

THE THEOSOPHICAL BOOKSHELF



# CHRISTIANITY

ITS EVIDENCES, ITS ORIGIN,  
ITS MORALITY, ITS HISTORY

ANNIE BESANT

# **Christianity: Its Evidences, Its Origin, Its Morality, Its History**

**Annie Besant**

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## CENTURY XV.

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### **SECTION I.—ITS EVIDENCES UNRELIABLE.**

The origin of all religions, and the ignorance which is the root of the God-idea, having been dealt with in Part I. of this Text-Book, it now becomes our duty to investigate the evidences of the origin and of the growth of Christianity, to examine its morality and its dogmas, to study the history of its supposed founder, to trace out its symbols and its ceremonies; in fine, to show cause for its utter rejection by the Freethinker. The foundation stone of Christianity, laid in Paradise by the Creation and Fall of Man 6,000 years ago, has already been destroyed in the first section of this work; and we may at once, therefore, proceed to Christianity itself. The history of the origin of the creed is naturally the

first point to deal with, and this may be divided into two parts: 1. The evidences afforded by profane history as to its origin and early growth. 2. Its story as told by itself in its own documents.

The most remarkable thing in the evidences afforded by profane history is their extreme paucity; the very existence of Jesus cannot be proved from contemporary documents. A child whose birth is heralded by a star which guides foreign sages to Judæa; a massacre of all the infants of a town within the Roman Empire by command of a subject king; a teacher who heals the leper, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the lame, and who raises the mouldering corpse; a King of the Jews entering Jerusalem in triumphal procession, without opposition from the Roman legions of Cæsar; an accused ringleader of sedition arrested by his own countrymen, and handed over to the imperial governor; a rebel adjudged to death by Roman law; a three hours' darkness over all the land; an earthquake breaking open graves and rending the temple veil; a number of ghosts wandering about Jerusalem; a crucified corpse rising again to life, and appearing to a crowd of above 500 people; a man risen from the dead ascending bodily into heaven without any concealment, and in the broad daylight, from a mountain near Jerusalem; all these marvellous events took place, we are told, and yet they have left no ripple on the current of contemporary history. There is, however, no lack of such history, and an exhaustive account of the country and age in which the hero of the story lived is given by one of his own nation—a most painstaking and laborious historian. "How shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable prodigies.

The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, demons were expelled, and the laws of nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the Church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle, and, pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral or physical government of the world. Under the reign of Tiberius the whole earth, or at least a celebrated province of the Roman Empire, was involved in a preternatural darkness of three hours. Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history. It happened during the lifetime of Seneca and the elder Pliny, who must have experienced the immediate effects, or received the earliest intelligence, of the prodigy. Each of these philosophers, in a laborious work, has recorded all the great phenomena of nature—earthquakes, meteors, comets, and eclipses, which his indefatigable curiosity could collect. Both the one and the other have omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which the mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe. A distinct chapter of Pliny is designed for eclipses of an extraordinary nature and unusual duration; but he contents himself with describing the singular defect of light which followed the murder of Cæsar, when, during the greatest part of the year, the orb of the sun appeared pale and without splendour. This season of obscurity, which cannot surely be compared with the preternatural darkness of the Passion, had been already celebrated by most of the poets and historians of that memorable age" (Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," vol. ii., pp. 191, 192. Ed. 1821).

If Pagan historians are thus curiously silent, what deduction shall we draw from the similar silence of the great Jewish annalist? Is it credible that Josephus should

thus have ignored Jesus Christ, if one tithe of the marvels related in the Gospels really took place? So damning to the story of Christianity has this difficulty been felt, that a passage has been inserted in Josephus (born A.D. 37, died about A.D. 100) relating to Jesus Christ, which runs as follows: "Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; 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" ("Antiquities of the Jews," book xviii., ch. iii., sect. 3). The passage itself proves its own forgery: Christ drew over scarcely any Gentiles, if the Gospel story be true, as he himself said: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew xv. 24). A Jew would not believe that a doer of wonderful works must necessarily be more than man, since their own prophets were said to have performed miracles. If Josephus believed Jesus to be Christ, he would assuredly have become a Christian; while, if he believed him to be God, he would have drawn full attention to so unique a fact as the incarnation of the Deity. Finally, the concluding remark that the Christians were "not extinct" scarcely coincides with the idea that Josephus, at Rome, must have been cognisant of their increasing numbers, and of their persecution by Nero. It is, however, scarcely pretended now-a-days, by any scholar of note, that the passage is authentic. Sections 2 and 4 were manifestly written one after the other. "There were a great number of them slain by this means, and others of them ran away wounded; and thus an end was put

to this sedition. *About the same time another sad calamity put the Jews into disorder.*" The forged passage breaks the continuity of the history. The oldest MSS. do not contain this section. It is first quoted by Eusebius, who probably himself forged it; and its authenticity is given up by Lardner, Gibbon, Bishop Warburton, and many others. Lardner well summarises the arguments against its authenticity:—

"I do not perceive that we at all want the suspected testimony to Jesus, which was never quoted by any of our Christian ancestors before Eusebius.

