

# Who Was the Historical Jesus?

OLLI

C. Murphy

## References to Jesus in the Roman Authors

### 1. Pliny the Younger, c. 113 CE

Since I have begun to deal with this problem [of people turning in Christians as atheists], the charges have become more common and are increasing in variety, as often happens. An anonymous accusatory pamphlet has been circulated containing the names of many people. I decided to dismiss any who denied that they are or ever have been Christians when they repeated after me a formula invoking the gods and made offerings of wine and incense to your image, which I had ordered to be brought with the images of the gods into court for this reason, and when they reviled Christ (*Christo male dicere*). I understand that no one who is really a Christian can be made to do these things. Other people, whose names were given to me by an informer, first said that they were Christians and then denied it. They said that they had stopped being Christians two or more years ago, and some more than twenty. They all venerated your image and the images of the gods as the others did, and reviled Christ. They also maintained that the sum total of their guilt or error was no more than the following. They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung antiphonally a hymn to Christ as if to a god (*carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem*). They also took an oath not for any crime, but to keep from theft, robbery and adultery, not to break any promise, and not to withhold a deposit when reclaimed.

*Letters*, 10, Letter 96<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Suetonius, c. 120 CE

[Emperor Claudius] expelled the Jews from Rome, since they were always making disturbances because of the instigator Chrestus (*Judaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*).

*Lives of the Caesars* 5, *The Deified Claudius* 25.4<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Studying the Historical Jesus; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000) 41-2. For an English translation and the Latin original, see Pliny, *Pliny, Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice (Loeb Classical Library 59; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 30. For an English translation and the Latin original, see Suetonius, *Suetonius, volume 2*, trans. J. c. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library 38; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1914).

### 3. Tacitus, 116 CE

But neither human effort nor the emperor's generosity nor the placating of the gods ended the scandalous belief that the fire had been ordered. Therefore, to put down the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits and punished in the most unusual ways those hated for their shameful acts [*flagitia*], whom the crowd called "Chrestians." The founder of this name, Christ, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate [*Auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat*]. Suppressed for a time, the deadly superstition erupted again not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but also in the city [Rome], where all things horrible and shameful from everywhere come together and become popular. Therefore, first those who admitted to it were arrested, then on their information a very large multitude was convicted, not so much for the crime of arson as for hatred of the human race [*odium humani generis*]. Derision was added to their end: they were covered with the skins of wild animals and torn to death by dogs; or they were crucified and when the day ended they were burned as torches. Nero provided his gardens for the spectacle and gave a show in his circus, mixing with the people in charioteer's clothing, or standing on his racing chariot. Therefore a feeling of pity arose despite a guilt which deserved the most exemplary punishment, because it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but for the ferocity of one man.

*Annals* 14.44<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 41-2. The actual name of the Annals is *Ab excessu divi Augusti* (From the Death of the divine Augustus). For an English translation and the Latin original, see Tacitus, *Tacitus, Annals, Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson (Loeb Classical Library 322; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1937).