

# Tacitus, *Annals* Book 15, Chapter 44

## Historical Context, Textual Analysis, and Significance for Christianity

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### I. Introduction to the Source

#### A. Author Background: Publius Cornelius Tacitus

- Roman senator, historian, and orator
- Lived c. AD 56–120
- Wrote during the reigns of the Flavian emperors and Trajan
- Known for:
  - Critical tone toward tyranny
  - Moral analysis of Roman decline
  - Hostility toward superstition and foreign cults
- *Annals* focuses on Roman history from AD 14–68 (Tiberius through Nero)

#### B. Nature and Purpose of *Annals*

- Political and moral history of imperial Rome
- Written from an elite Roman perspective
- Not intended as religious history, making references to Christianity especially valuable
- Book 15 addresses the later reign of Emperor Nero

### II. Historical Setting of Book 15, Chapter 44

#### A. Rome in AD 64

- Rome was the largest city in the empire
- Densely populated with wooden structures
- Frequent fires due to:
  - Narrow streets
  - Open flames used for cooking and lighting

## **B. The Great Fire of Rome**

- Broke out in July AD 64
- Burned for several days
- Destroyed or damaged much of the city
- Left thousands homeless
- Sparked widespread suspicion and unrest

## **III. Tacitus' Description of Emperor Nero**

### **A. Nero's Reputation in Roman Sources**

- Known for cruelty, extravagance, and self-indulgence
- Accused of:
  - Executing political rivals
  - Artistic vanity
  - Moral corruption
- Tacitus presents Nero as an unfit and dangerous ruler

### **B. Nero and the Fire**

- Rumors that Nero:
  - Ordered the fire intentionally
  - Wanted to rebuild Rome according to his own vision

- Tacitus reports:
  - Conflicting accounts
  - Public suspicion remained strong
- Nero needed a scapegoat to divert blame

## IV. The Scapegoating of Christians

### A. Identification of Christians

- Tacitus states Nero blamed:
  - “A class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace”
- Christians viewed as:
  - Socially disruptive
  - Religiously suspect
  - Unpatriotic due to refusal to worship Roman gods

### B. Roman Attitudes Toward Christianity

- Christianity seen as:
  - A “pernicious superstition”
  - Originating in Judea
  - Spreading to Rome
- Tacitus shows contempt for the movement, reinforcing the hostile Roman perspective

## V. Tacitus’ Reference to Jesus Christ

### A. Identification of Jesus

- Tacitus states:
  - “Christus... suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius”
  - Execution carried out under Pontius Pilate

- Key historical elements:
- Jesus was a real historical figure
- Executed by Roman authority
- Event dated to a specific time and ruler

## **B. Importance of This Reference**

- One of the earliest non-Christian references to Jesus
- Independent confirmation of:
  - Jesus' execution
  - Roman involvement
  - Early spread of Christianity
- Written by a hostile source, increasing historical credibility

## **VI. Description of Christian Persecution**

### **A. Nature of the Punishments**

- Tacitus describes extreme cruelty:
  - Christians torn apart by dogs
  - Crucified
  - Burned as human torches at night
- Executions staged as public spectacles

### **B. Public Reaction**

- Initially, Christians were despised
- Over time:
  - Sympathy arose for the victims
  - Executions seen as excessive and unjust

- Tacitus implies Nero's cruelty undermined his own goal

## **VII. Historical Reliability and Scholarly Evaluation**

### **A. Strengths of Tacitus as a Source**

- Careful historian with access to Roman records
- Hostile to Christianity, reducing bias toward exaggeration in its favor
- Consistent with other Roman sources (e.g., Suetonius, Pliny the Younger)

### **B. Limitations and Biases**

- Strong senatorial bias
- Contempt for non-Roman religions
- Focused on political narrative, not theology

## **VIII. Significance for Biblical and Christian History**

### **A. Confirmation of Gospel Accounts**

- Corroborates:
  - Jesus' execution
  - Role of Pontius Pilate
  - Timeframe of early Christianity

