

Discussion Questions: Tacitus & *Annals* 15:44

A. Historical Context and Roman Perspective

1. How does Tacitus' political and social position as a Roman senator shape his portrayal of Nero and the Christians?
2. Why was the Great Fire of Rome such a politically dangerous event for Nero?
3. According to Tacitus, why were Christians a convenient scapegoat for the fire?
4. What does Tacitus' language reveal about Roman attitudes toward new or foreign religions?

B. Tacitus as a Historical Source

5. What factors make Tacitus a strong historical source for studying early Christianity?
6. What limitations or biases should modern historians keep in mind when using *Annals* 15.44?
7. How does Tacitus' hostile tone toward Christianity affect the credibility of his reference to Jesus?
8. Compare Tacitus' account with another Roman source (Pliny the Younger or Suetonius). What similarities or differences stand out?

C. Jesus and Early Christianity

9. What specific historical claims does Tacitus make about Jesus Christ?
10. Why is Tacitus' reference to Jesus particularly important for non-biblical historical study?
11. How does Tacitus' description of Christianity align or conflict with New Testament portrayals of the early church?
12. What does this passage reveal about the spread of Christianity by AD 64?

D. Persecution and Public Response

13. How does Tacitus describe the methods of persecution used against Christians?
14. Why does Tacitus suggest that public sympathy shifted toward the Christians despite their unpopularity?
15. What does this shift in sympathy suggest about Roman views of justice and imperial power?

E. Biblical History and Interpretation

16. How does Tacitus Annals 15.44 help historians distinguish between theology and historical evidence?
17. Why is extra-biblical evidence important for the academic study of Christianity?
18. How might this passage be used in modern discussions of Christian apologetics?

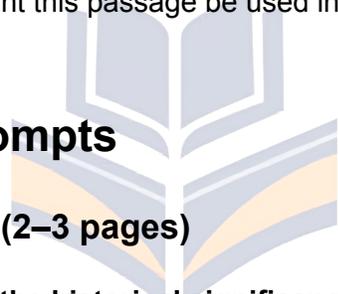
Essay Prompts

Short Essay (2–3 pages)

1. **Explain the historical significance of Tacitus Annals 15.44 for the study of early Christianity.**
Address Tacitus' credibility, historical context, and why his reference to Jesus is valuable.
2. **Analyze Tacitus' portrayal of Nero in relation to the Great Fire of Rome.**
How does Nero's treatment of Christians serve Tacitus' broader moral critique of imperial power?
3. **Discuss Roman perceptions of Christianity as seen in Tacitus Annals 15.44.**
What fears or misunderstandings shaped Roman hostility toward Christians?

Medium-Length Essay (4–6 pages)

4. **Evaluate Tacitus as a historical witness to Jesus Christ.**
Compare his account with New Testament sources and at least one other Roman writer.



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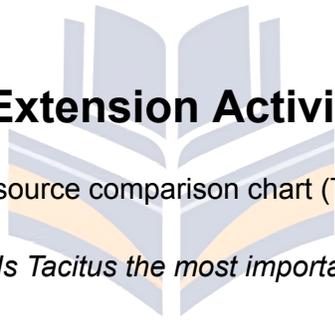
5. **The persecution of Christians under Nero was both political and social.**
Discuss how Tacitus' account illustrates the intersection of politics, religion, and public opinion in first-century Rome.
6. **Assess the importance of extra-biblical sources in reconstructing the historical life of Jesus.**
Use Tacitus Annals 15.44 as a primary case study.

Research or Capstone Essay (8–10 pages)

7. **“Hostile sources often provide the strongest historical evidence.”**
Evaluate this claim using Tacitus Annals 15.44 and other non-Christian references to Jesus and early Christianity.
8. **Analyze how early Christian persecution shaped the identity and theology of the early church.**
Use Tacitus' account as historical context alongside selected New Testament texts.

Optional Extension Activities

- Primary source comparison chart (Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius)
- Debate: *Is Tacitus the most important non-biblical source for Jesus?*
- Reflection paper on historical suffering and martyrdom



Discussion Questions: Pliny the Younger

A. Historical Context and Roman Policy

1. Why was Pliny uncertain about how to deal with Christians, and what does this reveal about Roman law regarding new religious movements?
2. How does Trajan's response reflect broader Roman priorities such as social order, tradition, and political loyalty?
3. In what ways does Roman religious practice differ fundamentally from early Christian belief and worship?

B. Christianity as Seen by an Outsider

4. How does Pliny's description of Christian practices compare with what is found in the New Testament?
5. Why might Roman officials have viewed Christianity as dangerous or disruptive, even if Christians were morally upright?
6. What misunderstandings about Christianity are evident in Pliny's letters?

C. Christology and Worship

7. What is the significance of Pliny's statement that Christians sang hymns to Christ "as to a god"?
8. How does this evidence challenge claims that belief in Jesus' divinity developed centuries later?
9. Why is non-Christian testimony especially valuable when studying early Christian beliefs?

