

# MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY

Pearl River, Louisiana

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## COVENANT RESEARCH STUDY

# FIRST-CENTURY JUDEA, THE COVENANT PEOPLE, AND THE HISTORICAL YESHUA:

*What Historians Say About Life Under the Covenant, When the Law Was  
Declared Abolished, and Who Was the Real Jesus?*

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS MATTERS

When modern Christianity declares that the covenant of Yahweh was nailed to a cross and that the Torah was done away with through the death of Jesus, it makes a claim that deserves historical examination — not just theological debate. The question is straightforward: What do historians, archaeologists, and secular scholars actually say about how the Jewish people lived in first-century Judea? Were they keepers of the covenant? Had the Oral Torah been codified yet? Did they eat clean foods and separate themselves from their Greek and Roman neighbors?

And when did the doctrine of 'Torah abrogation' actually appear in history? Was it taught by the historical Jesus — or did it emerge after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, shaped by Roman politics, Greek philosophy, and one controversial figure named Marcion of Sinope?

This study answers those questions entirely from historians, archaeologists, and primary sources — without theological bias from any tradition.

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## PART ONE

### THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN FIRST-CENTURY JUDEA:

*How They Actually Lived*

#### Section 1 — The People, the Land, and the Roman Occupation

Roman general Pompey conquered Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) in 63 BCE, bringing the region formally under Roman domination. Scholars estimate that approximately four

million Jews lived within the Roman Empire during the first century CE, scattered by war, exile, trade, and commerce across the known world. Historian Josephus ben Mattityahu — Flavius Josephus — the most important Jewish historian of this period, chronicled the political, social, and cultural life of the Jewish people in remarkable detail in his works *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*.

The Jewish population of the first century was not monolithic. It was divided between those in Judea, Samaria, and the Galilee — who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic — and those in the Diaspora (the Greek-speaking dispersed communities of Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome), who read their scriptures in the Greek Septuagint translation. Both communities, however, maintained the foundational marks of covenant identity.

## Section 2 — Were They Strict Covenant Keepers?

The historical record is unambiguous. The three most visible and defining practices that marked the Jewish people as a distinct covenant nation — and which drew consistent criticism from their Greek and Roman neighbors — were:

**1. Kashrut — Dietary Laws.** The dietary laws of Vayikra (Leviticus) chapters 11 and Devarim (Deuteronomy) 14 were actively observed. Greek and Roman writers described these laws as 'antisocial' and 'ridiculous.' The Roman administrator Tacitus mocked Jewish dietary restrictions, and Greek observers were baffled by them — yet Jews maintained them, even in the Diaspora where social pressure to assimilate was highest.

**2. Shabbat — Sabbath Observance.** Romans considered the Sabbath a sign of laziness and found it politically inconvenient. Multiple Roman sources, including Tacitus, Ovid, and Suetonius, ridiculed the Jewish practice of ceasing all work one day in seven. Nevertheless, Jews kept the Sabbath across the Empire. The synagogue — which existed in cities throughout the Roman world — served as the center of Sabbath gathering, Torah reading, and community governance.

**3. B'rit Milah — Circumcision.** Romans considered circumcision barbaric. Greek athletes who competed in the gymnasium — which required nudity — were socially embarrassed by it. Yet circumcision remained a defining covenant sign for first-century Jewish men throughout the world, actively practiced and never abandoned.

Professor N.T. Wright, writing in *The New Testament and the People of God*, correctly observes that Torah observance was not a legalistic attempt to earn divine favor — it was 'the badge that one wore as a mark of identity, of belonging to the chosen people in the present.' This is precisely what the Torah itself says in **Shemot (Exodus) 19:5–6**:  
**"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you**

**shall be My own possession among all the peoples... and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."**

### **Section 3 — Did They Mingle With Greeks and Romans?**

This is historically nuanced. The scholarly record shows a spectrum:

**The Pharisees** (Hebrew: *parush*, 'separated ones') deliberately separated themselves from Hellenistic and Roman culture, maintained strict Torah observance, and refused participation in Greek games, Roman religious ceremonies, and pagan practices. They are described by Josephus as the most precise interpreters of the law. Their name itself meant 'separated.'

**The Sadducees** were centered on the Temple and the priesthood. They cooperated politically with Roman authority, rejected the Oral Torah (unlike the Pharisees), and focused exclusively on the written Torah. They were the priestly aristocracy. With the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the Sadducees ceased to exist as a movement.

**The Essenes** (documented by both Josephus and Philo of Alexandria) went furthest of all — they separated entirely from society, established covenant communities near the Dead Sea, and produced what we now know as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their Torah observance was the most rigorous of any first-century Jewish sect.

**The Amme Ha-Aretz** ('people of the land') were the rural masses who, according to the Talmud and Josephus, did not consistently observe the laws of purity and tithes. Britannica notes they were 'negligent of the law.' This represents not the norm but the exception — and it was consistently criticized by religious leadership.

**The Hellenized Jews** of the Diaspora were most affected by Greek culture, yet even they maintained their core covenant identity. The Torah had been translated into Greek in Alexandria (the Septuagint) precisely to serve communities who no longer read Hebrew — but they still read the Torah.

**The bottom line from historians: First-century Jewish society, across all of its sects and geographies, maintained the covenant as its foundational identity marker. The question was never whether to keep the covenant — it was how, and which interpretive tradition governed its application.**

## HAD THE ORAL TORAH BEEN CREATED YET?

*The Historical Timeline of the Mishnah*

### Section 4 — The Oral Tradition Before 70 CE

This is a critical question because modern Judaism — particularly Rabbinic Judaism — is built upon the Mishnah and Talmud, not the Tanakh alone. Understanding when these texts were codified matters enormously for understanding what Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth would have actually encountered and taught.