### **B. Insight into Early Christian Identity**

- Christians recognized as a distinct group by AD 64
- Seen as separate from Judaism by Roman authorities
- Already numerous enough in Rome to attract imperial attention

### **C. Early Persecution and Martyrdom**

- Demonstrates:

- Early and violent persecution
- Willingness of Christians to suffer publicly
- Helps explain:
  - Development of martyr theology
  - Strength of early Christian communities

## IX. Importance for a Biblical History Course

### A. Value as a Primary Source

- Non-biblical corroboration of New Testament events
- Provides Roman perspective on early Christianity
- Useful for historical methodology and source criticism

### B. Interdisciplinary Applications

- Roman political history
- Religious studies
- Early church history
- Historiography and bias analysis



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## X. Conclusion

- *Annals* 15.44 is a cornerstone text for historical Jesus studies
- Demonstrates how Christianity intersected with Roman power
- Shows the movement's early visibility and perceived threat
- Remains one of the most important extra-biblical sources for understanding the origins of Christianity

# Outline: Pliny the Younger and His Significance to Christianity

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## I. Introduction

- Purpose of the study
  - To examine the writings of Pliny the Younger as a **non-Christian Roman source**
  - To evaluate their historical value for understanding **early Christianity**
- Importance of non-biblical sources in biblical history
  - Corroboration of New Testament claims
  - Insight into Roman perceptions of Christianity
- Overview of Pliny the Younger
  - Roman aristocrat, lawyer, author, and imperial administrator
  - Lived c. AD 61–113

## II. Historical and Cultural Background

### A. The Roman Empire in the Early 2nd Century

- Political structure under Emperor Trajan
- Role of provincial governors
- Roman attitudes toward new religions and foreign cults
- Importance of public religion and emperor worship

### B. Christianity in the Roman World

- Spread of Christianity beyond Judea
- Growth in Asia Minor
- Social makeup of early Christian communities
- Perceived threat to Roman order and traditions

### III. Pliny the Younger: Life and Career

#### A. Early Life and Education

- Born into an elite Roman family
- Adopted by his uncle, Pliny the Elder
- Classical education in rhetoric and law

#### B. Public Service

- Senatorial career
- Appointment as governor (legatus Augusti) of **Bithynia-Pontus**
- Responsibilities: legal administration, public order, and religious policy

#### C. Literary Contributions

- Collection of personal letters (*Epistulae*)
- Importance of letters as historical documents
- Letters intended for publication and public readership

### IV. The Letters of Pliny the Younger

#### A. Nature and Purpose of the Letters

- Administrative correspondence
- Moral and philosophical reflections
- Insight into Roman governance
- Historical reliability and limitations

#### B. Book 10 of the Letters

- Official correspondence with Emperor Trajan
- Unique historical value due to imperial responses
- Includes Pliny's inquiry regarding Christians

## **V. Letter 10.96: Pliny's Description of Christians**

### **A. Context of the Letter**

- Christians brought before Pliny for trial
- Lack of clear legal precedent
- Pliny's uncertainty regarding punishment

### **B. Interrogation of Christians**

- Questioning accused individuals
- Opportunity to recant
- Execution of those who refused to deny Christianity

### **C. Charges Against Christians**

- Refusal to worship Roman gods
- Refusal to honor the emperor's image
- Viewed as obstinate and stubborn

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### **D. Description of Christian Beliefs and Practices**

- Christians met regularly on a fixed day (likely Sunday)
- Sang hymns "to Christ as to a god"
- Bound themselves by moral oaths
  - Not to commit theft, fraud, or adultery
  - To keep promises and return entrusted property
- Shared ordinary food (not criminal or immoral)

## **VI. Letter 10.97: Trajan's Response**

### **A. Emperor Trajan's Policy**

- Christians not to be actively hunted
- Anonymous accusations rejected

- Punishment only for those who persist in Christianity

### **B. Legal Precedent Established**

- Christianity treated as illegal but tolerated in practice
- Emphasis on loyalty to Roman religion over belief
- Reflection of Roman pragmatism