"Nor do I recollect that Josephus has anywhere mentioned the name or word *Christ*, in any of his works; except the testimony above mentioned, and the passage concerning James, the Lord's brother.

"It interrupts the narrative.

"The language is quite Christian.

"It is not quoted by Chrysostom, though he often refers to Josephus, and could not have omitted quoting it, had it been then in the text.

"It is not quoted by Photius, though he has three articles concerning Josephus.

"Under the article Justus of Tiberias, this author (Photius) expressly states that historian (Josephus) being a Jew, has not taken the least notice of Christ.

"Neither Justin in his dialogue with Trypho the Jew, nor Clemens Alexandrinus, who made so many extracts from

Christian authors, nor Origen against Celsus, have ever mentioned this testimony.

"But, on the contrary, in chapter xxxv. of the first book of that work, Origen openly affirms, that Josephus, who had mentioned John the Baptist, did not acknowledge Christ" (Answer to Dr. Chandler, as quoted in Taylor's "Diegesis," pp. 368, 369. Ed. 1844).

Keim thinks that the remarks of Origen caused the forgery; after criticising the passage he winds up: "For all these reasons, the passage cannot be maintained; it has first appeared in this form in the Catholic Church of the Jews and Gentiles, and under the dominion of the Fourth Gospel, and hardly before the third century, probably before Eusebius, and after Origen, whose bitter criticisms of Josephus may have given cause for it" ("Jesus of Nazara," p. 25, English edition, 1873).

"Those who are best acquainted with the character of Josephus, and the style of his writings, have no hesitation in condemning this passage as a forgery interpolated in the text during the third century by some pious Christian, who was scandalised that so famous a writer as Josephus should have taken no notice of the Gospels, or of Christ their subject. But the zeal of the interpolator has outrun his discretion, for we might as well expect to gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles, as to find this notice of Christ among the Judaising writings of Josephus. It is well known that this author was a zealous Jew, devoted to the laws of Moses and the traditions of his countrymen. How then could he have written that *Jesus was the Christ*? Such an admission would have proved him to be a Christian himself, in which case the passage under consideration, too long for a Jew, would have been far too short for a believer in the new religion, and thus the passage stands forth, like



an ill-set jewel, contrasting most inharmoniously with everything around it. If it had been genuine, we might be sure that Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Chrysostom would have quoted it in their controversies with the Jews, and that Origen or Photius would have mentioned it. But Eusebius, the ecclesiastical historian (i., II), is the first who quotes it, and our reliance on the judgment or even the honesty of this writer is not so great as to allow of our considering everything found in his works as undoubtedly genuine" ("Christian Records," by Rev. Dr. Giles, p. 30. Ed. 1854).

On the other side the student should consult Hartwell Horne's "Introduction." Ed. 1825, vol. i., p. 307-11. Renan observes that the passage—in the authenticity of which he believes—is "in the style of Josephus," but adds that "it has been retouched by a Christian hand." The two statements seem scarcely consistent, as such "retouching" would surely alter "the style" ("Vie de Jésus," Introduction, p. 10. Ed. 1863).

Paley argues that when the multitude of Christians living in the time of Josephus is considered, it cannot "be believed that the religion, and the transaction upon which it was founded, were too obscure to engage the attention of Josephus, or to obtain a place in his history" ("Evid. of Christianity," p. 73. Ed. 1845). We answer, it is plain, from the fact that Josephus entirely ignores both, that the pretended story of Jesus was not widely known among his contemporaries, and that the early spread of Christianity is much exaggerated. But says Paley: "Be, however, the fact, or the cause of the omission in Josephus, what it may, no other or different history on the subject has been given by him or is pretended to have been given" (Ibid, pp. 73, 74). Our contention being that the supposed occurrences never took place at all, no history of them is to be looked for in

the pages of a writer who was relating only facts. Josephus speaks of James, "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ" ("Antiquities," book xx., ch. ix., sect. 1), and this passage shares the fate of the longer one, being likewise rejected because of being an interpolation. The other supposed reference of Josephus to Jesus is found in his discourse on Hades, wherein he says that all men "shall be brought before God the Word; for to him hath the Father committed all judgment; and he, in order to fulfil the will of his Father, shall come as judge, whom we call Christ" ("Works of Josephus," by Whiston, p. 661). Supposing that this passage were genuine, it would simply convey the Jewish belief that the Messiah—Christ—the Anointed, was the appointed judge, as in Dan. vii., 9-14, and more largely in the Book of Enoch.

The silence of Jewish writers of this period is not confined to Josephus, and this silence tells with tremendous weight against the Christian story. Judge Strange writes: "Josephus knew nothing of these wonderments, and he wrote up to the year 93, being familiar with all the chief scenes of the alleged Christianity. Nicolaus of Damascus, who preceded him and lived to the time of Herod's successor Archelaus, and Justus of Tiberias, who was the contemporary and rival of Josephus in Galilee, equally knew nothing of the movement. Philo-Judæus, who occupied the whole period ascribed to Jesus, and engaged himself deeply in figuring out the Logos, had heard nothing of the being who was realising at Jerusalem the image his fancy was creating" ("Portraiture and Mission of Jesus," p. 27).