In the first century CE, the Pharisees maintained what they called the 'Oral Torah' — a body of interpretive traditions they claimed had been transmitted from Mosheh (Moses) at Sinai alongside the Written Torah. These traditions were **not yet written down**. They circulated orally, debated between the competing schools of Hillel and Shammai. The Sadducees rejected these oral traditions entirely, accepting only the written text.

Josephus confirms: the Pharisees 'have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses.' This is the Oral Torah — unwritten, disputed, sectarian. Not yet the Mishnah.

### Section 5 — The Destruction of the Temple: The Turning Point (70 CE)

In 70 CE, Roman general Titus destroyed the Second Temple of **Yahweh** in Yerushalayim. This was catastrophically transformative. The Temple had been the center of Jewish religious and national life. With it gone:

- The Sadducees, who centered their entire theological authority on Temple worship, immediately ceased to exist as a movement.
- The Essenes disappeared.
- The Pharisees — and their tradition of oral interpretation — became the surviving, dominant form of Judaism.

Pharisaic leader Yochanan ben Zakkai escaped the siege of Jerusalem and famously negotiated with the Roman general Vespasian: 'Give me Yavneh and its sages.' Vespasian agreed. Ben Zakkai established the rabbinic academy at Yavneh (approximately 25 miles west of Jerusalem), which became the spiritual center of post-Temple Judaism.

Scholar Adin Steinsaltz documents that the destruction of the Temple 'necessitated a complete reconstruction of Jewish religious life.' The oral traditions that had been transmitted and debated informally now became the urgent project of preservation.

## Section 6 — The Mishnah: When Was It Written?

The **Mishnah** — the first written codification of the oral traditions — was not completed until approximately **200–220 CE**, roughly 130 years after the Temple's destruction. It was redacted by **Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi** (Judah the Prince), who feared that persecution, dispersion, and the passage of time would cause the oral traditions to be lost forever.

**The Mishnah then became the foundation of the Talmud.** Two Talmuds exist: the **Jerusalem Talmud** (compiled c. 300–350 CE in the Galilee) and the **Babylonian Talmud** (compiled c. 450–500 CE in Babylon). The Babylonian Talmud became the normative text of Rabbinic Judaism.

The historical timeline is therefore:

**63 BCE** — Roman conquest of Judea

**c. 4–6 BCE to 30–33 CE** — Life of Yeshua of Nazareth

**70 CE** — Destruction of the Second Temple; Temple Judaism ends

**c. 70–200 CE** — Tannaitic period: oral traditions increasingly debated and compiled at Yavneh and other academies

**200–220 CE** — Mishnah finalized by Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi

**c. 300–350 CE** — Jerusalem Talmud compiled

**c. 450–500 CE** — Babylonian Talmud compiled

This means: the **Oral Torah as a codified legal text did not exist in the lifetime of Yeshua**. The traditions he encountered from the Pharisees were exactly that — unwritten, contested, sectarian traditions that competed with the authority of the written Torah. When the historical Yeshua challenged the Pharisees for 'making void the word of **Elohim** through your tradition' (Matthew 15:6), he was engaging a real, documented historical dispute between written Torah authority and oral tradition — not abolishing the Torah.

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## PART THREE

### WHEN DID 'THE TORAH IS DONE AWAY WITH' APPEAR?

*Tracing the Origins of Antinomian Doctrine*

## Section 7 — What First-Century Jewish Followers of Yeshua Actually Believed

**This is perhaps the most historically critical point for those who claim Yeshua abolished the Torah through his death.** Here is what historians confirm about the earliest followers of Yeshua:

The earliest community of Yeshua's followers — based in Yerushalayim, led by his brother Ya'akov (James) — were observant Jews. They kept the Sabbath, kept the dietary laws, circumcised their male children, attended Temple worship, and kept the Torah. Historian Paula Fredriksen, in her landmark work ***When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation***, documents that all of the earliest competing Christian groups 'accused each other of being too Jewish.' Even their arguments about Yeshua were framed entirely within Second Temple Judaism's categories.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which debated what Gentile converts needed to observe, did not conclude that the Torah was abolished — it concluded that Gentile converts should at minimum observe the Noahide-adjacent covenant laws of Vayikra (Leviticus) 17–18 as a starting point.

The historian S. Paul — Saul of Tarsus, who himself claimed to be a Pharisee of the school of Gamaliel — is the earliest source from which the teaching of 'justification by faith apart from works of the Torah' emerges in written form. Historians note the deep irony: there is reason to believe Paul himself, in his personal practice, continued to observe the Torah as an observant Jew. What he was arguing was a particular theological framework for Gentile inclusion — which later generations developed into full antinomianism.

## **Section 8 — Marcion of Sinope: The Man Who Said 'Throw Away the Torah'**

**The clearest, most historically documented origin point for the Christian teaching that the Torah is abolished — and that the God of the Hebrew scriptures is a different, lesser deity than the Father of Jesus — is Marcion of Sinope (c. 85–160 CE).**

Marcion was born in Sinope, on the Black Sea coast of what is now Turkey. He was the son of a bishop. He traveled to Rome approximately 135–140 CE, made a large donation to the congregation there (200,000 sesterces — more than 100 years' wages), and then began teaching a radical theology. He was formally **excommunicated by the Roman church in 144 CE**. His donation was returned to him.

**Marcion's theological system included the following positions:**

**1. There are two gods:** the Creator God of the Hebrew scriptures — whom Marcion identified as **Yahweh** — was an inferior, vengeful, and 'malevolent deity.' The true

'Supreme Being' was the Father of Jesus Christ, who had nothing to do with Creation or Israel.

