

12/6/2020 – Class Handout -- LIFE AND TIMES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

From: Alan_Daley@aol.com
To: Professor Dana Schuler
Date: Wed, 10 Feb 2016 at 8:28 a.m.
Subject: Gnosticism?

Dear Prof.,

I keep coming across references to ‘Gnosticism’ in some of the textbooks. Am I right in thinking that Gnosticism is mainly about salvation through a secret and special knowledge?

From: Professor Dana Schuler
To: Alan_Daley@aol.com
Date: Thur, 11 Feb 2016 at 9:25 a.m.
Subject: Re: Gnosticism?

Dear Alan,

On ‘Gnosticism’, no, **that’s not quite the full story**. The problem is that ‘Gnosticism’ is quite a slippery and misunderstood term. For a start, *the Gnostics did not know that they were Gnostics*. It was not their own designation for themselves; it was a designation given to them by others. On top of that, the Gnostics were diverse, so diverse in fact that some scholars wonder if we can even talk about a homogeneous religious system known as Gnosticism. Among the many groups that are identified as Gnostics, yes, there is a big emphasis on esoteric knowledge, especially of weird cosmologies and deities that duplicate and descend to earth. However, a more common feature is ‘Demiurgical creationism’. Don’t let the term scare you. Demiurgical creationism is basically the belief that the world was created by a wicked Demiurge who made yucky things like matter with all its evil, while Jesus is another god who comes to save us from the Demiurge and his wicked world. In other words, *‘Gnosticism’ separates the god of creation from the God of redemption*.

The real motivation in Gnosticism is theodicy, explaining why a God who is good would make a world like this, filled with so much evil, suffering, and death. The gnostic answer is that God didn’t make this world; it was a lesser and wicked deity who made the world, and the good God comes to save people from the world of bodies and matter. This salvation begins when we apprehend the true knowledge of our primordial origins. The origins of Gnosticism are disputed, but it probably derives from a Jewish interface with Middle Platonism as interpreted through biblical traditions sometime after the second Jewish revolt of AD 132–135 when some Jews began looking to Greek philosophy for a way of making sense of the world. This seems to have been taken up by Christian leaders like Valentinus and Marcion in the second century.

Yours kindly
Prof. Dana Schuler

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56–117) was a Roman senator and historian who wrote two major works on the Roman empire in the first century. In the course of his work he issued some strident denunciations of the Jews. His remarks not only underscore the anti-Jewish stance of Roman elites, but also provide something of a window into what Romans thought about the Jews and their practices:

[T]he other customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity. For the worst rascals among other peoples, renouncing their ancestral religions, always kept sending tribute and contributions to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews; again, the Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity. They sit apart at meals, and they sleep apart, and although as a race, they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves nothing is unlawful. They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference. Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account. However, they take thought to increase their numbers; for they regard it as a crime to kill any late-born child, and they believe that the souls of those who are killed in battle or by the executioner are immortal: hence comes their passion for begetting children, and their scorn of death. (Tac. Hist. 5.5)

From The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright ...

N. T. Wright takes us on a fascinating journey through ancient beliefs about life after death, from the shadowy figures who inhabit Homer's Hades, through Plato's hope for a blessed immortality, to the first century, where the Greek and Roman world (apart from the Jews) consistently denied any possibility of resurrection.

We then examine ancient Jewish beliefs on the same subject, from the Bible to the Dead Sea Scrolls and beyond. This sets the scene for a full-scale examination of early Christian beliefs about resurrection in general and that of Jesus in particular, beginning with Paul and working through to the start of the third century.

Wright looks at all the evidence, and asks: **Why did Christians agree with Jewish resurrection belief while introducing into it—across the board—significant modifications?** To answer this question, we come to the strange and evocative Easter stories in the gospels and asks whether they can have been late inventions. Wright seeks the best historical conclusions about the empty tomb and the belief that Jesus really did rise bodily from the dead, recognizing that it was this belief that caused early Christians to call Jesus "Son of God." In doing so, they posed a political challenge as well as a theological one.

These challenges retain their power in the twenty-first century.

Tacitus connects Jesus to his execution by Pontius Pilate.

An account of Jesus appears in [*Annals of Imperial Rome*](#), a first-century history of the [Roman Empire](#) written around 116 A.D. by the Roman senator and historian Tacitus. In chronicling the [burning of Rome](#) in 64 A.D., Tacitus mentions that [Emperor Nero](#) falsely blamed “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.”

As a Roman historian, Tacitus did not have any Christian biases in his discussion of the persecution of Christians by Nero, says Ehrman. “Just about everything he says coincides—from a completely different point of view, by a Roman author disdainful of Christians and their superstition—with what the New Testament itself says: Jesus was executed by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, for crimes against the state, and a religious movement of his followers sprang up in his wake.”

“When Tacitus wrote history, if he considered the information not entirely reliable, he normally wrote some indication of that for his readers,” Mykytiuk says in vouching for the historical value of the passage. “There is no such indication of potential error in the passage that mentions Christus.”

<https://www.history.com/news/was-jesus-real-historical-evidence>

Is the life of Christ recorded in any historical records besides the Bible?

Seven known secular historical documents refer to the existence of Jesus and His ministry.

The Annals by First Century Roman historian Tacitus mentions Christ and his crucifixion by Pontius Pilate in book 14, chapter 44.

The Babylonian Talmud, a historical collection of the post-biblical history of the Jewish people, mentions Jesus as leading the Jewish people astray.

An undoctored Arabic passage was written by the first-century historian **Josephus** in Agapius, “The book of the Title” refers to Jesus' ministry, crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, appearance to many after his crucifixion, and his international following.

Pliny the Younger in a letter to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. asked for advice on dealing with Christians who sing hymns to Christ as if to a god.

A historical **letter from Syria** written between 73 A.D. and the Third Century by Mara bar-Serapion, refers to the murder of “the wise king of the Jews,” believed to be a reference to Jesus.

<https://www.cbfc.net/you-asked-for-it/is-the-life-of-christ-recorded-in-any-historical-records-besides-the-bible/>