We propose now to go carefully through the alleged testimonies to Christianity, as urged in Paley's "Evidences of Christianity," following his presentment of the argument step by step, and offering objections to each point as raised by him.

The next historian who is claimed as a witness to Christianity is Tacitus (born A.D. 54 or 55, died A.D. 134 or 135), who writes, dealing with the reign of Nero, that this Emperor "inflicted the most cruel punishments upon a set of people, who were holden in abhorrence for their crimes, and were commonly called Christians. The founder of that name was Christus, who, in the reign of Tiberius, was punished as a criminal by the procurator, Pontius Pilate. This pernicious superstition, thus checked for awhile, broke out again; and spread not only over Judæa the source of this evil, but reached the city also: whither flow from all quarters all things vile and shameful, and where they find shelter and encouragement. At first, only those were apprehended who confessed themselves of that sect; afterwards, a vast multitude discovered by them; all which were condemned, not so much for the crime of burning the city, as for their hatred of mankind. Their executions were so contrived as to expose them to derision and contempt. Some were covered over with the skins of wild beasts, and torn to pieces by dogs; some were crucified. Others, having been daubed over with combustible materials, were set up as lights in the night-time, and thus burned to death. Nero made use of his own gardens as a theatre on this occasion, and also exhibited the diversions of the circus, sometimes standing in the crowd as a spectator, in the habit of a charioteer; at other times driving a chariot himself; till at length these men, though really criminal, and deserving exemplary punishment, began to be commiserated as people who were destroyed, not out of regard to the public welfare, but only to gratify the cruelty of one man" ("Annals," book xv., sect. 44).

This was probably written, if authentic, about A.D. 107. The reasons against the authenticity of this passage are thus given by Robert Taylor: "This passage, which would have

served the purpose of Christian quotation better than any other in all the writings of Tacitus, or of any Pagan writer whatever, is not quoted by any of the Christian Fathers.

"It is not quoted by Tertullian, though he had read and largely quotes the works of Tacitus: and though his argument immediately called for the use of this quotation with so loud a voice, that his omission of it, if it had really existed, amounts to a violent improbability.

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"This Father has spoken of Tacitus in a way that it is absolutely impossible that he should have spoken of him had his writings contained such a passage.

"It is not quoted by Clemens Alexandrinus, who set himself entirely to the work of adducing and bringing together all the admissions and recognitions which Pagan authors had made of the existence of Christ or Christians before his time.

"It has nowhere been stumbled on by the laborious and all-seeking Eusebius, who could by no possibility have missed of it....

"There is no vestige nor trace of its existence anywhere in the world before the fifteenth century.

"It rests then entirely upon the fidelity of a single individual. And he, having the ability, the opportunity, and the strongest possible incitement of interest to induce him to introduce the interpolation.

"The passage itself, though unquestionably the work of a master, and entitled to be pronounced the *chef d'oeuvre* of

the art, betrays the *penchant* of that delight in blood, and in descriptions of bloody horrors, as peculiarly characteristic of the Christian disposition as it was abhorrent to the mild and gentle mind, and highly cultivated taste of Tacitus.

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"It is falsified by the 'Apology of Tertullian,' and the far more respectable testimony of Melito, Bishop of Sardis, who explicitly states that the Christians, up to his time, the third century, had never been victims of persecution; and that it was in provinces lying beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and not in Judæa, that Christianity originated.

"Tacitus has, in no other part of his writings, made the least allusion to Christ or Christians.

"The use of this passage as a part of the 'Evidences of the Christian Religion,' is absolutely modern" ("Diegesis," pp. 374—376).

Judge Strange—writing on another point—gives us an argument against the authenticity of this passage: "As Josephus made Rome his place of abode from the year 70 to the end of the century, there inditing his history of all that concerned the Jews, it is apparent that, had there been a sect flourishing in the city who were proclaiming the risen Jesus as the Messiah in his time, the circumstance was one this careful and discerning writer could not have failed to notice and to comment on" ("Portraiture and Mission of Jesus," p. 15). It is, indeed, passing strange that Josephus, who tells us so much about false Messiahs and their followers, should omit—as he must have done if this passage of Tacitus be authentic—all reference to this

additional false Messiah, whose followers in the very city where Josephus was living, underwent such terrible tortures, either during his residence there, or immediately before it. Burning men, used as torches, adherents of a Jewish Messiah, ought surely to have been unusual enough to have attracted his attention. We may add to these arguments that, supposing such a passage were really written by Tacitus, the two lines regarding Christus look much like an interpolation, as the remainder would run more connectedly if they were omitted. But the whole passage is of more than doubtful authenticity, being in itself incredible, if the Acts and the Epistles of the New Testament be true; for this persecution is said to have occurred during the reign of Nero, during which Paul abode in Rome, teaching in peace, "no man forbidding him" (Acts xxviii. 31); during which, also, he wrote to the Romans that they need not be afraid of the government if they did right (Romans xii. 34); clearly, if these passages are true, the account in Tacitus must be false; and as he himself had no reason for composing such a tale, it must have been forged by Christians to glorify their creed.