**2. The entire Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) was the work of the inferior creator god and must be rejected entirely.**

3. The only valid scriptures were a shortened version of Luke's Gospel (with all 'Jewish' passages removed, including the birth narratives) and ten Pauline epistles (also edited). Marcion compiled the **first known Christian canon** — doing so by systematically cutting out every covenant connection to the Tanakh.

4. Paul was the only legitimate apostle. The Twelve had been corrupted by Jewish influence.

The patristic response to Marcion was immediate and fierce. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, and Polycarp of Smyrna all condemned Marcion as a heretic. Polycarp, upon meeting Marcion in Rome, reportedly called him 'the firstborn of Satan.' Tertullian wrote a five-volume treatise, ***Adversus Marcionem***, circa 208 CE, specifically to refute him.

Britannica summarizes: 'The Marcionites were considered the most dangerous of the gnostics by the established church.'

Yet the historical evidence is undeniable: **Marcion's core theological premise — that the death of Christ ended the authority of the Torah and severed Christianity from its Hebrew covenant roots — became the dominant popular framing of Christianity in subsequent centuries**, even after Marcion himself was declared a heretic.

## **Section 9 — After Marcion: Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (325 CE)**

The next major institutional turning point came in 325 CE, when Roman Emperor Constantine I convened the **First Council of Nicaea**. Constantine — who presided over the council as an unbaptized catechumen — was not primarily motivated by theology. He wanted unity in the Empire.

The council's primary business was resolving the Arian controversy: Arius of Alexandria had taught that Yeshua was not divine, but a created being — that 'there was a time when he was not.' His bishop Alexander and the deacon Athanasius countered that Yeshua was coequal and coeternal with the Father.

The council ruled against Arius, producing the **Nicene Creed** — which declared Yeshua to be 'of one substance' (*homoousios*) with the Father. This was the first time a Roman imperial government defined Christian orthodoxy through political decree.

Historian Bart Ehrman (Professor of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina) is explicit: **'The Council of Nicaea did NOT decide that Jesus was divine — everyone present already believed he was. The debate was: in what sense? In what relationship to the Father?'** The council did not invent the divinity of Christ; it codified a specific philosophical framework for understanding it — a framework drawn heavily from Platonic Greek philosophy (the concept of *homoousios* was Greek philosophical terminology, not Hebrew covenant language).

What Constantine's patronage of Christianity did accelerate, historically, was anti-Jewish legislation. Historian Paula Fredriksen documents: 'Things actually got worse for many Christian groups, because the Catholic Church started to excommunicate and persecute them.' **And for Jewish communities, the Edict of Thessalonica (380 CE) — making Catholic Christianity the state religion — initiated systematic state-sponsored persecution of the Jewish people.**

## **Section 10 — Summary: The Historical Timeline of 'Torah Abrogation' Teaching**

**Before 70 CE:** Jewish followers of Yeshua in Jerusalem remain Torah observant. No credible historical evidence that Yeshua taught the Torah was abolished.

**70 CE:** Destruction of the Temple. Jewish identity restructures around the Pharisaic rabbinical movement. The separation between Jewish and Gentile followers of Yeshua accelerates.

**c. 100–140 CE:** Paul's letters, increasingly read in isolation from their Jewish context, provide raw material for anti-Torah readings. The Gospel of John, written in this period, contains the strongest anti-Pharisaic language and the highest Christology.

**144 CE:** Marcion is excommunicated in Rome. His canon — the first formal rejection of the Tanakh as Christian scripture — forces the broader church to respond and define its own canon.

**200–220 CE:** The Mishnah is compiled. Rabbinic Judaism formally codifies the Oral Torah and establishes itself as the normative form of post-Temple Judaism.

**325 CE:** Council of Nicaea. The nature of Christ is defined through Roman imperial authority using Greek philosophical categories. Anti-Jewish legislation begins to accelerate under Christian emperors.

**380 CE:** Catholic Christianity becomes the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Systematic anti-Jewish law and theology becomes institutionalized.

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## PART FOUR

### WHO WAS THE REAL YESHUA?

*What Historians Say — Jewish, Roman, and Christian Sources*

#### Section 11 — Did Yeshua (Jesus) Actually Exist?

This is a question that deserves a straight historical answer: **The scholarly consensus across Jewish, Christian, and secular scholarship is that a Jewish man named Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth historically existed in first-century Judea.** Historian Bart Ehrman — a noted agnostic and skeptic of traditional Christianity — states plainly: 'He certainly existed, as virtually every competent scholar of antiquity, Christian or non-Christian, agrees.'

The evidence comes from multiple independent sources written within decades of his death, evaluated here with the scholarly standard of two or three independent witnesses:

#### Primary Non-Christian Sources

**1. Josephus (Flavius Josephus), *Antiquities of the Jews*, c. 93–94 CE.** Josephus references Yeshua twice. The most famous passage (Book 18, Chapter 3) — the Testimonium Flavianum — has been partially interpolated by later Christian scribes, but the scholarly consensus holds that an authentic nucleus existed in the original Josephus text. The second reference (Book 20, Chapter 9) — describing 'James the brother of Jesus who is called Christ' — is considered almost universally authentic by scholars, including those hostile to Christianity. Josephus scholar Louis Feldman states that 'few have doubted the genuineness' of this second reference. **Important caveat per Miqdash Bethel research standards:** Josephus was a traitor to the Jewish revolt and a court propagandist for the Flavian emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. His pro-Roman bias shapes his treatment of the Jewish revolt, Jewish leadership, and the causes of the Temple's destruction. All claims drawn from Josephus must be corroborated by at least one independent source before being cited as established fact. Full text accessible at [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org) and [ccel.org](http://ccel.org).

