Essay Title:

How Non-Christian Sources Illuminate Early Christianity: A Study of Josephus' Reference to James

By:

Owen Walters (2508048)

Synopsis:

This essay examines Josephus' reference to James, the brother of Jesus, and explores how non-Christian sources can illuminate the origins and leadership of early Christianity.

Introduction

This essay will examine how non-Christian sources contribute to our understanding of early Christianity, focusing on Flavius Josephus' reference to James, the brother of Jesus, in *Antiquities* 20.9.1.[1] As a first-century Jewish historian writing for a Roman audience, Josephus offers an invaluable external perspective. His brief account of James' execution provides independent confirmation of figures mentioned in the New Testament and sheds light on the social and political environment in which the Christian movement emerged. This essay will examine the passage in its historical context and alongside New Testament evidence to show how Josephus' testimony clarifies the nature of the earliest Christian community. It will begin with the historical background of first-century Judea, followed by a close reading of *Antiquities* 20.9.1, before considering its implications within modern scholarship.

Historical Background

Flavius Josephus was born in 37 CE and grew up in Jerusalem, giving him first-hand exposure to temple life, Jewish law and first-century Judaism.[2] As Mason notes, he was "intimately acquainted with the religion of Israel, its temple and its feasts."[3]

To fully understand the significance of Josephus' *Antiquities* 20.9.1 for illuminating early Christianity, it is essential to consider the historical context in which he lived and wrote. Far from being an impartial observer, Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian writing for a Roman audience, whose works often combine historical reporting with a defence of Jewish culture. As

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[1] Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. by William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 20.9.1.
[2] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Flavius Josephus', https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Josephus [accessed 7 December 2025].
[3] Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), p. 1.

Rajak notes, Josephus wrote under Flavian patronage but remained shaped more by his Jewish background than by Roman influence, using his works to defend and explain Jewish history and culture to his Roman readership.[4]

Despite these apologetic tendencies, his writings remain key for understanding early Judaism and the wider historical landscape in which Christianity emerges. As Klawans observes, "the most important single source we have for the study of ancient Judaism [is] the writings of Flavius Josephus."[5] Writing from Rome for a largely non-Jewish audience, Josephus aimed to explain Jewish history and politics to readers who were otherwise unfamiliar.

His involvement in the Jewish revolt against Rome, and relocation after surrendering, shaped both his perspective and the tone of his writing. Feldman notes Josephus had been "an eyewitness and even participant in many of its events," giving him exceptional insight into the turmoil of the period.[6]

Judea during this period saw instability in high priestly leadership and constant tension with Roman rule. Bruce notes that Judea was administered directly by Roman prefects whose oversight restricted the Sanhedrin's authority.[7] Such conditions produced legal uncertainty and help explain how actions like the unlawful execution of James could occur during weakened governance.

This background shows why Josephus' writing is valuable for understanding early Christianity. His accounts help situate figures such as James within the wider social and political world of first-century Judaism.

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[4] Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 185–222.
[5] Jonathan Klawans, *Josephus and the Theologies of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

[6] Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937–1980)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), p. 347.
[7] F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 32–33.

Close Reading of Josephus' *Antiquities* 20.9.1

Josephus' account in *Antiquities* 20.9.1 is significant because it offers a concise, non-Christian report of the execution of James, "the brother of Jesus who was called Christ."[8] He records that Ananus convened the Sanhedrin, accused James and others of breaking the law, and "delivered them to be stoned," an action presented as exceeding his legal authority. Mason observes that Josephus implies Ananus exploited a moment of political instability and acted without proper Roman oversight.[9] Scholars such as Meier affirm Josephus' reliability here, noting the passage functions as a "passing, almost blasé, reference" to a minor figure and lacks traits typical of Christian invention.[10] This provides the foundation for understanding James' broader significance.

Josephus' identification of James highlights his notable role within the early Christian movement. He refers to him simply as "the brother of Jesus who was called Christ," a neutral description suggesting Josephus assumed his readers recognised Jesus. This aligns with New Testament testimony such as Galatians 1:18–19, where Paul describes meeting James as a leading authority. As Theissen and Merz observe, Josephus shows no interest in Jesus himself here but mentions him only to identify James, a neutral formula that strengthens the historical reliability of the reference.[11] Taken together, these sources show that early Christian leaders were publicly known figures, which helps explain the strong reaction to James' execution and the Roman intervention that followed.

Josephus frames the execution as an unlawful act carried out during political instability. He implies Ananus acted without Roman authorisation, exploiting

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[8] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.1.
[9] Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, p. 124.
[10] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 5 vols (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2016), I (1991), p. 57.
[11] Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 65.

the interval between the death of Festus and the arrival of Albinus.[12] As the Jewish Encyclopedia observes, "after the establishment of Roman supremacy the Sanhedrin no longer possessed the right of capital punishment."[13] This explains why Josephus presents Ananus' actions as illegal; by proceeding without Roman sanction, he acted beyond his jurisdiction. Such instability helps explain why the execution provoked public complaint and later led to Ananus' dismissal.

