

SOME HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT THE TITLE 'CHRISTIAN'

The members of the Church of God are one in Jesus Christ, one in faith, as John wrote of Jesus declaring: ***"...keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they be one as we are."*** John 17:11b. Those adherents are called "Christian", taking on the name of him they follow, that is, the Christ of God.

Some facts pertaining to the use of the name "Christian" are given to us from the literary works of a number of historical figures who lived during the first century A.D. and partially into the second, and some of them will be provided in this booklet. The writers that we will be referencing were Romans with the exception of one, who was a Pharisaic Jew. Excerpts from the writings of these men are provided here to demonstrate that the title "Christian" was used during the era of these writers. To elaborate further, the excerpts support that the title Christian was applied to the followers of Jesus by the Roman populace.

The Roman historian, Cornelius Tacitus, lived about 55 to 117 A.D. In his book, "Annals", when writing about the burning of Rome which occurred in 64 A.D., Tacitus pens that the Emperor Nero needed a scapegoat to take suspicion away from himself for the burning of Rome, so he used the Christians. ***"But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations 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, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origins, 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 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. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens to the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car [ie. chariot]. Hence, even for criminals, who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed."*** It is believed that Tacitus wrote his Annals during 115 to 117 A.D., covering most of the years between 14 to 68 A.D. Note that Tacitus was not a Christian and like many of the pagan populace of Rome, talked about Christians with disdain given that Christ spoke against the vanities of man and spoke of the one true God, the Father, which flew in the face of a people who believed in many gods. To the pagan populace, speaking against the many gods that they followed was an abomination, just as Tacitus wrote. Many lies sprouted up about Christians in the first and second centuries given they would not conform to mainstream Roman beliefs.

Gaius Suetonius (69 to 140 A.D.) was a Roman historian and author of "De Vita Caesarum" (ie. The Lives of the Caesars). He also alludes to the Neronian persecutions

of 64 A.D.: *"Punishments were inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous superstition."*

Pliny the Younger, lived between 63 and 113 A.D. and was a Roman author and an administrator. While he was proconsul in Pontus and Bithynia, he addressed a letter to Emperor Trajan in 111 A.D., asking for advice on how to prosecute those accused of being Christian and excerpts from that letter follows: *"...I have never attended hearings concerning Christians, so I am unaware what is usually punished or investigated, and to what extent. I am more than a little in doubt whether there is to be a distinction between ages, and to what extent the young should be treated no differently from the more hardened; whether pardon should be granted to repentance; whether the person who has been a Christian in some sense should not benefit by having renounced it; whether it is the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name which should be punished. In the meantime, this is the procedure I have followed, in the cases of those brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians. If they admitted it, I asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with execution. Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished... Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods after me, and with incense and wine made obeisance to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought in together with images of the gods for this very purposes, and who moreover cursed Christ (those who are truly Christian cannot, it is said, be forced to do any of these things), I ordered to be acquitted."* The Emperor Trajan's reply to Pliny was as follows: *"You have followed the appropriate procedure, my Secundus, in examining the cases of those brought before you as Christians, for no general rule can be laid down which would establish a definite routine. Christians are not to be sought out. If brought before you and found guilty, they must be punished, but in such a way that a person who denies that he is a Christian and demonstrates this by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, may obtain pardon for repentance, even if his previous record is suspect."* Notice that the crimes that Christians committed were their refusal to not worship the pagan gods of the Romans and believing that Jesus is our king. Even though Christians believe Jesus is king in the spiritual sense, such a declaration would be a punishable offence to the ruling Caesar.

Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, and the Emperor Trajan, were all Romans and pagan believers, and lived during the first and into the second centuries A.D.. Not once did any of these men refer to the followers of Jesus by any name other than 'Christian'.

There is one other ancient author that should be mentioned for the purposes of our discussion. He was a Jew and a famous historical writer. His name was Joseph ben Matthias, better known by the name of Flavius Josephus. Josephus was a Pharisaic Jew and as far as we know, he remained a Pharisee his entire life.

Josephus' book, "Antiquities of the Jews", was published sometime between 93 and 94 A.D. and made mention of the 'tribe' called Christians in Book 18, Chapter 3. It should be pointed out that this segment of Josephus' writing is not accepted by many historians and theologians as being entirely the legitimate writing of Josephus. These scholars are convinced that portions of this section were altered by the changing or the adding of words. The reason for this belief is that it is highly improbable that a Pharisaic Jew

would discredit himself by writing an acknowledgement stating Jesus "was the Christ" or "was Christ". We would agree that it would be illogical for a Pharisaic Jew to refer to Jesus as the "Messiah" or the "Anointed of God", nor would he use the phrase "a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure". A Pharisee would never make the remark that Jesus was the true Messiah. The Messiah that most Jews waited for would physically lead and deliver Israel from the shackles of bondage of the Roman occupiers. Pharisaic Jews at no time accepted Jesus as the Messiah except those that were converted from the religion of Judaism, such as Paul. There seems little doubt that this passage was interpolated.

Despite the tampering in the forementioned section of Josephus' book, we can accept a reference made by him about Jesus in the 20th book, Chapter 9. The reason is that the phraseology is more in line with what a Pharisaic Jew might say. Josephus refers to Jesus as one "who was called Christ" (Messiah), but it does not declare him as "being the Christ". While a Christian would no doubt believe Jesus as being the "Anointed of God", a Pharisaic Jew would definitely not accept Jesus as the "Christ". Josephus could have seen Jesus as being "a doer of good works, and a teacher of a new faith", though not likely a faith that he accepted or believed. Following is the text from Book 20, chapter 9 of "Antiquities of the Jews": ***"Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned."***

Note that while Josephus does not use the appellation 'Christian' in this passage, he does reference Jesus' brother, James, and those followers of Jesus that were with him. He acknowledges that Jesus was known as Christ to those that followed him.

All of the forementioned historical accounts were written no later than 120 A.D. and we can be certain that the authors would not be overly fond of Christianity, themselves being pagans with the exception of Josephus who was of the Jewish faith.

Just as a side note, Catholicism did not become the state religion until about the middle of the fourth century A.D. Up until that time, simply claiming to be a Christian was a crime because it meant that the person regarded God as Supreme and Jesus as His Son, which offended the ruling Roman Caesars. Even after Catholicism became the religion of the Roman Empire, those Christians who would not conform to that particular version of Christianity were still in physical danger for they would be guilty of the crime of being a 'heretic'. You would only be safe from persecution if you were willing to adopt the doctrines, dogma, and decrees of the Roman Catholic church and refer to yourself as a Catholic.

To conclude this discussion, the pagan writers of old made it clear that the followers of Jesus were named after him, and more specifically, after his title of 'Christ', and thus were referred to as 'Christians' by the Roman populace. The name 'Christian' simply means "a follower and believer in the Christ" (Christianos in Greek).