**2. Tacitus (Publius Cornelius Tacitus), *Annals*, c. 116 CE.** Tacitus — a Roman senator, historian, and demonstrably hostile to Christianity — records that 'Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.' Historians regard this passage as authentic and of independent historical value. William Portier, John Dominic Crossan, and Bart Ehrman all affirm: the crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is 'as sure as anything historical can ever be.'

**3. Pliny the Younger, *Epistles X.96*, c. 111 CE.** Roman governor of Bithynia, Pliny writes to Emperor Trajan about Christians who 'sing hymns to Christ as to a god' before dawn and bind themselves by oath to ethical conduct. This confirms the existence of an active movement based on Yeshua approximately 80 years after his death.

**4. The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin 43a*).** The Talmud — hostile to the early Christian movement — nonetheless confirms that 'Yeshu was hanged on the eve of Passover.' Even opposing sources corroborate the basic historical reality.

#### What the Non-Christian Sources Confirm

- He existed as a historical person.
- His personal name was Yeshua.
- He was a Jewish teacher in first-century Judea and the Galilee.
- He was executed by crucifixion under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (who governed 26–36 CE).
- His followers — called 'Christians' — continued after his death and spread throughout the Roman Empire.
- He had a brother named James (Ya'akov).
- His followers believed him to be the Messiah.

#### Section 12 — What Kind of Jew Was Yeshua?

This is where the historical record sharply diverges from popular Christian teaching — and aligns far more closely with the covenant framework of Miqdash Bethel.

Scholar David Flusser (1917–2000), Professor of Early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism at Hebrew University, an Orthodox Jewish scholar, applied his knowledge of the Talmud and Torah to Greek and Roman texts to illuminate first-century Judaism. Flusser's conclusion: Yeshua was a Jew who operated entirely within the theological categories of Second Temple Judaism. His debates with the Pharisees were **internal Jewish debates**, not rejections of Judaism itself.

What does the Tanakh say about the perpetuity of the covenant? **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 29:29: "The secret things belong to Yahweh our Elohim, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this Torah." — Forever.** Not 'until a Messiah comes.' Not 'until a death on a Roman cross.'

Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 40:8: **"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our Elohim will stand forever."**

Tehillim (Psalm) 119:89: **"Forever, O Yahweh, Your word is settled in heaven."**

If the historical Yeshua was a Jew who upheld the written Torah, taught from the Tanakh, and challenged the oral traditions of the Pharisees — then who taught that his death abolished the Torah? The historical record points to a clear answer: the doctrine was not first-century. It was second-century. It was Marcion. It was Roman. It was Greek philosophy dressed in Hebrew garments.

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## PART FIVE

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM?

#### Section 13 — Judaism

**Modern Judaism** — specifically Rabbinic Judaism, which is the normative form of Judaism since approximately 500 CE — is built upon the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud, not the Tanakh alone. This means that present-day Rabbinic Judaism, whatever its covenant faithfulness in practice, rests on a codified oral tradition that postdates the historical Yeshua by two centuries and the Written Torah by millennia.

The great Tanakh scholar Yechezkel Kaufmann, and the textual tradition of Karaite Judaism, confirm: **the written Torah is authoritative. Oral tradition is human interpretation. The two must never be conflated. Judaism's covenant is with Yahweh as revealed in the Tanakh. The Talmud is commentary, not covenant authority.**

#### Section 14 — Christianity

**Christianity inherits a profound historical problem: the Jesus it worships — as defined by the Nicene Creed — is a theological construction built on Greek philosophical categories (homoousios)** imposed by a Roman emperor in 325 CE, deeply influenced by Marcionite antinomianism even while rejecting Marcion explicitly. **The historical Yeshua of first-century Judea was a Torah-observant Jew.** The

Christ of the Nicene Creed is a Greek philosophical construct defined by imperial politics.

This does not mean Yeshua was not significant. It means the question **'Who is the real Jesus?' must be answered historically, not theologically.** And historically, the answer is: a Jewish prophet from the Galilee, operating within the covenant framework of Yahweh and the Tanakh, who challenged the oral traditions of the Pharisees, was executed by Rome under Pontius Pilate, and whose movement was subsequently reinterpreted — first by Paul, then by Marcion, then by Constantine — into something that would have been unrecognizable to him.

## Section 15 — Islam

**The Islamic understanding of Isa (Jesus) is, in several historically significant respects, closer to the Jewish first-century reality than Nicene Christianity.** The Quran affirms:

- **Isa was not God, but a prophet and messenger of Yahweh (Allah).**
- **Isa was born of Maryam (Mary) miraculously.**
- **Isa did not die on the cross — Islam teaches substitution.**
- **Isa upheld the Torah (Injil).**
- **Isa will return at the end of days.**

On the specific question of the Torah: the Quran (Al-Ma'idah 5:46) states that Isa confirmed 'what was before him of the Torah.' The Quran does not teach that Isa abolished the covenant. The doctrine of Torah-abolition through Christ's death is not Quranic — it is Pauline, as developed by Marcion and codified at Nicaea.

The convergence point for all three traditions — at the level of the Tanakh / Torah itself — is **Shemot (Exodus) 19:5–6**, the covenant of **Yahweh** with all humanity through Israel. **The covenant is unconditional in its source. It is conditional in its blessings and cursings. But it was never abolished.**

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## CONCLUSION: THE COVENANT STANDS

What history teaches — through Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny, Flusser, Ehrman, Fredriksen, and the archaeological and textual records — is this:

**1. First-century Jews in Judea were active covenant keepers.** They kept the dietary laws, observed the Sabbath, circumcised their sons, and separated themselves from pagan culture. Torah observance was their identity, not a burden they were seeking release from.