D. Ethics and Community Life

10. How do the moral commitments Pliny lists reflect early Christian ethical teaching?
11. Why might Pliny have been surprised by the ethical behavior of Christians?

12. How did Christian moral practices set them apart from surrounding Roman society?

E. Historical Reliability and Limitations

13. What makes Pliny a reliable historical witness, and what are the limitations of his testimony?

14. How should historians evaluate sources written by opponents or outsiders to Christianity?

15. What important information about Jesus or Christianity is missing from Pliny's account, and why?

Essay Prompts

Short Essay Prompts (3–5 pages)

1. **Evaluate the historical significance of Pliny the Younger's letters as evidence for early Christianity.**
Consider both their strengths and limitations as non-Christian sources.
2. **Analyze Pliny's understanding of Christianity and explain how Roman cultural assumptions shaped his interpretation of Christian beliefs and practices.**
3. **Discuss how Pliny's correspondence with Trajan helps explain the nature of early Christian persecution under the Roman Empire.**
4. **Explain why Pliny's description of Christian worship is important for understanding early Christology.**

Long Essay / Research Paper Prompts (8–12 pages)

5. **Compare Pliny the Younger's account of Christians with New Testament descriptions of early Christian life.**
Evaluate points of agreement and divergence.
6. **Assess the role of Roman administrative documents in reconstructing the history of early Christianity, using Pliny the Younger as a case study.**

7. **To what extent does Pliny the Younger's testimony support the historical reliability of early Christian claims about Jesus?**
Include comparison with other non-Christian sources such as Tacitus or Suetonius.
8. **Examine the relationship between religious belief and political loyalty in the Roman Empire, using Pliny's treatment of Christians as a primary example.**

Optional Comparative or Apologetics-Focused Essays

9. **Why is Pliny the Younger frequently cited in Christian apologetics, and how effective is his testimony as historical evidence?**
10. **Critically analyze the claim that Christianity was merely a late-developing myth by engaging Pliny's letters as historical counter-evidence.**



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Josephus Discussion Questions

1. Why is Flavius Josephus considered one of the most important non-Christian sources for the study of early Christianity?
2. How does Josephus' position under Roman patronage affect the reliability of his writings?
3. In what ways does Josephus confirm the historical context of the New Testament without endorsing Christian theology?
4. Why is the reference to James, the brother of Jesus, considered more historically secure than the Testimonium Flavianum?
5. How does Josephus' description of Jewish leadership and Roman authority help explain tensions seen in the Gospels?
6. What does Josephus' silence on certain Christian beliefs suggest about the limits of historical sources?
7. How should historians balance bias and usefulness when evaluating ancient sources like Josephus?

Short-Answer and Critical Thinking Questions

1. Identify two ways Josephus contributes to our understanding of Second Temple Judaism.
2. Explain why Josephus' writings are valuable for studying the historical Jesus.
3. Describe one limitation of using Josephus as a source for Christian origins.
4. What role did the destruction of the Second Temple play in shaping early Christianity?

Essay Prompts

Short Essays (2–3 pages)

1. Assess the historical value of Josephus' reference to Jesus in *Antiquities* 18.
2. Explain how Josephus' life experiences influenced his portrayal of Jewish and Roman history.
3. Discuss why non-Christian sources are especially important for the study of Jesus' historicity.

Long Essays / Research Papers (5–8 pages)

1. Evaluate the reliability of Flavius Josephus as a historian and his significance for biblical history.
2. Analyze the Testimonium Flavianum in light of modern scholarly debate, addressing authenticity and interpolation.

3. Compare Josephus' references to Jesus with those found in Roman historians such as Tacitus.
4. To what extent do Josephus' writings support the historical framework of the New Testament?

Optional Lecture Enhancements

- Timeline handout
- Map labeling activity
- Primary source excerpt analysis
- Document-based question (DBQ) using Josephus excerpts
- Essay scaffolding worksheet for research papers
- Essay question: *Evaluate Josephus' usefulness as a source for the historical Jesus.*



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Discussion Prompts: Suetonius

I. Evaluating Suetonius as a Historical Source

1. How does Suetonius's biographical style affect the reliability of his references to Christianity?
2. In what ways does Suetonius's position within the Roman imperial administration shape his perspective on religious movements?
3. Why might brief or dismissive references still be historically valuable?

II. Christianity and Social Unrest in Rome

4. What does Suetonius's reference to disturbances among Jews under Claudius suggest about early Christian preaching?
5. How does the Claudius expulsion contribute to our understanding of Jewish-Christian relations in the first century?
6. Why might Roman authorities have viewed Christian disputes as a threat to public order rather than a theological issue?

III. Roman Attitudes Toward Christianity

7. What does Suetonius's description of Christianity as a "mischievous superstition" reveal about Roman religious values?
8. How does Roman suspicion of Christianity compare to its tolerance of other foreign religions?
9. Why was exclusivity (rather than belief content) such a significant issue for Roman officials?