The extreme ease with which this passage might have been inserted in all editions of Tacitus used in modern times arises from the fact that all such editions are but copies of one single MS., which was in the possession of one single individual; the solitary owner might make any interpolations he pleased, and there was no second copy by which his accuracy might be tested. "The first publication of any part of the 'Annals of Tacitus' was by Johannes de Spire, at Venice, in the year 1468—his imprint being made from a single MS., in his own power and possession only, and purporting to have been written in the eighth century.... from this all other MSS. and printed copies of the works of Tacitus are derived." ("Diegesis," p. 373.)

Suetonius (born about A.D. 65, died in second century) writes: "The Christians, a race of men of a new and mischievous (or magical) superstition, were punished." In another passage we read of Claudius, who reigned A.D. 41-54: "He drove the Jews, who, at the suggestion of Chrestus, were constantly rioting, out of Rome." From this we might infer that there was at that time a Jewish leader, named Chrestus, living in Rome, and inciting the Jews to rebellion. His followers would probably take his name, and, expelled from Rome, they would spread this name in all directions. If the passage in Acts xi. 20 and 26 be of any historical value, it would curiously strengthen this hypothesis, since the "disciples were called Christians first in Antioch," and the missionaries to Antioch, who preached "unto the Jews only," came from Cyprus and Cyrene, which would naturally lie in the way of fugitives from Rome to Asia Minor. They would bring the name Christian with them, and the date in the Acts synchronises with that in Suetonius. Chrestus would appear to have left a sect behind him in Rome, bearing his name, the members of which were prosecuted by the Government, very likely as traitors and rebels. Keim's good opinion of Suetonius is much degraded by this Chrestus: "In his 'Life of Claudius,' who expelled the Jews from Rome, he has shown his undoubted inferiority to Tacitus as a historian by treating 'Christ' as a restless and seditious Jewish agitator, who was still living in the time of Claudius, and, indeed, in Rome" ("Jesus of Nazara," p. 33).

It is natural that modern Christians should object to a Jewish Chrestus starting up at Rome simultaneously with their Jewish Christus in Judæa, who, according to Luke's chronology, must have been crucified about A.D. 43. The coincidence is certainly inconvenient; but if they refuse the testimony of Suetonius concerning Chrestus, the leader, why should they accept it concerning the Christians, the

followers? Paley, of course, although he quotes Suetonius, omits all reference at this stage to the unlucky Chrestus; his duty was to present evidences of, not against, Christianity. Most dishonestly, however, he inserts a reference to it later on (p. 73), where, in a brief *résumé* of the evidence, he uses it as a link in his chain: "When Suetonius, an historian contemporary with Tacitus, relates that, in the time of Claudius, the Jews were making disturbances at Rome, Christus being their leader." Why does not Paley explain to us how Jesus came to be leading Jews at Rome during the reign of Claudius, and why he incited them to riot? No such incident is related in the life of Jesus of Nazareth; and if Suetonius be correct, the credit of the Gospels is destroyed. To his shame be it said, that Paley here deliberately refers to a passage, *which he has not ventured to quote*, simply that he may use the great name of Suetonius to strengthen his lamentably weak argument, by the pretence that Suetonius mentions Jesus of Nazareth, and thus makes him a historical character. Few more disgraceful perversions of evidence can be found, even in the annals of controversy. H. Horne refers to this passage in proof of the existence of Christ (Introduction, vol. i., page 202); but without offering any explanation of the appearance of Christ in Rome some years after he ought to have been dead.

Juvenal is next dragged forward by Paley as a witness, because he mentioned the punishment of some criminals: "I think it sufficiently probable that these [Christian executions] were the executions to which the poet refers" ("Evidences," p. 29.) Needless to say that there is not a particle of proof that they were anything of the kind; but when evidence is lacking, it is necessary to invent it.

Pliny the Younger (born A.D. 61, died A.D. 115) writes to the Emperor Trajan, about A.D. 107, to ask him how he



shall treat the Christians, and as Paley has so grossly misrepresented this letter, it will be well to reproduce the whole of it. It contains no word of Christians dying boldly as Paley pretends, nor, indeed, of the punishment of death being inflicted at all. The word translated "punishment" is *supplicium* (acc. of *supplicium*) in the original, and is a term which, like the French *supplice*, derived from it, may mean the punishment of death, or any other heavy penalty. The translation of the letter runs as follows: "C. Pliny to the Emperor Trajan, Health.—It is customary with me to refer to you, my lord, matters about which I entertain a doubt. For who is better able either to rule my hesitation, or to instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at the inquiries about the Christians, and, therefore, cannot say for what crime, or to what extent, they are usually punished, or what is the nature of the inquiry about them. Nor have I been free from great doubts whether there should not be a distinction between ages, or how far those of a tender frame should be treated differently from the robust; whether those who repent should not be pardoned, so that one who has been a Christian should not derive advantage from having ceased to be one; whether the name itself of being a Christian should be punished, or only crime attendant upon the name? In the meantime I have laid down this rule in dealing with those who were brought before me for being Christians. I asked whether they were Christians; if they confessed, I asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; if they persevered, I ordered them to be led off. For I had no doubt in my mind that, whatever it might be which they acknowledged, obduracy and inflexible obstinacy, at all events should be punished. There were others guilty of like folly, whom I set aside to be sent to Rome, because they were Roman citizens. In the next place, when this crime began, as usual, gradually to spread, it showed itself in a variety of ways. An indictment was set forth without any