**2. The Oral Torah (Mishnah) did not exist in written form in the lifetime of Yeshua.** The oral traditions of the Pharisees were contested, sectarian, and in Yeshua's documented teaching, subordinate to the written Torah.

**3. The doctrine that the Torah was abolished through the death of Christ did not originate in first-century Judea.** It originated — in its most systematic form — with **Marcion of Sinope** in 144 CE, was condemned as heresy by the early church, **yet permanently colored the anti-Torah trajectory of Western Christianity.**

**4. The historical Yeshua — confirmed by Roman, Jewish, and early Christian sources — was a first-century Jewish teacher and prophet from the Galilee, executed under Pontius Pilate.** He was not the invention of Nicaea. But the Nicene Christ — defined in Greek philosophical terms by an unbaptized Roman emperor — is not the same as the Yeshua of history.

**5. All three great traditions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — have a common, unalterable foundation: the Tanakh and the covenant of Yahweh. That covenant was not made with a religion. It was made with a people, through a covenant, grounded in the Torah. And as Devarim (Deuteronomy) 29:9 declares: "Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do."**

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## PART SIX

### THE FIVE PRIMARY HISTORIANS OF THE FIRST CENTURY:

*Who They Were, What They Wrote, and What Their Records Confirm*

The study of first-century Judea, the covenant people, and the historical Yeshua depends entirely on primary source testimony. The following five historians constitute the core evidentiary library for this period. Their writings — Roman, Jewish-Roman, and Greek — provide independent, cross-corroborating accounts that no serious student of this period can bypass. Each historian is assessed here for his scope, his reliability, his documented biases, and his specific value to this study.

## Historian 1 — Tacitus (c. 56 – c. 120 CE)

**Full Name:** Publius Cornelius Tacitus

**Nationality / Position:** Roman senator, orator, provincial governor, and historian

**Primary Works:** *Annals* (covering the reigns of Tiberius through Nero, 14–68 CE) and *Histories* (covering 69–96 CE, the Year of the Four Emperors through Domitian)

### What He Wrote That Matters for This Study

Tacitus is the single most important Roman historian for corroborating the execution of Yeshua (Jesus). In *Annals*, Book XV, Chapter 44, written approximately 116 CE, he records that Nero blamed the great fire of Rome (64 CE) on 'the Christians.' To explain who the Christians were, Tacitus writes:

Tacitus records that **"Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus"** — and that 'a most mischievous superstition' (his contemptuous description of the Christian movement) 'broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.'

This passage is authenticated by the scholarly consensus of Latinists, secular historians, and New Testament scholars across all religious perspectives. Andreas Köstenberger and Robert Van Voorst both confirm: the strongly negative tone toward Christians makes it impossible to be a Christian interpolation. Bart Ehrman states flatly: the crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is **'as sure as anything historical can ever be.'**

### His Value and His Bias

Tacitus was a Roman patriot and a senator. He held no sympathy for Christianity, Judaism, or Eastern religions generally. This makes his corroboration of the crucifixion under Pilate all the more reliable — he had no motive to invent or embellish it. However, his anti-Jewish and anti-Eastern bias means his characterizations of Jewish customs must be read with awareness. He described the Jewish people as 'hostile to all others,' mischaracterized their theology, and mocked the Sabbath as laziness.

For this study, Tacitus provides: independent Roman confirmation of the execution of Yeshua under Pontius Pilate (26–36 CE), and confirmation that the movement did not die with him — it continued and spread to Rome within a generation.

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## Historian 2 — Suetonius (c. 69 – after 122 CE)

**Full Name:** Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus

**Nationality / Position:** Roman historian and imperial secretary to Emperor Hadrian  
**Primary Work:** *De Vita Caesarum* (Lives of the Twelve Caesars) — biographical accounts of Julius Caesar through Domitian

### What He Wrote That Matters for This Study

Suetonius provides two passages relevant to this study. The most significant is in his biography of Emperor Claudius (reigned 41–54 CE), *Claudius*, Chapter 25:

**"Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome."**

Scholars near-unanimously identify 'Chrestus' as a phonetic variation of 'Christus' (Christ). This is likely the same event referenced in Acts 18:2, which records that Priscilla and Aquila had recently left Rome because 'Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave Rome.' This Roman expulsion of Jews over disputes about 'Chrestus' confirms that the movement around Yeshua had already penetrated Rome's Jewish community within approximately 20 years of his death and was causing enough civil disturbance to draw imperial attention.

The second passage, in his biography of Nero, confirms Roman persecution of Christians: Nero inflicted punishment on 'the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.' Though this does not name Yeshua directly, it confirms the historical reality of the movement in mid-first-century Rome.

### His Value and His Bias

Suetonius was an imperial biographer more than a historian in the analytical tradition of Tacitus. He tends toward the anecdotal and the sensational. His references to Christ/Christians are incidental — they appear only to explain the actions of emperors — which adds to their historical credibility. He had no theological stake in either direction.

For this study, Suetonius provides: independent Roman confirmation that the Jesus movement had reached Rome by the reign of Claudius (41–54 CE), and was socially disruptive enough to cause an imperial expulsion of Jews from the capital city.

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## Historian 3 — Flavius Josephus (37 – c. 100 CE)

**Full Name:** Yosef ben Mattityahu ha-Kohen; Latin: Titus Flavius Josephus

**Nationality / Position:** Jewish-Roman historian; former Jewish military commander in Galilee; court historian to Emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian

**Primary Works:** *The Jewish War* (c. 75 CE); *Antiquities of the Jews* (c. 93–94 CE); *Against Apion*; *Life of Josephus*

### What He Wrote That Matters for This Study

Josephus is the most important primary source for first-century Jewish history, period. He was a Jew — a priest of priestly descent — who knew the Jerusalem Temple from the inside, commanded Jewish forces in the Galilee during the revolt of 66–70 CE, surrendered to Rome, and spent the rest of his life writing history under Roman patronage. He is essential, and he must be read critically.

