tacitus' *Annals* and concluded that "attention to accuracy in detail is characteristic of his work as a whole."¹⁷ Martin's insistence on the anachronism of "procurator" instead of "prefect" fails to undermine what Tacitus is reporting about Jesus. For example, Craig Evans notes, "Apparently Tacitus has made use of the title (i.e., procurator) that was more common in the time of his writing, rather than the earlier and historically correct title (i.e., praefectus). This 'error' should not be taken as evidence that

¹⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷ Robert E. Van Voorst. *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, 45.

Tacitus' information is faulty. A similar looseness in terminology is seen in other authors.”¹⁸

This “looseness” by other ancient authors has been documented by Murray J. Harris. For example, Harris notes,

Now it may be that Tacitus is anachronizing either consciously or unconsciously and using in reference to Pilate (as he has done for Gessius Florus, *Hist.* 5.10) the title for an equestrian governor (viz. procurator = ἐπιτροπος) common in his own day. But since both Philo (Leg. 38) and Josephus refers to the governor of Judaea as either ἐπιτροπος or ἐπαρχος (= praefectus) it seems reasonable to suppose that there was a certain fluidity of terminology regarding the titles of the governor of Judaea, at least in popular usage, during the period A.D. 6-66, but that from A.D. 6-41 the titles praefectus or pro legato predominated, while after the reconstitution of the province, from A.D. 44-66, the term procurator (= epitropos) became the common designation.¹⁹

Skeptics fail to consider the historical “looseness” and “fluidity” of the term “prefect” and “procurator” not only in Tacitus' writings, but other ancient authors.

Tacitus did not use official documents objection refuted

Furthermore, Michael Martin is incorrect in that Tacitus did have access to some official Roman documents. Tacitus had connections in the Roman world and has referred to official Roman records several times. For example, Eddy and Rhodes note, “What we do know is Tacitus had access to the *Acta-Senatus*- the Senate's archives for its own activities- for he cites these archives twice in his work (*Annals* 5.4: 15.74), and his further use of them is implied by his detailed reports of Senate happenings.”²⁰ So, Michael Martin's allegation of Tacitus not obtaining at least *some* of his information from Romans sources is false. As Van Voorst notes,

¹⁸ Craig Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the Study of Current Research*, (Boston: Brill, 1998), 465-466.

¹⁹ Murray J. Harris, “References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors,” in *The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 349-350.

²⁰ Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*, 184.

“Tacitus certainly did not draw directly or indirectly on writings that came to form the New Testament. No literary or oral dependence can be demonstrated between his description and the Gospel accounts.”²¹ There is no evidence Tacitus listened to what he would perceive as Christian hearsay.

Interpolation objection refuted

As mentioned earlier, Richard Carrier believes the *Annals* passage was referring to another person named Chrestus as he notes, “I think it’s more likely that Tacitus had already explained who the Chrestians were in his account of the Chrestus riots (those also recorded by Suetonius), which would have appeared in his section of the *Annals* for the early years of the reign of Claudius, now lost.”²² Unfortunately for Carrier, he relies more on conjecture than he does evidence. This is not a Christian interpolation as there are several thoughts that Carrier fails to consider that will now be brought to bear on the situation.

First, why would Christians who were taught by their founder to be honest, alter a text and lie? Secondly, the passage in *Annals* at face value does not indicate it was doctored. For example, Eddy and Boyd note,

Moreover, there is nothing about the passage that suggests a Christian inserted it. To the contrary, it is rather difficult to imagine a Christian describing Christianity as a ‘deadly superstition’ that fosters ‘shameful’ acts. What is more, one would not expect a Christian interpolator to leave the account of Christian origins with Jesus’ execution. Rather one would expect a Christian interpolator to at least allude to Jesus’s resurrection, such as we find with the clear interpolation of Josephus’ account of Jesus.²³

²¹ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, 46

²² Richard Carrier, “The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44,” 273.

²³ Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*, 180-181.