author, containing the names of many who denied that they were Christians or ever had been; and, when I set the example, they called on the gods, and made offerings of frankincense and wine to your image, which I, for this purpose, had ordered to be brought out, together with the images of the gods. Moreover, they cursed Christ; none of which acts can be extorted from those who are really Christians. I consequently gave orders that they should be discharged. Again, others, who have been informed against, said that they were Christians, and afterwards denied it; that they had been so once but had ceased to be so, some three years ago, some longer than that, some even twenty years before; all of these worshipped your image, and the statues of the gods; they also cursed Christ. But they asserted that this was the sum total of their crime or error, whichever it may be called, that they were used to come together on a stated day before it was light, and to sing in turn, among themselves, a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath—not to anything wicked—but that they would not commit theft, robbery, or adultery, nor break their word, nor deny that anything had been entrusted to them when called upon to restore it. After this they said that it was their custom to separate, and again to meet together to take their meals, which were in common and of a harmless nature; but that they had ceased even to do this since the proclamation which I issued according to your commands, forbidding such meetings to be held. I therefore deemed it the more necessary to enquire of two servant maids, who were said to be attendants, what was the real truth, and to apply the torture. But I found that it was nothing but a bad and excessive superstition, and I consequently adjourned the inquiry, and consulted you upon the subject. For it seemed to me to be a matter on which it was desirable to take advice, in consequence of the number of those who are in danger. For there are many of every age, of every rank, and

even of both sexes, who are invited to incur the danger, and will still be invited. For the infection of this superstition has spread through not only cities, but also villages and the country, though it seems possible to check and remedy it. At all events it is evident that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, and the sacred solemnities, which had been intermitted, are revived, and victims are sold everywhere, though formerly it was difficult to find a buyer. It is, therefore, easy to believe that a number of persons may be corrected, if the door of repentance be left open" (Ep. 97).

It is urged by Christian advocates that this letter at least shows how widely Christianity had spread at this early date; but we shall later have occasion to draw attention to the fact that the name "Christian" was used before the reputed time of Christ to describe some extensively-spread sects, and that the worshippers of the Egyptian Serapis were known by that title. It may be added that the authenticity of this letter is by no means beyond dispute, and that R. Taylor urges some very strong arguments against it. Among others, he suggests: "The undeniable fact that the first Christians were the greatest liars and forgers that had ever been in the whole world, and that they actually stopped at nothing.... The flagrant atopism of Christians being found in the remote province of Bithynia, before they had acquired any notoriety in Rome.... The inconsistency of the supposition that so just and moral a people as the primitive Christians are assumed to have been, should have been the first to provoke the Roman Government to depart from its universal maxims of toleration, liberality, and indifference.... The use of the torture to extort confession.... The choice of women to be the subjects of this torture, when the ill-usage of women was, in like manner, abhorrent to the Roman character" ("Diegesis," pp. 383, 384).

Paley boldly states that Martial (born A.D. 43, died about A.D. 100) makes the Christians "the subject of his ridicule," because he wrote an epigram on the stupidity of admiring any vain-glorious fool who would rush to be tormented for the sake of notoriety. Hard-set must Christians be for evidence, when reduced to rely on such pretended allusions.

Epictetus (flourished first half of second century) is claimed as another witness, because he states that "It is possible a man may arrive at this temper, and become indifferent to these things from madness, or from habit, as the Galileans" (Book iv., chapter 7). The Galileans, i.e., the people of Galilee, appear to have had a bad name, and it is highly probable that Epictetus simply referred to them, just as he might have said as an equivalent phrase for stupidity, "like the Boeotians." In addition to this, the followers of Judas the Gaulonite were known as Galileans, and were remarkable for the "inflexible constancy which, in defence of their cause, rendered them insensible of death and tortures" ("Decline and Fall," vol. ii., p. 214).

Marcus Aurelius (born A.D. 121, died A.D. 180) is Paley's last support, as he urges that fortitude in the face of death should arise from judgment, "and not from obstinacy, like the Christians." As no one disputes the existence of a sect called Christians when Marcus Aurelius wrote, this testimony is not specially valuable.

Paley, so keen to swoop down on any hint that can be twisted into an allusion to the Christians, entirely omits the interesting letter written by the Emperor Adrian to his brother-in-law Servianus, A.D. 134. The evidence is not of an edifying character, and this accounts for the omission: "The worshippers of Serapis are Christians, and those are

consecrated to the god Serapis, who, I find, call themselves the bishops of Christ" (Quoted in "Diegesis," p. 386).

Such are the whole external evidences of Christianity until after A.D. 160. In a time rich in historians and philosophers one man, Tacitus, in a disputed passage, mentions a Christus punished under Pontius Pilate, and the existence of a sect bearing his name. Suetonius, Pliny, Adrian, possibly Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, casually mention some people called Christians.

