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S5E6 - Non-Christian Sources

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

What do historical sources outside of the Christian community have to say about the resurrection? We'll walk through several ancient historians and their writings.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr. Lacona is associate professor of theology at Houston Baptist University, and he's a frequent speaker on campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jerez, your host. On this episode today, we're going to be talking about non-Christian sources, about the resurrection of Jesus, or really the historical Jesus in evaluating whether they are of value for the project that Dr. Lacona has in his big huge thick book, *The Resurrection of Jesus, A New Historiographical Approach* published in 2010. But if you don't own it, I want to encourage you to buy it.

Also before we jump into our discussion today, I want to encourage you to subscribe to Dr. Lacona's YouTube channel. Lots of great videos coming out from his channel there, and it's really a great way to get a notification on YouTube that, "Hey, he's got a new video. Check it out." So we'd love to have you following along on his platform there.

Well, Mike, going to non-Christian sources pertaining to Jesus, goes a little bit outside my comfortable zone here. But I'm keen to just ask you some questions and play a little bit of a reporter role. And so why don't we just start with this? When we think about non-Christian sources, there can be value here about the historical Jesus, because non-Christian sources, they're not going to have that bias that may allegedly be for Christian sources.

So that makes them a good source. But on the other hand, there are some weaknesses as well that I'm sure we'll jump into. So the biggest or most popular non-Christian source that is frequently cited and you devote a number of time to, or rather space in your book is Josephus.

So tell us about who Josephus was and why he plays an important role for Christian apologists in making a historical case for Jesus. Sure. Well, Josephus was a Jew.

He was born in the year 37. So within four to seven years after Jesus' death, he was born in Jerusalem to a popular Jewish priest named Matthias. So he's growing up shortly after Jesus has been executed.

And while the apostles who are headquartered in Jerusalem and publicly proclaiming the message of Jesus and his teachings, Josephus is growing up during that time. If the book of Acts is correct, then it said that a number of Jewish priests were converting and becoming followers of Jesus. So this place is Josephus in a situation geographically and chronologically where he would have heard the apostles preach and know what the early Christians were saying.

Also Josephus was interested in spiritual things. He later became a Jewish priest and a Pharisee. So we can only imagine what the discussions were around the table of Josephus' family.

But I think we would be right to anticipate that they would have talked about Jesus on occasion, even in negative terms. Josephus does not become a Christian. He fights against the Romans during the fall of Jerusalem.

He gets defeated by the Romans and he ends up joining the Romans and became a court historian for the emperor of his pajian. Now Josephus mentions Jesus on two occasions, both appear in his antiquities of the Jews, the histories of the history of the Jews. The one is a short passage, rarely disputed ever, where it mentions the stoning of James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, Messiah.

So that's just an innocent kind of thing. Josephus also mentions John about this, but it's not in relation to Jesus. That text about James, the brother of Jesus, is in antiquities, book twenty, section two hundred.

But in antiquities, book eighteen, section sixty three, I believe it is, Josephus has a text about Jesus here that goes a little more in depth about him. And let me read you this text. It says, "At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man, for he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure, and he gained a following among both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin.

He was the Messiah, and one pilot, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken to these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day, the tribe of Christians named after him has not died out." Now that's the text of Josephus that we have today, but unfortunately the earliest manuscript we have is centuries later.

But we do have Eusebius with this text in the fourth century. The problem is Oregon says that Josephus was not a Christian, and Josephus makes in this text many statements. He was the Messiah.

He rose from the dead. Scripture said many wondrous things about him. These aren't the kind of things that would be said by a non-believing Jew.

So most Josephus scholars think that a Christian has sometime in the second or third century doctored up this text. It's probably true. They got in, they doctored it up, made it sound better than it actually did.

The question is to what extent, what was in the original before that interpolator got involved in it? So a number of scholars have attempted to remove what they think was the additional stuff, the additional content, and get to what Josephus actually said. And I'm going to read to you a version that John Meyer, a historian of Jesus, offers, and that Lewis Feldman died a few years back, but he was the leading Josephus scholar of our generation. And he told me in an email that he agreed with Meyer's version.