His two references to Yeshua are foundational:

**1. The Testimonium Flavianum** (*Antiquities*, Book 18, Chapter 3). The surviving text contains elements that are clearly later Christian interpolations (no Jewish historian writing for a Roman audience would call Yeshua 'the Messiah' or describe his resurrection as fact). However, the scholarly consensus since the late 20th century holds that an authentic nucleus existed — a brief neutral reference to Yeshua as a real person, a teacher with followers, executed under Pilate. The Arabic version of the Testimonium (a 10th-century text by Agapius of Hierapolis), which is less embellished, likely preserves closer to what Josephus actually wrote: **"He was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders."** The cautious 'perhaps' is classically Josephean — and classically Jewish.

**2. The James Reference** (*Antiquities*, Book 20, Chapter 9). This passage — describing the stoning of **"James the brother of Jesus who is called Christ"** in 62 CE — is considered authentically Josephean by virtually all scholars, including those hostile to Christianity. It independently confirms: Yeshua existed, had a brother named Ya'akov (James), and was called 'the Messiah' by his followers.

Beyond the Jesus references, Josephus provides the indispensable account of Jewish life in first-century Judea: the sectarian divisions between Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes; the covenant practices of Jewish communities; the Temple's centrality; and the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. His *The Jewish War* is the primary historical account of the events that permanently reshaped both Judaism and early Christianity.

### His Value and His Bias

Josephus is indispensable — and must be handled carefully. He was a traitor to the Jewish revolt and a propagandist for the Flavian emperors. Per Miqdash Bethel

research standards: always corroborate Josephus with independent sources. His pro-Roman bias shapes his treatment of the Jewish revolt, Jewish leadership, and the causes of the Temple's destruction. But on the basic historical facts of Jewish life, Jewish sects, and the existence of Yeshua, he is uniquely valuable because he was a contemporary insider.

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## Historian 4 — Livy (64/59 BCE – 17 CE)

**Full Name:** Titus Livius

**Nationality / Position:** Roman historian; born in Patavium (modern Padua, Italy)

**Primary Work:** *Ab Urbe Condita* (History of Rome from Its Founding), a 142-volume history covering Rome from its legendary founding through the death of Drusus in 9 BCE

### What He Wrote That Matters for This Study

Livy does not write about Yeshua or the Jewish people in any significant way — his work covers the earlier centuries of Roman history. However, his value to this study is foundational and structural:

**1. Roman Law and the Character of the Empire.** Livy's exhaustive history of Roman law, Roman religion, Roman military culture, and Roman governance provides the essential backdrop for understanding the world into which Yeshua was born. When we read of Pontius Pilate, of Roman crucifixion, of Roman provincial administration — Livy's account of how Roman institutions were built and how Roman law functioned gives that context its depth.

**2. Roman Religious Law and Foreign Religions.** Livy documents the Roman Senate's response to foreign religious movements — including the suppression of the Bacchanalian cults (186 BCE, *Ab Urbe Condita* 39). The Roman pattern of tolerating foreign religions in their home territories while suppressing them when they disrupted Roman social order is precisely the pattern applied to Judaism and early Christianity. Livy documents this Roman instinct from its earliest form.

**3. The Moral Foundation of Rome's Self-Understanding.** Livy wrote with explicit moral purpose — to document Roman virtue and Roman decline. His history shapes the reader's understanding of what 'Roman civilization' meant and why any deviant movement, Jewish or Christian, would be viewed as a cultural and religious threat to the Roman order.

### His Value and His Bias

Livy is the definitive historian of the Roman Republic and early Empire. He is an idealist — he believed Rome's history was a moral story — and must be read with that tendency in mind. Only 35 of his original 142 books survive. For this study, Livy provides the institutional and cultural backdrop: the Roman Empire's legal, religious, and moral framework that governed first-century Judea as a province and shaped every interaction between Rome, the Jewish people, and the early followers of Yeshua.

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## Historian 5 — Plutarch (c. 45 – c. 125 CE)

**Full Name:** Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus

**Nationality / Position:** Greek philosopher, biographer, and historian; priest of Apollo at Delphi

**Primary Work:** *Parallel Lives* (biographies of 23 pairs of famous Greek and Roman figures); also *Moralia*, a collection of essays on ethics, religion, and philosophy

### What He Wrote That Matters for This Study

Like Livy, Plutarch does not write directly about Yeshua or early Christianity. His value is contextual, cultural, and philosophical:

**1. The Greek-Roman World's Moral and Religious Assumptions.** Plutarch's biographies and *Moralia* illuminate the ethical, philosophical, and religious assumptions of the Greco-Roman world in which early Christianity developed. His discussions of Greek and Roman religion — including the nature of divine power, the relationship between gods and humanity, and the meaning of fate and virtue — reveal the intellectual environment that shaped how Paul of Tarsus framed his theology, how Marcion constructed his dualism, and how the Council of Nicaea used Greek philosophical categories like *homoousios* to define the nature of Yeshua.

**2. The Parallel Lives and Jewish Figures.** Plutarch's biographical method — comparing great men across cultures for moral instruction — reflects the Hellenistic Jewish tradition exemplified by Philo of Alexandria, who used Greek philosophical categories to interpret the Torah. Understanding Plutarch's method helps illuminate why Hellenized Jews in Alexandria and the Diaspora read the Torah through Greek philosophical lenses, and why Paul's epistles carry the marks of both Hebrew covenant theology and Greek rhetorical structure.