The Rev. Dr. Giles thus summarises the proofs of the weakness of early Christian evidences in "profane history:"—

"Though the remains of Grecian and Latin profane literature which belong to the first and second centuries of our era are enough to form a library of themselves, they contain no allusion to the New Testament.... The Latin writers, who lived between the time of Christ's crucifixion and the year A.D. 200, are Seneca, Lucan, Suetonius, Tacitus, Persius, Juvenal, Martial, Pliny the Elder, Silius Italicus, Statius, Quintilian, and Pliny the Younger, besides numerous others of inferior note. The greater number of these make mention of the Jews, but not of the Christians. In fact, Suetonius, Tacitus, and the younger Pliny, are the only Roman writers who mention the Christian religion or its founder" ("Christian Records," by Rev. Dr. Giles, P. 36).

"The Greek classic writers, who lived between the time of Christ's crucifixion and the year 200, are those which follow: Epictetus, Plutarch, Ælian, Arrian, Galen, Lucian, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ptolemy, Marcus Aurelius (who, though a Roman emperor, wrote in Greek), Pausanias, and many others of less note. The allusions to Christianity found in their works are singularly brief" (Ibid, p. 42).

What does it all, this "evidence," amount to? One writer, Tacitus, records that a man, called by his followers "Christ"—for no one pretends that Christ is anything more than a title given by his disciples to a certain Jew named Jesus—was put to death by Pontius Pilate. And suppose he were, what then? How is this a proof of the religion called Christianity? Tacitus knows nothing of the miracle-worker, of the risen and ascended man; he is strangely ignorant of all the wonders that had occurred; and, allowing the passage to be genuine, it tells sorely against the marvellous history given by the Christians of their leader, whose fame is supposed to have spread far and wide, and whose fame most certainly must so have spread had he really performed all the wonderful works attributed to him. But no necessity lies upon the Freethinker, when he rejects Christianity, to disprove the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth, although we point to the inadequacy of the evidence even of his existence. The strength of the Freethought position is in no-wise injured by the admission that a young Jew named Joshua (*i.e.* Jesus) may have wandered up and down Galilee and Judæa in the reign of Tiberius, that he may have been a religious reformer, that he may have been put to death by Pontius Pilate for sedition. All this is perfectly likely, and to allow it in no way endorses the mass of legend and myth encrusted round this tiny nucleus of possible fact. This obscure peasant is not the Christian Jesus, who is—as we shall later urge—only a new presentation of the ancient Sun-God, with unmistakeable family likeness to his elder brothers. The Reverend Robert Taylor very rightly remarks, concerning this small historical possibility: "These are circumstances which fall entirely within the scale of rational possibility, and draw for no more than an ordinary and indifferent testimony of history, to command the mind's assent. The mere relation of any historian, living near enough to the

time supposed to guarantee the probability of his competent information on the subject, would have been entitled to our acquiescence. We could have no reason to deny or to doubt what such an historian could have had no motive to feign or to exaggerate. The proof, even to demonstration, of these circumstances would constitute no step or advance towards the proof of the truth of the Christian religion; while the absence of a sufficient degree of evidence to render even these circumstances unquestionable must, *à fortiori*, be fatal to the credibility of the less credible circumstances founded upon them" ("Diegesis," p. 7).

But Paley pleads some indirect evidence on behalf of Christianity, which deserves a word of notice since the direct evidence so lamentably breaks down. He urges that: "there is satisfactory evidence that many, professing to be original witnesses of the Christian miracles, passed their lives in labours, dangers, and sufferings, voluntarily undergone, in attestation of the accounts which they delivered, and solely in consequence of their belief of those accounts; and that they also submitted, from the same motives, to new rules of conduct." Nearly 200 pages are devoted to the proof of this proposition, a proposition which it is difficult to characterise with becoming courtesy, when we know the complete and utter absence of any "satisfactory evidence" that the original witnesses did anything of the kind.

It is pleaded that the "original witnesses passed their lives in labours, etc., in attestation of the accounts they delivered." The evidence of this may be looked for either in Pagan or in Christian writings. Pagan writers know literally nothing about the "original witnesses," mentioning, at the utmost, but "the Christians;" and these Christians, when put to death, were not so executed in attestation of any accounts delivered by them, but wholly and solely because

of the evil deeds and the scandalous practices rightly or wrongly attributed to them. Supposing—what is not true—that they had been executed for their creed, there is no pretence that they were eye-witnesses of the miracles of Christ.

Paley's first argument is drawn "from the nature of the case"—*i.e.*, that persecution ought to have taken place, whether it did or not, because both Jews and Gentiles would reject the new creed. So far as the Jews are concerned, we hear of no persecution from Josephus. If we interrogate the Christian Acts, we hear but of little, two persons only being killed. We learn also that "many thousands of Jews" belonged to the new sect, and were propitiated by Christian conformity to the law; and that, when the Jews rose against Paul—not as a Christian, but as a breaker of the Mosaic law—he was promptly delivered by the Romans, who would have set him at liberty had he not elected to be tried at Rome. If we turn to the conduct of the Pagans, we meet the same blank absence of evidence of persecution, until we come to the disputed passage in Tacitus, wherein none of the eye-witnesses are said to have been concerned; and we have, on the other side, the undisputed fact that, under the imperial rule of Rome, every subject nation practised its own creed undisturbed, so long as it did not incite to civil disturbances. "The religious tenets of the Galileans, or Christians, were never made a subject of punishment, or even of inquiry" ("Decline and Fall," vol. ii., p. 215).