So you tone it down. You dummy this thing down, and here's what you got. And this isn't

what all scholars who study Josephus agrees on, but he, Feldman told me, and he'd actually done some bean counting from like, I think 1937 to 1980.

And then I asked him what he thought. And I emailed him either 2000 or 2001. And he thought the number of Josephus specialists who think that Josephus mentions Jesus here was at least three to one versus those who said Josephus didn't mention him.

And he said he wouldn't be surprised if it was as high as five to one. So let me reach you this revised text. At that time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure.

And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And one pilot because of an accusation made by the leading men among us condemned into the cross. Those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so.

And up until this very day, the tribe of Christians named after him has not died out. And I think that this would be plausible. In fact, you know, they don't think that he mentioned Jesus resurrection.

And I'm sure he didn't say the disciple, he appeared to Jesus disciples. But I think there's a good chance that since Josephus is growing up in Jerusalem, where the apostolic proclamation is going to have a lot of focus on the resurrection of Jesus, Josephus almost certainly knew that this is what they were proclaiming. And I think a toned down version such as the disciples claimed or reported that he appeared alive to them three days later.

And the tribe of Christians remained to this day. That makes sense to me. I think that's a more plausible.

I think that should be in there. But whether it is or not, we don't know. We can only speculate.

And so Josephus certainly mentions the death of Jesus. And I think it is good for that. You have a nine Christian who mentions the death of Jesus implausibly that his disciples were reporting that he appeared alive to them.

Well, if anything, it can serve as an inspiration for young people to want to pursue scholarship and to go manuscript hunting to see if we can find a dig up another manuscript, which can help verify us, which rendering is the one we should go with. So that's something in my doctoral research, I began to encounter for the fifth century monks I studied. There are different questions about which rendering and the manuscripts and all that.

And it's like, well, if only we found this, it could help us. True. Now we've got that situation here.

I don't know what it was for the literature that you studied. But I know for the classical literature and post classical literature, the stuff, the Greco-Roman, right, it's like by Cicero and Caesar and Tacitus and Suetonius. Sometimes the best manuscripts, the only manuscripts we have would be 11th century.

And most manuscripts for that Latin literature appear between the ninth and 15th centuries. So when we say Josephus, if he was 11th century, ninth century, whatever, whatever it was, that's not unusual. Yeah.

And to find an eighth century manuscript, you know, hey, that'd be a big improvement. And much more feasible than a second or third century manuscript, of course. Alright, well, so Josephus is sort of the most popular of the non-Christian sources.

There are a number of other ones that we're going to run through here. But before we do that, what sort of value do you think you place on Josephus' two references here to Jesus? Is there much value here? Well, for the first one, book 20 section 200, yeah, it tells us about Jesus was known as the Messiah by some. He was referred to as the Messiah and that he had a brother named James who had been martyred, who had been killed.

And in fact, Josephus says that he was charged with being a lawbreaker, breaker of the Jewish law, which is something we find in the book of Acts, they accused the Christians of being. So it's certainly coherent with what we find in Acts and later church tradition from Clement of Alexandria and Hagusipus that James the brother of Jesus had been martyred. So that doesn't help us in terms of our current project.

It does what the historical Jesus to know that he had a brother who had been killed, executed, and then that Jesus was known as Messiah. But, you know, for our thing about what happened to Jesus, the book 20 section 200 doesn't help us. But certainly, book 18 section 63 does it informs us about Jesus death by punch us pilot at the end, and he says at the instigation of the leading men among us, he's talking about the Jewish leaders.

So that that's completely consistent with what we find in the gospels. And of Josephus mentions the disciples reporting that he appeared alive 10, three days later. That's pretty cool too.