**3. The Treatment of Caesar and Roman Imperial Power.** Plutarch's biography of Julius Caesar and his accounts of the transition from Republic to Empire directly illuminate the political world Yeshua was born into — Herod's kingdom, Roman provincial governance, and the dynamics of client kings under imperial Rome that

shaped the political tension between the Jewish covenant community and Roman power.

### **His Value and His Bias**

Plutarch is a moral philosopher as much as a historian. He selects and interprets facts to illustrate ethical lessons. His Greek perspective — as distinct from the Roman perspective of Tacitus and Suetonius — provides a third independent cultural vantage point on the first-century world. For this study, Plutarch provides the Greek philosophical and cultural framework that became the lens through which both Hellenized Judaism and emerging Christianity read, reinterpreted, and in some cases departed from the Hebrew covenant.

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### **Additional Contributors to the Historical Record**

**Velleius Paterculus (c. 19 BCE – c. 31 CE):** Roman military officer and historian. His *Compendium of Roman History* covers from the Trojan War to 29 CE, overlapping with the early life of Yeshua. He provides eyewitness accounts of the reign of Tiberius — the emperor under whom Pontius Pilate governed Judea and under whom the crucifixion occurred. His testimony about Tiberius's character and governance is historically valuable for understanding the political environment of Judea during Yeshua's ministry.

**Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE):** Roman naturalist and military commander. His *Natural History* is encyclopedic and provides detailed documentation of first-century geography, including the geography of Judea and the surrounding region. He died in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Though his historical work on the German Wars is lost, his geographical and natural observations corroborate the physical-historical setting of the Tanakh and first-century Judea.

**Pliny the Younger (c. 61–113 CE):** Governor of Bithynia-Pontus; nephew of Pliny the Elder. His *Letters*, Book X, Letter 96 (c. 111 CE) — addressed to Emperor Trajan — is one of the three most important non-Christian references to early Christianity. He documents that Christians in his province were meeting before dawn to "**worship Christ as to a god**" and binding themselves by oath to ethical conduct. His letter confirms: the movement was widespread, organized, and covenant-ethically grounded within 80 years of Yeshua's death.

**Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–115 CE):** Greek orator and philosopher, called 'Golden-Mouthed' for his rhetorical brilliance. His 80 surviving discourses illuminate the Greek philosophical and political world of the first and early second century. His writings on kingship, justice, and the nature of divine governance provide the Greek intellectual

framework within which early Christian theology was debated — and within which Marcion's dualism and the Nicene Creed's Greek philosophical formulations must be understood.

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## **The Historians as a Unified Body of Testimony**

**When the five primary historians — and their associates — are read together as a body of testimony, their combined witness establishes the following historical conclusions for this study:**

**From Tacitus:** Yeshua was executed under Pontius Pilate. The movement continued after his death and reached Rome within a generation.

**From Suetonius:** The movement had penetrated Rome's Jewish community within 20 years of the crucifixion and was disruptive enough to cause an imperial expulsion.

**From Josephus:** Yeshua was a real historical figure, a Jewish teacher with followers, executed under Pilate, with a brother named Ya'akov (James) who led the Jerusalem community after him. First-century Jewish life was defined by active covenant observance, sectarian diversity, and the centrality of the Temple.

**From Livy:** The Roman institutional and legal framework within which Judea existed as a province — including Roman religious law and Roman responses to foreign religious movements — was well-established before Yeshua was born.

**From Plutarch:** The Greek philosophical and ethical world that shaped Hellenized Judaism, Pauline theology, and ultimately the Nicene Creed was not a neutral background — it was a competing intellectual framework that the Hebrew covenant consistently resisted and which consistently pulled followers away from the written Torah toward abstraction.

**These historians are not theologians. They are not writing to defend or attack any covenant position. That is precisely what makes their testimony so powerful. What they confirm — across Roman, Jewish-Roman, and Greek perspectives — is consistent with, and confirmed by, the Tanakh itself: Yahweh made a covenant. A people lived by it. An empire tried to break it. And the covenant stands.**

## **Access and Research Standards for These Sources**

**Loeb Classical Library** (Harvard University Press) is the standard scholarly access point for Tacitus, Suetonius, Livy, Plutarch, Pliny the Younger, Pliny the Elder, Velleius Paterculus, and Dio Chrysostom — providing the original Greek or Latin text on the left page with English translation on the right. For Josephus, the primary free access points are **[gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org)**, **[ccel.org](http://ccel.org)**, and the University of Chicago **[penelope.uchicago.edu](http://penelope.uchicago.edu)**, all carrying the standard William Whiston English translation.

### **Bias documentation per Miqdash Bethel's Devarim 19:15 research standard:**

Tacitus and Suetonius held documented contempt for Eastern religions, including Judaism and early Christianity — making their corroboration of Yeshua's existence and execution all the more historically significant, since they had no motive to invent or embellish. Josephus carried documented pro-Roman bias as a court propagandist for the Flavian dynasty — every claim from Josephus must be independently corroborated before being treated as established fact. Livy and Plutarch wrote with explicit moral and philosophical agendas respectively — useful for background and context, not as neutral recorders. All ancient sources are read through the two-or-three-witnesses standard of **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 19:15**.

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## **CITED SOURCES AND AUTHORITIES**

**STANDING RESEARCH STANDARD — Devarim (Deuteronomy) 19:15:** No claim in this document rests on a single source. All primary historical claims are corroborated by two or three independent witnesses. Josephus is always corroborated independently due to documented pro-Roman bias.

