



[Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History I.6.6-11](#)

The falling in favour of the Jewish people, their subjugation by Rome, and the coming of Christ

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Ecclesiastical History

Reference:

I.6.6-11

Commentary:

Eusebius of Caesarea was born shortly after 260 CE, and died in 341 CE. We know little of his early life, but he became a student of Pamphilus, a priest at Caesarea Maritima who had used his fortune to build a library in the city containing the books which his patron Ambrosius had provided the famous theologian Origen with, as well as Origen's own writings. Both Eusebius and Pamphilus endeavoured to preserve Origen's literary heritage, and defended his views when they came under attack during the time of the Diocletianic persecution. During this period, Eusebius remained in Palestine where he bore witness to numerous Christians being martyred between 303 and 311 CE. He also later witnessed martyrdoms in Upper Egypt and Tyre after the emperor Galerius temporarily renewed the persecution after it had initially ceased. The fact that Eusebius himself managed to only serve a short period in prison during the persecution, while Pamphilus and several of his other friends were martyred, perhaps suggests that he was from a family with certain influence. This might be confirmed also by his relationship with the emperor Constantine. In 313 CE, Eusebius was made bishop of Caesarea, although he became the subject of controversy due to his pro-Arian stance, resulting in his provisional ex-communication at the Council of Antioch, which needed to be overturned before he could take part in the important Council of Nicea in 325 CE (for a recent, concise introduction to Eusebius, see Timothy Barnes, "Eusebius of Caesarea"). Eusebius authored numerous works, including historical, exegetical, and apologetic writings, some of which are unfortunately lost. Apart from the *Ecclesiastical History*, his other most famous composition is the panegyric *Life of Constantine*, which praises the virtues of the first Christian Roman emperor, despite its reliability as a historical source for Constantine's life being greatly questioned (for the classic overview of Eusebius's works, which is split into genres, see Maurice Gerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum, Volume II*, p. 262-275; for a more recent discussion, see Barnes, "Eusebius of Caesarea," p. 4-12).

The *Ecclesiastical History*, surviving in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Armenian, and arguably Eusebius's most well-known work, is divided into ten books, with an additional account of the *Martyrs of Palestine*, surviving in a shorter and longer recension, and generally placed in modern editions after book VIII. The first seven books provide a history of the church up until the late-third century CE, at which point chronology becomes less important to Eusebius as he describes the events of the Great, or Diocletianic Persecution and the church's situation afterwards (beginning at VII.30.22). The textual tradition suggests that Eusebius published at least two editions of the work, one after 324 CE (around 325), and at least one at an earlier date, although scholars have disagreed as to precisely how many. Andrew Louth and Richard Burgess both agree that the first edition was published around 313/314 CE (see Louth, "The date of Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica*," p. 123, and Burgess, "The Dates and Editions," p. 483). As Doron Mendels has argued, however, differently from previous ancient historians, Eusebius made use of the historical genre in order to further the Christian cause. The *Ecclesiastical History* is more than a narration of a series of events; it is arranged according to particular themes which the author saw to be crucially important, such as the history of the Jews, heresy, and perhaps most significantly, martyrdom. For Mendels, Eusebius ultimately succeeds to "publicize the church's victory, its transformation from an esoteric Palestinian sect to a world religion, officially recognized by the emperor Constantine early in the fourth century CE" ("The Sources of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius," p. 195-196). In his book *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity*, Mendels makes the case that for Eusebius, the Eastern church rose to greatness due to it essentially being a



“media machine” which made use of the key media asset of martyrdom in order to promote itself. The persecution of Christians at the hands of Rome served to bring Christianity to the forefront of the public and institutional consciousness, and provided a golden opportunity for Christians to show off their religion in spectacular fashion to a mass audience. The role of the martyrs, therefore, is significant in the overall propagandistic aim of the *Ecclesiastical History*.

In this passage from the first book of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius outlines some of the significant events which occurred between the Jewish people and the Romans in the period leading up to Christ's birth, all of which he sees as firmly foretold in prophecy. We begin with the ending of the Jews' exile in Babylon, after which the government of the Jewish people was retained by a select aristocratic lineage (????????, *oligarchia*) until the Roman general Pompey destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 63 BCE, famously entering the holy of holies in the Temple (see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIV.72). Eusebius describes the conflict between two siblings from the Jewish Hasmonean Dynasty, Aristobulus II (the high priest and king of Judea between 66 and 63 BCE) and Hyrcanus II (the high priest and king of Judea from 67 to 66 BCE, and after 63 BCE high priest and ethnarch of Judea). Aristobulus, the younger brother of Hyrcanus rose in rebellion against his brother and took over rule of Judea in 66 BCE. However, the Romans intervened in their civil war, and Aristobulus was eventually deposed and carried off as a prisoner to Rome by Pompey in 63 BCE, who sided with the older sibling as a firmer ally of Rome, and gave him back the high priesthood. Eusebius claims that Aristobulus had been king and high priest by “the right of ancient succession.” This is not entirely misleading; Aristobulus was the son of Alexander Jannaeus and Alexandra Salome, and in 76 BCE Alexandra chose Hyrcanus as high priest while she was queen due to him being both the elder and also weaker brother. When she died in 67 BCE a problem of succession arose (for Josephus's recounting of the war between Aristobulus and Hyrcanus, see *Jewish Antiquities* XIV; for a discussion of these events from a Jewish perspective, see the commentary on [Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 4:1, 7b: Taanit 4:6, 68c](#), and for examples of the third century CE rabbinical reaction see the commentaries on [Mishnah Sotah 9:14](#) and [Tosefta Sotah 15:6, 8-9](#)). While Hyrcanus was once again the High Priest, he was not given back his kingship, and authority was held by the Romans, with the Jews being “tributary (????????, *hupophoros* – i.e. subject to taxation) to the Romans from that time.”