So I would say probable at least in terms at minimum, in terms of Jesus death on the orders of punch us pilot due to the instigation of the Jewish leadership. We get that from Josephus. Oh, good.

And it says that he performed deeds that astonished crowds, you know, astonishing deeds. So that would attest to by Josephus that Jesus was known as a miracle worker. Yeah, yeah, that's great.

And we're going to get some other references to that as well. Although it may not be

placed in as nice of terms. So let's jump into a few others here.

Tacitus is a historian who mentions Jesus. What value is there out of Tacitus? Well, Tacitus writes in the early 2nd century. And he's known by many thought by many to be Rome's greatest historian.

He wrote the histories of Rome. He wrote the annals of Rome. In fact, what's interesting, the annals of Rome, and you've got books one through six preserved in a single manuscript dated to the 11th century books.

Seven through 10 have been lost. And 11 through either 15 or 16. I think it's 16.

I've likewise been preserved in only a single manuscript dated to the 11th century. And yet much of what we know about Rome, ancient Rome comes from Tacitus. The history is too preserved in that later manuscript with books seven through, I'm sorry, 11 through 16.

So, but Tacitus, he just mentions Jesus in passing. It's really interesting what he says about it. It's in the context of Nero and the relationship of Nero to the burning of Rome, which happened in, I think it was 68, the year 68.

So, the story that Tacitus tells is that Nero takes office as the emperor. And he wants to build a new palace for himself. But the Senate says no, because the people are already taxed and this would require even excessive taxation to fund it.

Before you know it, shortly after that, Rome catches on fire and the current palace of the emperor burns down with it. And there's a story that's going around that he Nero was in a city like 35 miles away. I forgot the name of the city, but he's in a city like 35 miles away and he's watching Rome burn and he's playing a musical instrument in glee as he watches the city go up in flames.

And so, people are turning against Nero at this point and he's getting a little worried. So, Tacitus picks up at this point and he says, therefore to squelch the rumor, and this is in Annal's book 15 section 44, he says, therefore to squelch the rumor, Nero created scapegoats and subjected to the most refined tortures, those whom the common people called Christians, a group hated for their abominable crimes. Their name comes from Christ, who during the reign of Tiberius Caesar had been executed by the procurator, punches pilot, suppressed by the moment, for the moment, a deadly superstition broke out again, not only in Judea, the land which originated this evil, but also in the city of Rome.

So, here's something, there's a couple of things in there, where he refers to Christianity as a deadly superstition and he refers to it as an evil and he refers to Christians saying they were hated for their abominable crimes. He doesn't say what they were, but elsewhere we find other writers like in the martyrdom of Polycarp, the Christians were

referred to as atheists because they denied the existence of all other gods. They were exclusivist when they came to Jesus.

Jesus is God and he's the only God, there are no other gods, not the emperor himself, no other gods. So, they were called atheists and for that many of them were executed. So, you've got these negative terms toward Christians which makes Tacitus a hostile source, but he mentions that the Christians derived their name from Christ, who had been executed by the most extreme penalty, which would have been crucifixion, by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor during that time, during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, which is just what Luke tells us about Tiberius being the emperor and all four gospels mentioned Pontius Pilate being the governor who had Jesus executed.

And then it says that the superstition broke out, it had been suppressed for the moment, which what does Acts tell us, they went into hiding and they didn't come out and preach publicly until Pentecost, 50 days after Passover. So, it was suppressed for the moment and then it broke out again in Judea where it started, Jerusalem's in Judea and then it spread even to the city of Rome, the capital, the city of Rome. It seems like they're following the Great Commission, right, to make disciples of all nations, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the other most part.

So, it confirms that Christianity got its name from Christ, that Christ was the leader of the moment, that he was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, and then it's consistent with resurrection, but of course Tacitus wouldn't believe Jesus was raised. Sure, sure. Alright, let's move along to Pilius, Pilius the Younger.