### **Primary Historical Sources**

**Josephus, Flavius. *Antiquities of the Jews*** (c. 93–94 CE), 20 books. William Whiston translation. Free full text: [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org); [ccel.org](http://ccel.org); [penelope.uchicago.edu](http://penelope.uchicago.edu). Brill scholarly critical edition (Greek text, ed. Benedikt Niese): [scholarlyeditions.brill.com](http://scholarlyeditions.brill.com). **Always corroborate — pro-Roman bias documented.**

**Josephus, Flavius. *The Jewish War*** (c. 75 CE), 7 books. Same access points. Primary account of Temple destruction and first-century Jewish sectarian life.

**Josephus, Flavius. *Against Apion*** (c. 97 CE). [ccel.org](http://ccel.org) — free. Defense of Judaism against Greco-Roman critics.

**Josephus, Flavius. *Life of Flavius Josephus*** (c. 99 CE). [ccel.org](http://ccel.org) — free. Autobiography.

**Tacitus, Publius Cornelius. *Annals***, Book XV, Chapter 44 (c. 116 CE); ***Histories***. Loeb Classical Library. Key Yeshua reference authenticated by Latinists' scholarly consensus. Anti-Christian tone confirms no Christian interpolation.

**Suetonius, Gaius Tranquillus. *De Vita Caesarum — Lives of the Twelve Caesars***: Claudius 25; Nero 16 (c. 121 CE). Loeb Classical Library. 'Chrestus' reference confirms movement reached Rome within 20 years of crucifixion.

**Livy (Titus Livius). *Ab Urbe Condita — History of Rome*** (c. 27 BCE – 9 CE). Loeb Classical Library. Book 39 — Bacchanalia suppression as precedent for Roman

treatment of foreign religious movements. Roman institutional and legal background for Judean provincial governance.

**Plutarch. *Parallel Lives; Moralia*** (c. 75–125 CE). Loeb Classical Library. Greek philosophical and ethical framework that shaped Hellenized Judaism, Pauline theology, and Nicene Greek philosophical categories.

**Pliny the Younger. *Letters***, Book X, Letter 96 (c. 111 CE). Loeb Classical Library. Christians 'worship Christ as to a god' before dawn — independent Roman confirmation of early Christian covenant-ethical practice.

**Velleius Paterculus. *Compendium of Roman History*** (c. 30 CE). Loeb Classical Library. Eyewitness account of Tiberian reign contemporaneous with Yeshua's ministry.

**Pliny the Elder. *Natural History*** (c. 77 CE). Loeb Classical Library. First-century geographical and natural historical context for Judea.

**Dio Chrysostom. *Discourses*** (c. 80–115 CE). Loeb Classical Library. Greek philosophical and political context of first-century imperial world.

## Modern Scholarly Sources

**Ehrman, Bart D. *The Triumph of Christianity*** (HarperOne, 2018); ***How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*** (HarperOne, 2014). Professor of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Agnostic/secular scholar. Used for historical facts only, not theological conclusions.

**Fredriksen, Paula. *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*** (Yale University Press, 2018); ***Ancient Christianities*** (Yale University Press, 2023). Distinguished Professor Emerita, Boston University. Used for early Christian Jewish identity and Nicaea historical analysis.

**Flusser, David. *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*** (Hebrew University, Magnes Press, 1988); ***Jesus*** (Hebrew University, Magnes Press). Professor of Early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Orthodox Jewish scholar. Applied Talmud and Torah knowledge to Greek and Roman texts.

**Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God*** (Fortress Press, 1992). Used for historical-contextual analysis of first-century Jewish worldview only — not theological conclusions.

**Steinsaltz, Adin. *The Essential Talmud*** (Basic Books). Talmudic scholar. Referenced for Mishnah codification and post-Temple Jewish restructuring.

**Feldman, Louis H. Josephus scholarship. *Josephus and Modern Scholarship***. Standard authority on Testimonium Flavianum authentication.

**Crossan, John Dominic. Historical Jesus scholarship. Cited for crucifixion corroboration: 'As sure as anything historical can ever be.'**

## Primary Religious and Patristic Sources

**Tertullian. *Adversus Marcionem* — *Against Marcion*** (c. 208 CE), 5 volumes. Available at [newadvent.org](http://newadvent.org) (Church Fathers) — free. Primary source on Marcion of Sinope and the history of Torah-abolition doctrine.

**Babylonian Talmud. *Sanhedrin* 43a.** Available at [Sefaria.org](http://Sefaria.org) — free. Hostile Jewish source confirming Yeshua's historical existence and execution.

**Mishnah** (c. 200–220 CE). Redacted by Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi. Available at [Sefaria.org](http://Sefaria.org) — free. Establishes codification timeline of oral traditions after Temple destruction.

## Encyclopedia and Reference Works

**Encyclopedia Judaica** (22 volumes, Macmillan, 2007 ed.). Articles on Second Temple Judaism, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Marcion. Available: [archive.org](http://archive.org) — free full access.

**Jewish Encyclopedia** (12 volumes, Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906). [jewishencyclopedia.com](http://jewishencyclopedia.com) — free full access. Pre-Zionist era; valuable for historical meaning before 20th-century political influences.

**Encyclopaedia Britannica.** Articles: 'Judaism — Hellenistic'; 'Marcionites'; 'First Council of Nicaea'; 'Antinomianism.' [britannica.com](http://britannica.com).

## Digital Research Platforms

**Sefaria.org** — Complete Hebrew/Aramaic Tanakh, Mikraot Gedolot, Mishnah, both Talmuds. Free.

**newadvent.org** — Church Fathers, Council of Nicaea primary texts, patristic writings. Free.

**National Geographic.** 'How the Council of Nicaea Changed Christianity Forever.' May 2025.

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**Authority: The Tanakh — The Word of Yahweh Alone**