This view of the matter is thoroughly corroborated by Lardner: "The disciples of Jesus Christ were under the protection of the Roman law, since the God they worshipped and whose worship they recommended, was the God of the heavens and the earth, the same God whom the Jews worshipped, and the worship of whom was



allowed of all over the Roman Empire, and established by special edicts and decrees in most, perhaps in all the places, in which we meet with St. Paul in his travels" ("Credibility," vol. i., pt. I, pp. 406, 407. Ed. 1727). He also quotes "a remarkable piece of justice done the Jews at Doris, in Syria, by Petronius, President of that province. The fact is this: Some rash young fellows of the place got in and set up a statue of the Emperor in the Jews' synagogue. Agrippa the Great made complaints to Petronius concerning this injury. Whereupon Petronius issued a very sharp precept to the magistrates of Doris. He terms this action an offence, not against the Jews only, but also against the Emperor; says, it is agreeable to the law of nature that every man should be master of his own places, according to the decree of the Emperor. I have, says he, given directions that they who have dared to do these things contrary to the edict of Augustus, be delivered to the centurion Vitellius Proculus, that they may be brought to me, and answer for their behaviour. And I require the chief men in the magistracy to discover the guilty to the centurion, unless they are willing to have it thought, that this injustice has been done with their consent; and that they see to it, that no sedition or tumult happen upon this occasion, which, I perceive, is what some are aiming at.... I do also require, that for the future, you seek no pretence for sedition or disturbance, but that all men worship [God] according to their own customs" (Ibid, pp. 382, 383). After giving some other facts, Lardner sums up: "These are authentic testimonies in behalf of the equity of the Roman Government in general, and of the impartial administration of justice by the Roman presidents—toward all the people of their provinces, how much soever they differed from each other in matters of religion" (Ibid, p. 401).

The evidence of persecution which consists in quotations from the Christian books ("Evidences," pages 33-52) cannot

be admitted without evidence of the authenticity of the books quoted. The Acts and the Pauline epistles so grossly contradict each other that, having nothing outside themselves with which to compare them, they are mutually destructive. "The epistle to the Romans presents special difficulties to its acceptance as a genuine address to the Church of Rome in the era ascribed to it. The faith of this Church, at this early period, is said to be 'spoken of throughout the whole world'; and yet when Paul, according to the Acts, at a later time visited Rome, so little had this alleged Church influenced the neighbourhood, that the inquiring Jews of Rome are shown to be totally ignorant of what constituted Christianity, and to have looked to Paul to enlighten them" ("Portraiture and Mission of Jesus," p. 15). 2 Cor. is of very doubtful authenticity. The passage in James shows no fiery persecution. Hebrews is of later date. 2 Thess. again very doubtful. The "suffering" spoken of by Peter appears, from the context, to refer chiefly to reproaches, and a problematical "if any man suffer as a Christian." Had those he wrote to been then suffering, surely the apostle would have said: "*When* any man suffers ... let him not be ashamed." The whole question of the authenticity of the canonical books will be challenged later, and the weakness of this division of Paley's evidences will then be more fully apparent. Meanwhile we subjoin Lardner's view of these passages. He has been arguing that the Romans "protected the many rites of all their provinces;" and he proceeds: "There is, however, one difficulty which, I am aware, may be started by some persons. If the Roman Government, to which all the world was then subject, was so mild and gentle, and protected all men in the profession of their several religious tenets, and the practice of all their peculiar rites, whence comes it to pass that there are in the Epistles so many exhortations to the Christians to patience and constancy, and so many arguments of consolation suggested to them, as a suffering

body of men? [Here follow some passages as in Paley.] To this I answer: 1. That the account St. Luke has given in the Acts of the Apostles of the behaviour of the Roman officers out of Judæa, and in it, is confirmed not only by the account I have given of the genius and nature of the Roman Government, but also by the testimony of the most ancient Christian writers. The Romans did afterwards depart from these moderate maxims; but it is certain that they were governed by them as long as the history of the Acts of the Apostles reaches. Tertullian and divers others do affirm that Nero was the first Emperor that persecuted the Christians; nor did he begin to disturb them till after Paul had left Rome the first time he was there (when he was sent thither by Festus), and, therefore, not until he was become an enemy to all mankind. And I think that, according to the account which Tacitus has given of Nero's inhumane treatment of the Christians at Rome, in the tenth year of his reign, what he did then was not owing to their having different principles in religion from the Romans, but proceeded from a desire he had to throw off from himself the odium of a vile action—namely, setting fire to the city—which he was generally charged with. And Sulpicius Severus, a Christian historian of the fourth century, says the same thing ("Credibility of the Gospel History," vol. i., pages 416-420). Lardner, however, allows that the Jews persecuted the Christians where they could although they were unable to slay them. They probably persecuted them much in the same fashion that the Christians have persecuted Freethinkers during the present century.