Plenty of the younger? Plenty of the younger was Governor Bethania, which was one of the Roman provinces. He was a friend of Tacitus and we have a lot of the correspondence letters that he wrote to emperors and in one of those, he mentions, you know, asking the emperor what he should do. Should he put these Christians to death? He had been going to their doors, having people go to their doors to get the soldiers and asking them to deny Christ.

It heard that they were Christians. Do you affirm Christ if you do, you've got to deny him or you're going to be killed? And if they refuse to deny Christ at that point, he warned them again and if they refused, then he would take them off to execute them. And he talks about, he took two women deaconesses, I think, and tortured them until he got some information out of them.

But these early Christians seemed innocent. They got up early on the first day of the week Sunday and saying him to Christ as to a God, which shows that Jesus was highly revered. And we're talking about the beginning of the second century here.

So, yeah, so, they ate bread together. So, that could be the Eucharist or could have just been the meal that was shared by Christians afterward. So, yeah, we get some good

stuff from him.

But, you know, it's not really useful when it doesn't say much about Jesus. It tells us about some early Christianity, but it doesn't mention anything about Jesus's death. Like, he had been executed by the Romans, doesn't mention his resurrection or anything like that.

So, even though Plendy the Younger is interesting and he provides us with some useful information, it's not useful for our present scenario. So, I think Tacitus would be better. I said possible for Tacitus in the book, but I think we should probably have him as probable.

But, for Plendy the Younger, I'd say it's just not useful. It doesn't give us any useful information. Yeah.

Yeah. And the names we're going to go through, we're going to find a similar situation here. How about how about Sootonius? Sootonius is regarded as the greatest Roman biographer.

He writes closer to how modern biographers write than any other Greek or Roman of his day. He's best known for his lives of the divine Caesars. He gives us biographies of 12 Caesars.

Some really interesting stuff. I studied a bunch of resources on written by scholars on Josephus. I'm sorry, Sootonius specialists and wrote an article comparing Sootonius's finest biography, his biography of Augustus, which was the second one in the Caesars.

And compared that with the Gospel of Mark for its historical reliability, kind of interesting stuff. That article is available on my website. But, because he writes closer to how we write today, it's pretty interesting.

Now, it's disputed whether he mentions Jesus. There is one sentence that he has in his life of the Emperor Claudius in chapter 25. And it says, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Crestus, Claudius expelled them from Rome." Now, we know that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in the late 40s.

So the question would be, why is he affiliating this with Crestus? In fact, it's "Cristus," which would be the Latin name for Christ, not "Crestus." That's a different name. So is he referring to a Jew named Crestus having a Roman name of Crestus? Or is this a misspelling of Christ, Crestus? And has he misplaced this? Are some of these Jews debating over Christ, who Tacitus thought was alive at that point? We don't know. So it's very difficult to know, but and its scholars dispute it.

So I'd say probably most think that he may be, Suetonius may be confused and referring to Christ there. I just don't know. I don't know.

But I don't think he's useful, because in any sense, he's not much anything related to the death or the resurrection of Jesus, so it doesn't help us for the study. Sure. All right, let's just briefly here go through the rest.

Marabar-Sarapian. Marabar-Sarapian? We don't know exactly when it's dated either late first century after the year 73. It's either late first century or sometime later.

We can't be more precise. Marabar-Sarapian? Marabar was a Jew in prison who's awaiting execution, anticipating execution, and he mentions the death of Jesus. He says this, "Or the Jews by killing their wise king because their kingdom was taken away at that very time." So he mentions the death of Jesus and that the Jews were somehow responsible for this.

And he's talking about their kingdom being taken away. And that would be referring probably to the temple's destruction. So it mentions the death of Jesus, but if it's shortly after 73, then it could be decent, but we don't know.

So I don't think it's very useful. Yeah, yeah, it's vague. How about Phallus? Phallus is interesting.

Phallus wrote shortly after the year 50. He's writing a history of the Eastern Mediterranean world from the Trojan War up until around the year 50. There are fragments of Phallus that are preserved in the writing of Julius Africanus.