## **VII. Historical Significance for Christianity**

### **A. Independent Confirmation of Early Christianity**

- Confirms existence of Christians by early 2nd century
- Confirms spread beyond Palestine
- Demonstrates Christianity's growth among all social classes

### **B. Evidence for the Divinity of Christ**

- Christ worshiped "as a god"
- Supports early high Christology
- Counters claims that Jesus' divinity developed later

### **C. Ethical Teachings of Early Christians**

- Moral commitments consistent with New Testament teachings
- Reputation for ethical living
- Refutes rumors of criminal or immoral behavior

## **VIII. Relationship to the New Testament**

### **A. Corroboration of Biblical Claims**

- Early worship practices
- Commitment to moral behavior
- Willingness to suffer for faith

## **B. Chronological Importance**

- Written c. AD 112
- Close in time to apostolic and post-apostolic era
- Bridges gap between New Testament and later church fathers

## **IX. Use of Pliny in Christian Apologetics**

- Value as a hostile or neutral witness
- Strengthens historical case for Jesus and early Christianity
- Frequently cited alongside Tacitus and Josephus

## **X. Limitations and Critical Evaluation**

### **A. What Pliny Does Not Say**

- No biographical details of Jesus' life
- No reference to crucifixion or resurrection

### **B. Roman Bias and Perspective**

- Misunderstanding of Christian theology
- Focus on legality rather than belief
- External observation only

## **XI. Conclusion**

- Summary of Pliny's contribution to biblical history
- Importance of Roman administrative documents
- Enduring value for historical Jesus studies and early church history
- Pliny as a key non-Christian witness to early Christianity

# Outline: Flavius Josephus and His Significance to Christianity

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## I. Introduction to Flavius Josephus

- **Full Name:** Yosef ben Mattityahu (Joseph son of Matthias)
- **Roman Name:** Titus Flavius Josephus
- **Dates:** c. AD 37–c. AD 100
- **Historical Context**
  - Lived during the Second Temple period
  - Eyewitness to the Jewish–Roman War (AD 66–73)
  - Writing under Roman patronage after the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70)
- **Importance as a Historical Source**
  - Primary non-Christian Jewish historian of the 1st century
  - Provides critical background to the New Testament world
  - Bridges Jewish, Roman, and early Christian history

## II. Josephus' Life and Historical Perspective

- **Early Life and Education**
  - Born into a priestly and aristocratic Jewish family
  - Educated in Jewish law and traditions
  - Claimed familiarity with Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes
- **Role in the Jewish–Roman War**
  - Appointed Jewish commander in Galilee
  - Captured by Roman forces
  - Prophesied Vespasian's rise as emperor
- **Relationship with Rome**

- Granted Roman citizenship
- Adopted the family name “Flavius”
- Wrote under imperial protection
- **Historical Bias and Limitations**
  - Desire to defend Judaism to Roman audiences
  - Tendency to portray Romans favorably
  - Self-justifying elements in autobiographical sections

### III. Overview of Josephus’ Major Works

#### A. *The Jewish War* (c. AD 75)

- **Purpose**
  - Account of the Jewish revolt against Rome
  - Explanation of Jewish history and customs for Roman readers
- **Key Themes**
  - Causes of the revolt
  - Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple
- **Relevance to Christianity**
  - Confirms historical context of the New Testament era
  - Illuminates the political tensions surrounding Jesus and early Christians

#### B. *Antiquities of the Jews* (c. AD 93–94)

- **Purpose**
  - Comprehensive history of the Jewish people from creation to AD 66
- **Structure**
  - Books 1–10: Biblical history (Genesis–Exile)
  - Books 11–20: Post-exilic period to the Roman era
- **Importance for Biblical Studies**

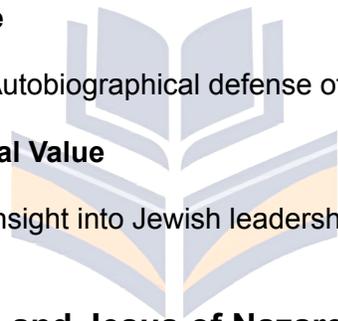
- Corroborates Old Testament narratives
- Provides historical background for intertestamental and New Testament periods