Josephus' neutrality as a non-Christian writer further enhances the historical value of his reference. He identifies Jesus only in passing and offers no theological comment, indicating no attempt to promote Christian belief. This strengthens the credibility of the account, since Josephus' concerns lay with Jewish affairs rather than Christian origins, reflecting the kind of historical aims noted by Bond in her survey of Josephus' work.[14] Scholars also observe that Josephus writes as an external observer; as Allen emphasises, his testimony provides an "independent, extra-biblical perspective." [15] His brief mention of James offers independent confirmation of Christian figures within their setting, supporting the argument that non-Christian sources illuminate early Christianity.

Implications for Understanding Early Christianity

Josephus' account carries several important implications for understanding early Christianity.

Firstly, his reference to James supports the New Testament portrayal of a structured Christian community with identifiable leaders. James is presented

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[12] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.1.
[13] Marcus Jastrow and S. Mendelsohn, 'Capital Punishment', in *Jewish Encyclopedia* http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4005-capital-punishment [accessed 5 December 2025].
[14] Helen Bond, 'Josephus', *Bible Odyssey* https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/josephus/ [accessed 5 December 2025].
[15] Nicholas P. L. Allen, 'Josephus on James the Just? A Re-Evaluation of *Antiquitates Judaicae* 20.9.1', *Journal of Early Christian History*, 7.1 (2017), 1–27, p. 1.

not as an obscure figure but as someone recognised within wider Jewish society, consistent with his prominence in Acts and Paul's letters. Josephus' mention of him suggests the Christian movement had become visible enough to attract attention. This visibility is reflected in the public response to James' death, as leading citizens protested and appealed to King Agrippa, resulting in Ananus' removal.[16] Eusebius likewise reports that James was "famous among all for righteousness," and that many Jews attributed later misfortunes to divine judgement for his death.[17] Such details demonstrate that the early Christian community was firmly embedded within the wider social landscape.

Secondly, the passage highlights tensions between early Christians and other Jewish groups. Josephus' charge that James was a lawbreaker reflects ongoing debates about religious authority and legal interpretation. Christians remained a Jewish sect at this point, and such conflicts correspond to disputes recorded in the New Testament.[18] Josephus' account therefore confirms that these disagreements were part of a genuine historical context.

Thirdly, the passage clarifies political pressures surrounding the early Christian movement. James' execution occurred during a temporary gap in Roman leadership, suggesting Christian figures could become vulnerable when political oversight weakened. As Bruce notes, Roman prefects exercised close supervision over Jerusalem, especially during unrest, underscoring that major judicial actions required Roman sanction.[19] This supports New Testament portrayals of Christian communities navigating relationships with Jewish authorities and Roman rule.

Finally, Josephus' testimony illustrates the value of non-Christian sources. His neutral reference to James confirms the existence of the movement, its

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[16] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.1.
[17] Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 2.23.10–11 (p. 177).
[18] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Christianity: The Primitive Church," https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity/The-history-of-Christianity#ref67417 [accessed 5 December 2025].
[19] Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 33.

leadership and the opposition it faced. As Maier observes, Josephus provides some of the most important non-Christian testimonies to early Christian figures, including Jesus, James and John the Baptist.[20] When analysed alongside Christian sources, Josephus' writings offer a more complete understanding of how early Christians functioned within their broader environment.

Secondary Scholarship and Historical Significance

Scholars across a range of disciplines regard Josephus' reference to James as one of the most valuable non-Christian testimonies for early Christianity. The passage is widely accepted as authentic. As Feldman observes, "almost all scholars have accepted as authentic Josephus' reference ... to James, 'the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ,'" noting that its tone, language and critical stance are characteristic of Josephus rather than later editors.[21] Thackeray likewise argues that the style and vocabulary of the passage are recognisably Josephan, strengthening confidence in its authenticity.[22] Historians frequently use the passage to corroborate New Testament accounts, since Josephus independently attests to the existence of Jesus and to an organised Christian community. Sanders notes that Josephus provides indispensable testimony for understanding the social and political conditions that shaped early Christianity.[23] Josephus' reliability on political and judicial matters makes this account a valuable resource offering an external perspective on early Christianity and how it interacted with Jewish authority and Roman governance. Together, these scholarly perspectives show why *Antiquities* 20.9.1 remains central to discussions of Christian origins.

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[20] Paul L. Maier (ed.), *Josephus: The Essential Writings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 9.
[21] Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship*, p. 705.
[22] H. St. John Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian* (1929; repr. New York: Ktav, 1967), p. 134.
[23] E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 49-50.

Conclusion

Josephus' account of the execution of James offers a concise and valuable window into the earliest stages of the Christian movement. His neutrality as a non-Christian Jewish historian allows him to provide independent confirmation of Christian figures, leadership and the tensions that shaped the Jerusalem community. When read alongside New Testament accounts, his testimony strengthens historical understanding by situating early Christians within the instability and legal constraints of first-century Judea. His reference to James highlights both the prominence of Christian leaders and the conflicts that emerged between Christian and Jewish authorities. More broadly, Josephus exemplifies how external sources can complement Christian texts in illuminating the historical setting in which the Christian movement emerged. His writings therefore remain crucial for understanding the origins of early Christianity.

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