In other words, *if* Christians were to alter the Tacitus account, they would not describe their beliefs with such pejorative language and leave their founder's resurrection out of the picture. Carrier's argumentation is the epitome of the old Latin saying, "potest ergo est" which is "it is possible; therefore, it is."²⁴ Even critical scholar Bart Ehrman described "interpolation theories" as a "'scholarship of convenience' where evidence inconvenient to one's views is discounted as not really existing (even though in fact it does exist)."²⁵ This is quite an indictment from a scholar who is not a Christian in the evangelical sense of the word. Ehrman is correct in that Carrier is ignoring evidence contrary to his position.

Failure to mention arson objection refuted

The fact that early Christians failed to quote this specific passage of Tacitus and the fire of Rome in no way favors the position of skeptics. Why would early Christians want to quote a passage that speaks so negatively ("pernicious superstition") of their faith? The church was busy dealing with a host of false doctrine and heretical teachers during the ante-Nicene period so quoting Tacitus was low on the priority list. For example, concerning Ignatius, Sean McDowell notes, "Ignatius wrote his letters to individual churches to address issues they were currently facing, such as unity, suffering, and the danger of false teachers."²⁶ These issues were of prime importance, rather than the alleged charge of arson.

Christus spelling objection refuted

The choice of the word "Christus" fails to buttress the skeptics' position which tries to argue it is the title Christians gave to Jesus and not His legal name and therefore the Christians

²⁴ Michael. R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, 214.

²⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (NY: Harper Collins, 2012), 133.

²⁶ Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 10.

added this interpolation (Chrestus to Christus) centuries later. There are several good reasons Tacitus used Christus. First, Robert Van Voorst notes, “As we have seen, Tacitus can spell Christus correctly and he uses this spelling to correct the common misspelling ‘Chrestians.’”²⁷ The spelling of “Christus” is significant because Carrier desperately tries to tie it to a group of people that Suetonius mentions called Chrestians (founder was Chrestus) who were involved in riots.²⁸ It seems plausible that Tacitus is correcting the misspelling of Christus vs Chrestus. However, even if Tacitus used “Chrestus,” Sean McDowell notes, “it is historically probable that ‘Chrestus’ refers to Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁹ The difference of the letters “i” and “e” are not enough evidence for the interpolation accusation to stand.

Second, it is possible as Van Voorst further argues that since the New Testament uses “Christ as a proper name independent of Jesus,”³⁰ that this idiomatic expression of the early church might have reached the ears of Tacitus. Van Voorst reports that this “Christian usage reached Pliny (Letters 10:96).”³¹ And all the scholars agree that Pliny and Suetonius communicated. So, it is highly likely that Pliny could have used Christus in his communication with Tacitus.

Lastly, it is congruent for Tacitus to have used Christus instead of Jesus’ legal name to not confuse his readers. Van Voorst cogently argues that if Tacitus used Jesus’ legal name it “would have interfered with his explanation of the origin of Christianoi in Christus confusing

²⁷ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, 45.

²⁸ Richard Carrier, “The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, Annals 15.44,” 271.

²⁹ Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus*, 49.

³⁰ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, 46

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

his readers.”³² In other words, the derivative of Christus is in *Christianoi*. It would be more difficult for the reader to see the name Jesus tied to *Christianoi*.

Conclusion

The arguments from the skeptics have been documented and refuted. Skeptic Bart Ehrman, concedes the Tacitus passage is genuine as he notes,

Some mythicists argue that this reference in Tacitus was not written by him, they claim the same thing for Pliny and Suetonius, where the references are less important-but- were inserted into his writings (interpolated) by Christians who copied them, producing the manuscripts we have of Tacitus today. (We have no originals only later copies.). I don’t know of any trained classicists or scholars of ancient Rome who think this, and it seems highly unlikely.³³

Ehrman’s quote is comprehensive in that it does not matter which argument (e.g., interpolation, spelling, anachronism, fire at Rome, no future quotations by Christian writers, etc.) the skeptics marshal against the Tacitus reference, the notion that it is inauthentic is “highly unlikely.” The evidence is conclusive in that *The Annals* 15:44 is referring to Jesus of Nazareth and the “pernicious superstition” breaking out again was Tacitus testifying to the disciples and apostles’ sincere belief and testimony to the post-mortem appearances of Christ.

³² Ibid., 46.

³³ Bart. D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, 55.

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