### **C. *Against Apion***

- **Purpose**
  - Defense of Judaism against Greek critics
- **Key Contributions**
  - Defense of the reliability of Hebrew Scriptures
  - Argument for the antiquity of Jewish faith

### **D. *Life of Josephus***

- **Purpose**
  - Autobiographical defense of Josephus' conduct
- **Historical Value**
  - Insight into Jewish leadership and internal divisions



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## **IV. Josephus and Jesus of Nazareth**

### **A. The Testimonium Flavianum (Antiquities 18.3.3)**

- **Content**
  - Mentions Jesus as a wise teacher
  - Refers to crucifixion under Pontius Pilate
- **Textual Issues**
  - Scholarly debate over Christian interpolations
  - Likely partially authentic core
- **Historical Significance**
  - One of the earliest non-Christian references to Jesus
  - Confirms Jesus' execution and following

## B. Reference to James, the Brother of Jesus (Antiquities 20.9.1)

- **Description**
  - Mentions “James, the brother of Jesus who is called Christ”
- **Scholarly Consensus**
  - Widely regarded as authentic
- **Importance for Christianity**
  - Confirms Jesus as a known historical figure
  - Affirms the existence of early Christian leadership

## V. Josephus and Early Christianity

- **Non-Christian Confirmation**
  - Jesus existed as a historical person
  - Jesus was crucified under Roman authority
  - Followers continued after his death
- **Contextualizing the New Testament**
  - Roman governance of Judea
  - Role of the priesthood and Sanhedrin
  - Messianic expectations in 1st-century Judaism
- **Comparison with New Testament Sources**
  - Differences in perspective and theology
  - Similarities in historical framework

## VI. Josephus' Contribution to Christian Apologetics

- **Use as an External Source**
  - Independent corroboration of Gospel claims

- **Strengths**
  - Jewish, non-Christian perspective
  - Close chronological proximity to Jesus
- **Limitations**
  - Not a theological endorsement
  - Must be evaluated critically alongside other sources
- **Role in Historical Jesus Studies**
  - Supports the scholarly consensus that Jesus was a real historical figure

## VII. Scholarly Evaluation and Debates

- **Authenticity Debates**
  - Christian interpolation vs. original text
- **Reliability of Josephus**
  - Comparison with Roman historians (Tacitus, Suetonius)
- **Modern Scholarly Approaches**
  - Textual criticism
  - Historical-critical method

## VIII. Conclusion: Why Josephus Matters for Biblical History

- **Historical Bridge**
  - Connects Old Testament Judaism with early Christianity
- **Essential Source**
  - Provides cultural, political, and religious context
- **Lasting Significance**
  - Continues to inform biblical studies, theology, and apologetics

- **Relevance for Study**

- Encourages critical evaluation of sources
- Demonstrates the value of non-Christian evidence for Christian origins



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# Outline: The Writings of Suetonius and Their Significance to Christianity

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## I. Introduction to Suetonius

- **Full name:** Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus
- **Dates:** c. AD 69–after AD 122
- **Historical period:** Early Roman Empire (1st–2nd century AD)
- **Profession and status**
  - Roman historian and biographer
  - Held administrative posts under Emperor Trajan and later Hadrian
  - Access to imperial archives, official correspondence, and court records
- **Importance for biblical history**
  - Non-Christian, non-Jewish Roman source
  - Provides external corroboration for the early presence of Christianity in Rome
  - Helps situate Christianity within the broader Roman political and social world

## II. Overview of Suetonius's Major Works

### A. *The Twelve Caesars*

- **Structure**
  - Biographical accounts of Julius Caesar through Domitian
  - Organized thematically rather than chronologically
- **Historical method**
  - Focus on character, habits, scandals, and policies
  - Includes anecdotes, rumors, and official acts

- **Value for historians**
  - Insight into Roman imperial governance
  - Reflection of elite Roman attitudes toward minority groups

