

Ancient Sources for Acts

Chapter 11

11:19–21

Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.4 §39

And what occasion is there to speak of others, when those of us Jews that dwell at Antioch are named Antiochians, because Seleucus the founder of that city gave them the privileges belonging thereto? After the like manner do those Jews that inhabit Ephesus and the other cities of Ionia enjoy the same name with those that were originally born there, by the grant of the succeeding princes.

Josephus *Jewish Wars* 3.2.4 §29

And now Vespasian took along with him his army from Antioch (which is the metropolis of Syria, and, without dispute, deserves the place of the third city in the habitable earth that was under the Roman empire, both in magnitude and other marks of prosperity) where he found king Agrippa, with all his forces, waiting for his coming, and marched to Ptolemais.

Tacitus, *Annals* 2.83

And so the people grieved the more bitterly as though Germanicus was again lost to them. New honors were devised and decreed, as men were inspired by affection for him or by genius. His name was to be celebrated in the song of the Salii; chairs of state with oaken garlands over them were to be set up in the places assigned to the priesthood of the Augustales; his image in ivory was to head the procession in the games of the circus; no flamen or augur, except from the Julian family, was to be chosen in the room of Germanicus. Triumphal arches were erected at Rome, on the banks of the Rhine, and on mount Amanus in Syria, with an inscription recording his achievements, and how he had died in the public service. A cenotaph was raised at Antioch, where the body was burnt, a lofty mound at Epidaphna, where he had ended his life. The number of his statues, or of the places in which they were honored, could not easily be computed. When a golden shield of remarkable size was voted him as a leader among orators, Tiberius declared that he would dedicate to him one of the usual kind, similar to the rest, for in eloquence, he said, there was no distinction of rank, and it was a sufficient glory for him to be classed among ancient writers. The knights called the seats in the theatre known as “the juniors,” Germanicus's benches, and arranged that their squadrons were to ride in procession behind his effigy on the fifteenth of July. Many of these honors still remain; some were at once dropped, or became obsolete with time.

Josephus, *Wars*, 7.3.3 §43

For as the Jewish nation is widely dispersed over all the habitable earth among its inhabitants, so it is very much intermingled with Syria by reason of its neighborhood, and had the greatest multitudes in Antioch by reason of the largeness of the city, wherein the kings, after Antiochus, had afforded them a habitation with the most undisturbed tranquility.

11:22–26

Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3 §64

And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44

Such indeed were the precautions of human wisdom. The next thing was to seek means of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books, by the direction of which prayers were offered to Vulcanus, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was entreated by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, whence water was procured to sprinkle the face and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women. 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 origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, 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 for 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. 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.

Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96–97

LETTER 96

TO THE EMPEROR TRAJAN:

It is a rule, Sir, which I inviolably observe, to refer myself to you in all my doubts; for who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. Whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether repentance admits to a pardon, or if a man has been once a Christian it avails him nothing to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated therewith are punishable in all these points I am greatly doubtful.

In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, I directed them to be carried thither.

These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the Gods, and who finally cursed Christ none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the Gods, and cursed Christ.

They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.

I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and betook myself at once to your counsel. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you, especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems possible, however, to check and cure it. 'Tis certain at least that the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial animals, which for some time past have met with but few purchasers. From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance.

LETTER 97

TRAJAN TO PLINY:

The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Information without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age.

Lucian, *Alexander* 25.38

25. When at last many sensible men, recovering, as it were, from profound intoxication, combined against him, especially all the followers of Epicurus, and when in the cities they began gradually to detect all the trickery and buncombe of the show, he issued a promulgation designed to scare them, saying that Pontus was full of atheists and Christians who had the hardihood to utter the vilest abuse of him; these he bade them drive away with stones if they wanted to have the god gracious. About Epicurus, moreover, he delivered himself of an oracle after this sort; when someone asked him how Epicurus was doing in Hades, he replied: "With leaden fetters on his feet in filthy mire he sitteth." Do you wonder, then, that the shrine waxed great, now that you see that the questions of its visitors were intelligent and refined?

11:27–30

Suetonius, *Claudius* 18.2

When there was a scarcity of grain because of long-continued droughts, he was once stopped in the middle of the Forum by a mob and so pelted with abuse and at the same time with pieces of bread, that he was barely able to make his escape to the Palace by a back door; and after this experience he resorted to every possible means to bring grain to Rome, even in the winter season. To the merchants he held out the certainty of profit by assuming the expense of any loss that they might suffer from storms, and offered to those who would build merchant ships large bounties.

Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.43

Several prodigies occurred in that year. Birds of evil omen perched on the Capitol; houses were thrown down by frequent shocks of earthquake, and as the panic spread, all the weak were trodden down in the hurry and confusion of the crowd. Scanty crops too, and consequent famine were regarded as a token of calamity. Nor were there merely whispered complaints; while Claudius was administering justice, the populace crowded round him with a boisterous clamor and drove him to a corner of the forum, where they violently pressed on him till he broke through the furious mob with a body of soldiers. It was ascertained that Rome had provisions for no more than fifteen days, and it was through the signal bounty of heaven and the mildness of the winter that its desperate plight was relieved. And yet in past days Italy used to send supplies for the legions into distant provinces, and even now it is not a barren soil which causes distress. But we prefer to cultivate Africa and Egypt, and trust the life of the Roman people to ships and all their risks.

Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 60.11.1–5

On the occasion of a severe famine he considered the problem of providing an abundant food-supply, not only for that particular crisis but for all future time. For practically all the grain used by the Romans was imported, and yet the region near the mouth of the Tiber had no safe landing-places or suitable harbors, so that their mastery of the sea was rendered useless to them. Except for the cargoes brought in during the summer season and stored in warehouses, they had no supplies for the winter; for if anyone ever risked a voyage at that season, he was sure to meet with disaster. In view of this situation, Claudius undertook to construct a harbor, and would not be deterred even when the architects, upon his enquiring how great the cost would be, answered, “You don't want to do it!” so confident were they that the huge expenditures necessary would shake him from his purpose, if he should learn the cost beforehand. He, however, conceived an undertaking worthy of the dignity and greatness of Rome, and he brought it to accomplishment. In the first place, he excavated a very considerable tract of land, built retaining walls on every side of the excavation, and then let the sea into it; secondly, in the sea itself he constructed huge moles on both sides of the entrance and thus enclosed a large body of water, in the midst of which he reared an island and placed on it a tower with a beacon light. This harbor, then, as it is still called in local parlance, was created by him at this time. He furthermore desired to make an outlet into the Liris for the Fucine Lake in the Marsian country, in order not only that the land around it might be tilled but also that the river might be made more navigable. But the money was expended in vain.

Orosius, *Hist.* 7.6.17

Nevertheless, during the following year there was so great a famine in Rome that the emperor was taunted and insulted by the people in the middle of the Forum and shamefully pelted with pieces of bread. He barely managed to escape the fury of the excited mob by fleeing through a private entrance into the Palace.

Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.15.3 §320

Thus this legislation, which appeared to be divine, made this man to be esteemed as one superior to his own nature. Nay, further, a little before the beginning of this war, when Claudius was emperor of the Romans, and Ismael was our high priest, and when so great a famine was come upon us, that one-tenth deal [of wheat] was sold for four drachmae,

Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.4

But Luke, who was of Antiochian parentage and a physician by profession, and who was especially intimate with Paul and well acquainted with the rest of the apostles, has left us, in two inspired books, proofs of that spiritual healing art which he learned from them.

Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 7

Luke a physician of Antioch, as his writings indicate, was not unskilled in the Greek language.

Jerome, *Preface to Commentary on Matthew*

The first evangelist is Matthew, the publican, who was surnamed Levi. He published his Gospel in Judæa in the Hebrew language, chiefly for the sake of Jewish believers in Christ, who adhered in vain

to the shadow of the law, although the substance of the Gospel had come. The second is Mark, the amanuensis of the Apostle Peter, and first bishop of the Church of Alexandria. He did not himself see our Lord and Savior, but he related the matter of his Master's preaching with more regard to minute detail than to historical sequence. The third is Luke, the physician, by birth a native of Antioch, in Syria, whose praise is in the Gospel. He was himself a disciple of the Apostle Paul, and composed his book in Achaia and Bœotia. He thoroughly investigates certain particulars and, as he himself confesses in the preface, describes what he had heard rather than what he had seen. The last is John, the Apostle and Evangelist, whom Jesus loved most, who, reclining on the Lord's bosom, drank the purest streams of doctrine, and was the only one thought worthy of the words from the cross, "Behold! thy mother." When he was in Asia, at the time when the seeds of heresy were springing up (I refer to Cerinthus, Ebion, and the rest who say that Christ has not come in the flesh, whom he in his own epistle calls Antichrists, and whom the Apostle Paul frequently assails), he was urged by almost all the bishops of Asia then living, and by deputations from many Churches, to write more profoundly concerning the divinity of the Savior, and to break through all obstacles so as to attain to the very Word of God (if I may so speak) with a boldness as successful as it appears audacious.