IV. Comparison with Biblical Texts

10. How does Suetonius's account of Claudius's expulsion align with Acts 18:2?
11. In what ways does Suetonius help illuminate the social pressures behind New Testament exhortations to perseverance?

12. How should historians balance biblical and non-biblical sources when reconstructing early Christian history?

V. Apologetic and Historical Implications

13. Why is hostile testimony often considered stronger historical evidence than friendly testimony?
14. How does Suetonius challenge the claim that Christianity was a later legendary development?
15. What limits should be placed on apologetic use of Roman historians?

Essay Questions

Short Essay (2–4 pages)

1. **Analyze Suetonius's reference to "Chrestus" under Claudius and discuss its significance for understanding the spread of Christianity in Rome.**
2. **Explain how Suetonius's description of Christianity reflects broader Roman attitudes toward new religious movements.**
3. **Compare Suetonius's references to Christians with those found in the New Testament. What similarities and differences stand out?**
4. **Assess the historical value of Suetonius as a non-Christian source for early church history.**

Long Essay / Research Paper (6–10 pages)

5. **Evaluate the contribution of Suetonius to the study of early Christianity when compared with Tacitus and Pliny the Younger.**
6. **Discuss how Suetonius's writings help situate Christianity within the political and social framework of the Roman Empire.**
7. **To what extent do Roman historical sources confirm key claims of the New Testament regarding persecution and the spread of Christianity?**

8. **Examine the strengths and limitations of using hostile Roman sources as evidence for the historical reliability of early Christian claims.**

Optional Capstone / Synthesis Essay

9. **Using Suetonius as a primary source, explain how early Christianity transitioned from an internal Jewish dispute to a distinct movement recognized—and opposed—by Roman authorities.**



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Bundled Discussion Prompts

Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, and Pliny the Younger

I. Understanding the Authors and Their Contexts

1. How do the backgrounds of Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, and Pliny shape their perspectives on Christianity?
2. Which of these authors had the closest political proximity to imperial power, and how does that affect their testimony?
3. Why is it significant that none of these authors were Christians?

II. Jesus as a Historical Figure

4. How does Josephus's reference to Jesus differ in tone and purpose from Tacitus's reference to Christus?
5. What key facts about Jesus are supported when Josephus and Tacitus are read together?
6. Why does the absence of theological detail in these sources actually strengthen their historical value?

III. Early Christianity and Roman Authority

7. How do Tacitus and Suetonius portray Christianity as a social or political problem?
8. What does Pliny's correspondence with Trajan reveal about how Roman officials identified Christians?
9. Why do Roman sources focus more on behavior and public order than on belief?

IV. Persecution and Public Perception

10. Compare Tacitus's description of Nero's persecution with Pliny's administrative approach to Christians.
11. What similarities exist between Roman accusations against Christians and those implied in New Testament texts?
12. How do these sources help explain why Christians were viewed with suspicion in the Roman world?

V. Christianity as a Distinct Movement

13. How does Suetonius's reference to disturbances among Jews indicate a transition from Judaism to Christianity?
14. At what point do Roman authors begin to clearly distinguish Christians from Jews?
15. What does this distinction tell us about the growth and identity of the early church?

VI. Historical Method and Source Evaluation

16. How should historians handle disputed passages such as the Testimonium Flavianum in Josephus?
17. What criteria should be used to weigh hostile versus neutral testimony?
18. How does comparing multiple independent sources strengthen historical conclusions?

VII. Biblical Integration

19. How do these Roman and Jewish sources complement the narrative in Acts?
20. In what ways do Peter's and Paul's writings reflect the realities described by Roman historians?
21. How do these external sources help modern readers better understand the New Testament world?

Short Essay (2–4 pages)

1. Compare the ways Suetonius and Tacitus describe Christianity and explain what their language reveals about Roman attitudes.
2. Explain how Josephus contributes uniquely to the historical study of Jesus in comparison to Roman authors.
3. Discuss how Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan provides insight into early Christian worship and ethics.
4. Analyze how at least two non-biblical sources confirm the existence and spread of Christianity in the first century.

Medium-Length Essay (4–6 pages)

5. Evaluate the combined historical value of Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, and Pliny the Younger for reconstructing early Christian history.
6. How do Roman legal and administrative concerns shape the way Christianity is portrayed in these sources?
7. Discuss the relationship between persecution, public misunderstanding, and Christian identity as seen in these texts.

Long Essay / Research Paper (8–12 pages)

8. Using all four authors, assess the historical reliability of the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus and the early church.
9. Examine how Christianity's rapid spread challenged Roman concepts of religion, loyalty, and social order.
10. To what extent do hostile and neutral non-Christian sources support core historical claims of Christianity?

Capstone / Synthesis Essay

11. Drawing on Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, and Pliny the Younger, explain how Christianity moved from an obscure Jewish movement to a recognized—and often persecuted—religion within the Roman Empire.

Optional Comparative Activity

- Create a chart comparing:
 - Author
 - Date
 - Attitude toward Christianity
 - Key historical claims
 - Limitations
- Follow with a written reflection evaluating which source is most valuable and why.



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