## **B. Other Works (Fragmentary or Lost)**

- *Lives of Famous Men* (De Viris Illustribus)
- Works on Roman customs, offices, and language
- Though largely lost, they establish Suetonius as a serious scholar of Roman institutions

## **III. Historical Context: Christianity in the Roman World**

- **Christianity as a new religious movement**
  - Originating in Judea
  - Viewed as a sect within Judaism by Roman authorities
- **Roman religious expectations**
  - Emphasis on public order and loyalty to the state
  - Suspicion of exclusive or “foreign” religious groups
- **Key Roman concerns**
  - Social unrest
  - Refusal to participate in emperor worship
  - Perceived threat to traditional values

## **IV. Suetonius’s References to Christianity**

### **A. The Claudius Passage (Claudius 25.4)**

- **Text summary**
  - Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of disturbances “at the instigation of Chrestus”

- **Key issues of interpretation**
  - “Chrestus” likely a reference to *Christus* (Christ)
  - Suggests disputes among Jews over Jesus as Messiah
- **Historical significance**
  - Confirms early Christian presence in Rome by AD 49
  - Aligns with Acts 18:2 (Aquila and Priscilla expelled from Rome)
- **Implications**
  - Christianity caused social conflict significant enough to attract imperial attention
  - Supports the biblical timeline of early Christian expansion

## B. The Nero Passage (Nero 16.2)

- **Text summary**
  - Nero punished Christians as followers of a “new and mischievous superstition”
- **Roman perspective**
  - Christianity viewed negatively, not as a legitimate religion
  - Language reflects disdain rather than theological critique
- **Historical importance**
  - Independent confirmation of persecution under Nero
  - Complements Tacitus’s account of Christians after the Great Fire of Rome
- **Connection to Christian tradition**
  - Reinforces the historical plausibility of early martyrdom narratives
  - Supports the context of persecution addressed in New Testament writings (e.g., 1 Peter)

## V. Suetonius’s Value as a Non-Christian Source

- **Hostile or neutral testimony**
  - Not attempting to promote Christianity

- Increases credibility as an external witness
- **Corroboration of key facts**
  - Christians existed as a distinct group
  - They were active in Rome within decades of Jesus's crucifixion
  - Roman authorities recognized and responded to them
- **Comparison with other Roman sources**
  - Tacitus: more detailed and explicitly names Christus
  - Pliny the Younger: provides insight into Christian worship practices
  - Suetonius: brief but socially revealing references

## VI. Limitations and Challenges in Using Suetonius

- **Brief and indirect references**
  - No detailed description of Christian beliefs
- **Potential misunderstandings**
  - Confusion between Jews and Christians
  - Use of pejorative language
- **Biographical style**
  - Not focused on religious analysis
  - More interested in imperial policy effects than causes

## VII. Significance for Biblical and Christian History

- **Historical Jesus studies**
  - Supports the existence of Christ as a historical figure
- **Early church history**
  - Confirms rapid spread of Christianity beyond Judea

- **New Testament context**
  - Illuminates political pressures faced by early believers
- **Apologetic significance**
  - Demonstrates that Christianity was recognized by hostile Roman observers
  - Strengthens claims that Christianity was not a later invention

## VIII. Use in a Biblical History Course

- **Pedagogical value**
  - Encourages critical engagement with primary sources
  - Demonstrates the use of non-biblical evidence
- **Suggested classroom applications**
  - Comparative analysis with Acts, Tacitus, and Pliny
  - Source evaluation exercises (bias, purpose, audience)
  - Discussion on persecution and religious tolerance in Rome
- **Key learning outcomes**
  - Students understand Christianity within its Roman context
  - Students evaluate historical evidence beyond Scripture
  - Students develop skills in historiography and source criticism

## IX. Conclusion

- Suetonius provides **brief but powerful confirmation** of early Christianity's presence and impact in Rome
- His writings help bridge **biblical narratives and Roman history**
- When used carefully, Suetonius is an essential source for understanding how Christianity was perceived by the Roman world in its earliest generations