A LETTER FROM PONTIUS PILATE

BY

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According to a recent newspaper report a letter from Pontius Pilate to the Emperor Tiberius was found in Liverpool. In this letter Pilate informs the Emperor of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion. He had tried hard to save Jesus' life from the fury of the Jews. He had even sent for reinforcements, 2000 men, to prevent the crucifixion — but the troops arrived too late.

The newspapers which reported this discovery also mention that the document from Liverpool was sent to the Vatican Archives with a request that it should be examined, and that it came back from Rome with an expression of the considered opinion that the letter seemed to be a forgery, but, so the report went on, "it is quite possible that it contains historically correct facts because it was written so much closer to the time of the events described." As a headline in The Times (London) most succinctly put it: FAKED LETTER MAY BE CORRECT.

It is to be hoped that some future historian will enlighten unborn generations on the mystery as to how Pilate's correspondence with Tiberius came to turn up in Liverpool. In the meantime we must content ourselves with what the letter tells us, and try to determine what it contributes to our knowledge of historical fact.

Alas, it tells us nothing significantly new. Almost all that it contains has been known for a long time... It is known that from the second century onward letters were put into circulation, purporting to have been despatched by Pilate with red-hot news of the first Good Friday and Easter events... so to say, before the stone was rolled back to its place... The oldest extant specimen of this type of epistolary literature comes from the last quarter of the second century. It is addressed to the Emperor Claudius who became

Rome’s ruler in the year 41 C.E. and reigned until the year 54. Pilate’s term of office as governor of Judaea fell in the years 26 to 36. There is no unanimity among historians as to the exact year of Jesus’ death, but no doubt attaches to the fact that it occurred during the period of Pilate’s governorship in Judaea. The emperor in office was Tiberius (14 to 37) who was succeeded by Caius Caligula. In fact, Claudius became emperor only a dozen or so years after the crucifixion of Jesus. And yet, it is to Claudius to whom Pilate’s earliest report of the crucifixion is addressed!

In all probability, this was intentional. No data of Jesus’ biography were then or are now available, but a belief was current in Christian circles towards the end of the second century that Jesus had completed the fiftieth year of his life when he died. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, gave expression to such a belief which was arrived at on purely speculative grounds. The Incarnation, the perfect union between God and man, would be complete — so Irenaeus thought— only if the Son of God had passed through the full span of a mortal’s life, experiencing, in addition to the stages of childhood, youth, and early manhood, also the years of maturity. It was commonly held in the Graeco-Roman world that man reached his full stature at the age of fifty. Hence the notion that Jesus must have reached that age before he died. Some such reasoning evidently lies behind the fact that Pilate’s alleged report about the crucifixion was addressed to Claudius.

Belated though it may appear, Pilate’s report is so interesting that its contents deserve to be quoted, at least in part:

“...the chief priests, moved by envy, delivered him to me and brought against him one false accusation after another. Believing them, I ordered him to be scourged and delivered him unto their will. And they crucified him. When he was buried, they set guards upon him — yet while my soldiers watched him, he rose again on the third day... The Jews bribed the soldiers and suborned them to testify that his body had been stolen. The soldiers, however, though they took the money, did not remain silent about what had happened. They testified that they saw him arisen...

I report this to Your Majesty lest anyone lie otherwise (sic) and you should believe false remours spread by the Jews.”

Said to come from the fourth century, the document which emerged in Liverpool represents a more elaborated, more embellished version of this second-century epistle addressed to Claudius.

The question arises: why should people, in the second century and later, disturb the ghost of Pilate and compel him to write