Eusebius continues to narrate how Hyrcanus was very soon after taken as a prisoner by the Parthians, and Herod the Great was given the client kingship of Judea by the Roman Senate (see Josephus, *Jewish War* I.174). Herod is described as “the first foreigner (????????, *allophulos*)” owing to the fact that Herod's father was an Idumean whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. It is under Herod that Christ was born, ushering in the prophesied salvation of the Gentiles. Eusebius makes clear that from this point onwards, Jewish independent rule ceased, with the Romans firmly in political control, and the integrity of the long-established High Priesthood was damaged. Additional support for the decline of the Jewish people is drawn from Josephus, who tells us that under Herod the Great and his son Archelaus, the position of High Priest was given not to those from the Hasmonean line, but rather to other individuals (see *Jewish Antiquities* XX.247). According to Josephus, this practice was subsequently continued by the Romans, who once the government of the Jews was in their hands, also appointed individuals of their choosing. Moreover, Josephus also recorded that Herod, followed by Archelaus and the Romans locked away the sacred garments from the High Priests, not allowing them to keep them themselves as had previously been the case (see *Jewish Antiquities* XV.403).

Eusebius's use of Josephus has been the subject of discussion among scholars, especially since Josephus appears much more important to Eusebius than he had been to any of his predecessors (possibly due to issues of availability; for this view, see Michael Hardwick, *Josephus as an Historical Source*, particularly p. 69-102). Eusebius paraphrases and quotes Josephus on numerous occasions (although strangely in *Ecclesiastical History* II.23.20 he quotes a passage which does not appear in the traditional text of Josephus; see Mendels, “The Sources of the *Ecclesiastical History*,” p. 203). As Mendels argues, in the present passage, Eusebius appears to deduce from Josephus that the very fact that Herod did not nominate priests from the Hasmonean line legitimates Jesus's own High Priesthood as the true and eternal one. Essentially, the passages from Josephus that Eusebius selects, both here and elsewhere, show the Jews “gradually leaving the public sphere” (they completely disappear after book VII of the present work), with the Christians taking their place due in no small measure to the intervention of the Romans (“The Sources of the *Ecclesiastical History*,” p. 204-205).

In the final section of our extract, the book of Daniel (9:24-27) is drawn upon by Eusebius as scriptural evidence that the time of Jewish favour and prominence, referred to as the “unction/anointing among the Jews” (????????????????, to para *loudaiois chrisma*), was always prophesied to be limited, to give way to the new era of Christ. The events involving the Jews and Rome described thus far in the passage are stated by Eusebius to be the fulfilment of Daniel's predictions, with the prince and his troops who destroy the holy city and the temple



sanctuary in Daniel 9:26 understood as Pompey and his army. Eusebius claims that he had treated the question of the number of weeks described in Daniel 9 elsewhere, demonstrating that they clearly refer to the number of weeks until Christ's coming. This may refer to his *Proof of the Gospel* VIII.2, which elaborates at length upon how after seven times seventy years (490 years), Christ's coming would put an end to the Jewish prophets, with the centrality of the Temple in worship ceasing and the Jewish people and their Temple being destroyed in a flood.

To conclude, Eusebius's presentation of the events leading up to Christ's advent see the Jewish people and their history as both necessary and important, particularly in terms of the prophetic tradition which predicted the coming of the Christian saviour. As Richard Horsley points out, Eusebius appreciates the Jewish history of prophecy, the patriarchs, and the fact that the Logos, the pre-existent Christ, was working through the Jewish people to make the appearance of the earthly Jesus possible. Moreover, Judaism gave Christianity a claim to antiquity, something which was often claimed to be missing by its critics (see *Ecclesiastical History* I.2. 1) ("Jesus and Judaism," p. 53). However, the Jewish nation were not to remain a prominent self-governing people, and their subjugation to Rome was something that Eusebius (along with other Christian writers) saw as long foretold within Jewish tradition itself. This is a viewpoint which Eusebius shares with several early-Christian authors, who while recognising that Rome was in many ways an oppressive force to Christianity, also understood it as having a divinely-sanctioned role of punishing the Jews, or at least ending their period of God-given independence, and paving the way for the Christian era (see, for instance, [Sibylline Oracles](#) I.387-400; [Epistle of Barnabas](#) 16.1-5). Eusebius, who had witnessed and written indulgently about the deaths of numerous Christians at the hands of Rome, would also see the transformation of the Roman world into a Christian empire under Constantine, the subject of Eusebius's famous panegyrical work, in which the emperor is presented as God's chosen vessel on earth. The present extract from the outset of the *Ecclesiastical History* therefore introduces the monumental rise of the Church with its beginnings in the subjugation of God's formerly favoured people, the Jews, by the dominating hand of Rome, which would itself become the vehicle for Christianity in due course.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [advent of Christ](#)
- [Aristobulus II](#)
- [client king](#)
- [Herod Archelaus](#)
- [Herod the Great](#)
- [high priest](#)
- [Hyrchanus II](#)
- [Jerusalem](#)
- [Jewish king](#)
- [Jewish people](#)
- [Jewish priesthood](#)
- [Josephus](#)
- [oligarchy](#)
- [Pompey](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [Roman authorities](#)
- [Roman Senate](#)

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The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

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Text

[Mishnah Sotah 9:14](#)

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Decrees following wars against Rome

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Text

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The destruction of the Temple

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