We don't have Phallus's writings anymore. It's just fragments preserved by Africanus, and he's writing around the year 200. And Phallus mentions, and he would, Phallus mentions an eclipse of the sun around the time of Jesus's crucifixion, and he said, "No," and Africanus replies and says, "Well, it wasn't an eclipse of the sun.

There was no eclipse at that point." So it's hard. Phallus mentions that darkness, but we don't have Phallus. We got it in Julius Africanus.

He was writing 150 years later, but we don't even have the writings of Julius Africanus there. That is preserved in the writing of Georgius and Chellus, who's writing around the year 800. Or it's someone who wrote 750 years after Phallus, who's quoting someone whose writing is no longer sent, who wrote 150 years later.

And there's no context. So we don't know if Phallus was, for all we know, he was responding to the Christian claim that there was a darkness at Jesus's crucifixion, and he's given a counter, an alternate explanation to that. We just don't know.

So it's possible that he could be mentioning the darkness at Jesus' death possible, but I'd say, I'd say I'm not going to use him, because it's just not enough. All right, finally, Celsus. Celsus? Well, Celsus wrote an attack on Christianity around the year 180.

We no longer have that, but it is preserved, probably pretty much verbatim in Origen's rebuttal called *Contra Celsum*. And he's writing that around the year 250. Celsus appears to have received his information from the Gospels.

So he doesn't really give us anything new. I'd say he's not useful. Yeah.

Yeah. All right. Well, thanks for that quick run-through of non-Christian sources.

There are some others as well, but time doesn't permit. And I think some people get the gist now that, unfortunately, there are some sources which just don't have much usefulness for the project at hand. Well, I would say that Lucian, right in the middle of the second century, he wrote the book *How to Write History*, but he writes some other things, and he's not the best historian himself.

But in his passing of Peregrinus, he does mention that Jesus was a sophist, a wise man. He might have been saying that sarcastically, but he also mentions that Jesus was crucified in Palestine. So that's kind of interesting, but we don't, it's 165, 150 when he's writing this, and we don't know where he got his information from.

He's certainly not a primary source. So useful for Jesus' death in Palestine, crucifixion in Palestine, but it's limited value. Yeah.

Okay. I'll give you a minute here, Mike, looking for a minute answer on a question from a listener. The resurrection, if true, ought to impact how we live our lives, is it reasonable to require a higher standard of proof than for normal historical explanations? That's a good question.

So I'd look at it from two ways. Number one, if you want to look at it purely as a historian, then I'd say, no, you shouldn't require more evidence for it. You need to look at the data and accept it.

But then you're going to say, well, yeah, but is it going to be enough to convince me to become a Christian if I don't want to be a Christian? And that's a different matter there. It's kind of like if someone asks me to put, I don't know, \$100 into a stock, and I look at the stock, I do some research, some due diligence, I say, oh, this looks like a good investment. I might do it.

But if they say, hey, I want you to dump all of your retirement savings into this, well, now you're requiring more of me. Now, it's not that I need more evidence. It's either a good decision or it's not, you know, has, but I might require more evidence before I make that leap to put more in into it.

So, you know, before devoting your life to something, you might want to, you know, look for more evidence. But I do think that the evidence we have is sufficient to establish that Jesus probably rose from the dead. Yeah.

So even if it does require a higher standard than say whether some war happened, nevertheless, the evidence is there using historical methods that are reasonable, reasonable historical methods. It's the difference between, say, in court, where you look at the preponderance of the evidence for the civil case. Is it more probable than not versus a criminal case where the, you have to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt, kind of like that.

I wouldn't say you have to do that with the resurrection of Jesus, but one requires a greater burden of proof. Yeah. Very good.

Well, thanks for that short, quick answer and also for guiding us through non-Christian sources as well pertaining to the historical Jesus. And specifically, if we can gather much on his death and resurrection. If you'd like to learn more about the work in ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can go to RisenJesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels.

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