But Paley adduces further the evidence of Clement, Hermas, Polycarp, Ignatius, and a circular letter of the Church of Smyrna, to prove the sufferings of the eye-witnesses ("Evidences," pages 52-55). When we pass into writings of this description in later times, there is, indeed, plenty of evidence—in fact, a good deal too much, for they

testify to such marvellous occurrences, that no trust is possible in anything which they say. Not only was St. Paul's head cut off, but the worthy Bishop of Rome, Linus, his contemporary (who is supposed to relate his martyrdom), tells us how, "instead of blood, nought but a stream of pure milk flowed from his veins;" and we are further instructed that his severed head took three jumps in "honour of the Trinity, and at each spot on which it jumped there instantly struck up a spring of living water, which retains at this day a plain and distinct taste of milk" ("Diegesis," pp. 256, 257). Against a mass of absurd stories of this kind, the *only evidence* of the persecution of Paley's eye-witnesses, we may set the remarks of Gibbon: "In the time of Tertullian and Clemens of Alexandria the glory of martyrdom was confined to St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. James. It was gradually bestowed on the rest of the Apostles by the more recent Greeks, who prudently selected for the theatre of their preaching and sufferings some remote country beyond the limits of the Roman Empire" ("Decline and Fall," vol. ii., p. 208, note). Later there was, indeed, more persecution; but even then the martyrdoms afford no evidence of the truth of Christianity. Martyrdom proves the sincerity, *but not the truth*, of the sufferer's belief; every creed has had its martyrs, and as the truth of one creed excludes the truth of every other, it follows that the vast majority have died for a delusion, and that, therefore, the number of martyrs it can reckon is no criterion of the truth of a creed, but only of the devotion it inspires. While we allow that the Christians underwent much persecution, there can be no doubt that the number of the sufferers has been grossly exaggerated. One can scarcely help suspecting that, as real martyrs were not forthcoming in as vast numbers as their supposed bones, martyrs were invented to fit the wealth-producing relics, as the relics did not fit the historical martyrs. "The total disregard of truth and probability in the representations of these primitive

martyrdoms was occasioned by a very natural mistake. The ecclesiastical writers of the fourth and fifth centuries ascribed to the magistrates of Rome the same degree of implacable and unrelenting zeal which filled their own breasts against the heretics, or the idolaters of their own time.... But it is certain, and we may appeal to the grateful confessions of the first Christians, that the greatest part of those magistrates, who exercised in the provinces the authority of the Emperor, or of the Senate, and to whose hands alone the jurisdiction of life and death was entrusted, behaved like men of polished manners and liberal education, who respected the rules of justice, and who were conversant with the precepts of philosophy. They frequently declined the odious task of persecution, dismissed the charge with contempt, or suggested to the accused Christian some legal evasion by which he might elude the severity of the laws. (Tertullian, in his epistle to the Governor of Africa, mentions several remarkable instances of lenity and forbearance which had happened within his own knowledge.)... The learned Origen, who, from his experience, as well as reading, was intimately acquainted with the history of the Christians, declares, in the most express terms, that the number of martyrs was very inconsiderable.... The general assertion of Origen may be explained and confirmed by the particular testimony of his friend Dionysius, who, in the immense city of Alexandria, and under the rigorous persecution of Decius, reckons only ten men and seven women who suffered for the profession of the Christian name" ("Decline and Fall," vol. ii., pp. 224-226. See throughout chap. xvi.). Gibbon calculates the whole number of martyrs of the Early Church at "somewhat less than two thousand persons;" and remarks caustically that the "Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels" (pp. 273, 274). Supposing, however,

that the most exaggerated accounts of Church historians were correct, how would that support Paley's argument? His contention is that the "eye-witnesses" of miraculous events died in testimony of their belief in them; and myriads of martyrs in the second and third centuries are of no assistance to him. So we will retrace our steps to the eye-witnesses, and we find the position of Gibbon—as to the lives and labours of the Apostles being written later by men not confining themselves to facts—endorsed by Mosheim, who judiciously observes: "Many have undertaken to write this history of the Apostles, a history which we find loaded with fables, doubts, and difficulties, when we pursue it further than the books of the New Testament, and the most ancient writers in the Christian Church" ("Eccles. Hist.," p. 27, ed. 1847). What "ancient writers" Mosheim alludes to it is difficult to guess, as may be judged from his criticisms quoted below, on the "Apostolic Fathers," the most ancient of all; and in estimating the worth of his opinion, it is necessary to remember that he was himself an earnest Christian, although a learned and candid one, so that every admission he makes, which tells against Christianity, is of double weight, it being the admission of a friend and defender.

To the credit of Paley's apostolic evidences (Clement, Hermas, Polycarp, Ignatius, and letter from Smyrna), we may urge the following objections. Clement's writings are much disputed: "The accounts which remain of his life, actions, and death are, for the most part, uncertain. Two *Epistles to the Corinthians*, written in Greek, have been attributed to him, of which the second has been looked upon as spurious, and the first as genuine, by many learned writers. But even this latter seems to have been corrupted and interpolated by some ignorant and presumptuous author.... The learned are now unanimous in regarding the other writings which bear the name of Clemens (Clement)