



[Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* II.2.1-4](#)

The communication between Pontius Pilate and the emperor Tiberius about Christ

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: *Ecclesiastical History*

Reference: II.2.1-4

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on [I.6.6-11](#).

In this passage, Eusebius claims that following Christ's death and resurrection, Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, in keeping with common practice informed the emperor Tiberius of the events which had occurred in his province, particularly the rumours relating to the risen Jesus. Eusebius tells us that Pilate related to the emperor all that he had heard about Christ, including that he was believed to be a god, and had performed many wonders. Subsequently, Eusebius records, Tiberius had turned to the Senate to investigate the matter, and even though due to Roman laws relating to the deification of men the notion of Christ's divinity was rejected, the emperor himself remained open minded and un-opposed to Christ. In order to substantiate his claims, Eusebius draws on the second-century writer Tertullian, who clearly underwent rhetorical training, and has some knowledge of Roman legal procedure and specific laws (the question of whether he was a jurist himself, as opposed to simply a well-trained orator, is debated; for discussion of this issue, see David Rankin, "Was Tertullian a Jurist?"). In relation to Eusebius's citation here, we can look to [Tertullian's Apology V](#), in which Tertullian discusses the deification of new gods in order to rationalise the way that Christianity was viewed by critics (i.e. not as a legitimate *religio*). Like Eusebius, Tertullian mentions a Roman decree stating that no god could be deified unless first ratified by the senate, and support this by stating that even Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (triumvir along with Octavian and Mark Antony, and the last Pontifex Maximus, high priest, of the Roman Republic) fell afoul of this rule when he wanted his own god Alburnus formally recognised (Tertullian's source for this information is not known, but he refers to it also in *Against Marcion* I.18 and *To the Nations* I.10). The decree cited is a matter of speculation, but Cicero, *On the Laws* XI.19 states the following: "No one shall have gods to himself, be they new gods or alien gods, unless recognised by the state." As Eusebius recognises, Tertullian then moves to argue that the emperor Tiberius unsuccessfully argued on behalf of making Christ a recognised divinity, turned down by the senate.

The argument made by Tertullian and Eusebius regarding Tiberius's views on Christ cannot be historically verified. However, they do evidence a notable early Christian tradition of exonerating Pilate of the death of Jesus (instead blaming the Jews), in this case even extending this exoneration to the emperor himself. However, Pilate and Tiberius's exoneration also makes them appear as weak characters: in spite of their power and authority they are obliged to make concessions to Roman institutions. In the second century CE, the [Gospel of Peter](#) also shares this more positive view of Pilate, and it seems that various *Acts of Pilate* were known which propagated similar views. The fourth-century Latin text known as the *Gospel of Nicodemus* preserves one such *Acts of Pilate*, claiming to be from official records kept at the *praetorium* in Jerusalem, and also found in the earlier Greek *Acts of Peter and Paul*. In the first book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius argues that the Jews, while essential for paving the way for Christ's arrival, were ultimately destined to fall from their privileged status with God (see I.6.6-11). While no critique of the Jews is explicitly given in the present passage, the argument that the Romans were not ignorant of Christ's significance is made clear, and this was something of great importance to Eusebius later on in this work and elsewhere, as he documented the acceptance of Christianity by the empire.

Keywords in the original language:



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Thematic keywords in English:

- [decree](#)
- [deification](#)
- [Jesus](#)
- [Pilate](#)
- [resurrection](#)
- [Roman governor](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman province](#)
- [Roman Senate](#)
- [Tiberius](#)

Bibliographical references: Rankin, David Ivan, "[Was Tertullian a Jurist?](#)", in *Studia Patristica 31: Papers presented at the Twelfth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1995* (ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 335-342

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Gospel of Peter 1-9; 35-46](#)

Exoneration of Pilate

- [Read more about Gospel of Peter 1-9; 35-46](#)

Text

[Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History I.6.6-11](#)

The falling in favour of the Jewish people, their subjugation by Rome, and the coming of Christ

- [Read more about Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History I.6.6-11](#)

Text



[Tertullian, Apology V](#)

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