The martyrdom of James the Just

**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:** II.23.12-20  
**Commentary:**
For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on I.6.6-11.

The present passage offers Eusebius’s account of the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus, for which he draws on various other sources. Rather than focusing on the details of the martyrdom story itself, however, what is more pertinent for our discussion is the significance of it in Eusebius’s mind for the fate of the Jews at the hands of the emperor Vespasian. Our commentary will therefore focus on this, combined with a consideration of how Eusebius utilises and develops material and ideology already circulating within early Christianity.

Leaving aside for a moment Hegesippus, whom Eusebius credits with composing a lengthy account of the martyrdom (which itself agrees with that of Clement), we must consider the influence upon Eusebius of Origen’s *Against Celsus* II.13, written in the mid-third century CE. Origen appeals to Josephus in order to argue that the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE was understood as a punishment for the Jews’ treatment of James the Just (see also his *Commentary On Matthew* X.17 and *Against Celsus* I.47, where this theme is also addressed). In *Against Celsus* I.47 and II.13, Origen uses the phrase “James the Just,” which is a Christian appellation, not a verbatim quote of Josephus. Indeed, none of Origen’s references to Josephus on the relationship of James’s death to the destruction of the Temple have precise references. In the present passage of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius develops this tradition about James’s martyrdom and divine punishment of the Jewish people, also connecting it directly with the siege of Jerusalem by Vespasian, and appealing to Josephus as a source (for Eusebius’s account of the siege of Jerusalem, see *Ecclesiastical History* III.5). Interestingly, this is one of the rare occasions on which Eusebius does not precisely reference his source, and it may be that he is simply using and trusting Origen, whose work he would have had easy access to (see John Painter, *James the Just*, p. 206). Indeed, Eusebius would have had good reason to follow Origen on this detail, since Josephus provided him with a good contemporary witness for the martyrdom of James and the destruction of Jerusalem. Perhaps, therefore, Eusebius felt justified in being less precise in his citation methods than he ordinarily would be (on Eusebius’s use of Josephus, see Michael Hardwick, *Josephus as an Historical Source*, p. 69-102, and Doron Mendels, “The Sources”).

In his *Jewish Antiquities* XX.197, 200, Josephus narrates simply that after the death of Porcius Festus, the procurator of Judea, the Jewish Sanhedrin were assembled by his successor Albinus, and brought before him was “the brother of Jesus, called Christ, whose name was James” along with certain others. They are subsequently accused of breaking the law, and given over to be stoned. The story is of course much more elaborate in both Eusebius and Hegesippus (a Jewish-Christian author of the second century), whom is referenced in the present passage in verse 19. It is likely that Hegesippus had not read Josephus’s account of the death of James, but has indulged in a highly polemical narrative to present James as a proto-martyr for Christianity. Hegesippus may, however, have been aware of the *Second Apocalypse of James*, a so-called “Gnostic” text from Nag Hammadi, which narrates James’s martyrdom in the same order as Hegesippus: first James gives a speech, and is then thrown off the Temple and stoned. Despite Eusebius’s claim that Hegesippus gives a lengthy account, our author still sees it fit to give his own rather extended narrative, although it generally replicates that of Hegesippus’s *Commentary on the Acts of the Church V*. 
Eusebius, Origen, and Hegesippus all make plain James’s reputation as a righteous/just (???????, dikaios) figure, which serves to emphasise that the events which took place following his death at the hands of the Jews can be understood as directly manifesting God’s judgement of the Jewish people for committing such an act of impiety. Eusebius, however, develops this notion, and takes further the view formerly laid out by Origen that Josephus should rightly have attributed the siege of Jerusalem to the death of Jesus. As Painter highlights, Eusebius wishes to assert that the siege of Jerusalem was in fact a punishment for the crimes committed against Christ by the Jews. In addition to the present passage, Eusebius argues in book III.7.7-9 and 11.1 that the choice to martyr James had in effect removed a protective force from Jerusalem, leaving it open to judgement and destruction. Therefore, James’s martyrdom, which occurred in 62 CE, for Eusebius bridges the gap between the death of Jesus (c. 30 CE) and the destruction of Jerusalem. James’s death, occurring eight years prior, but still closer to the siege of Jerusalem than Jesus’s death, can therefore be seen as the final nail in the coffin which completely lifted the temporary delay of God’s judgement of the Jewish people. Christ’s mistreatment at the hand of the Jews, therefore, is still kept clearly in focus (see James the Just, p. 207).

The destruction of the Temple, and the role of Romans as divine agents of God in punishing sinful Jewish behaviour was a popular theme among ancient Christian authors, including the author of the Gospel of Luke. The author of the Epistle of Barnabas argues, although it is rather far-fetched, that the building of the Temple exemplified that the Jews were descending into idolatrous practices, consecrating God in a manmade structure. As such, the Romans were carrying out God’s will by destroying it (see the commentary on 16.1-5). This viewpoint is not exclusively Christian, however. Jewish authors such as Josephus presented Roman violence against the Jews, at least in part, as divinely sanctioned punishment for their sins (but in this case not for building the Temple). For one example, see Jewish Antiquities XX.160 which describes how there were growing numbers of Jews engaging in criminal activity and impious acts, whom the procurator of Judea, Felix, arrested. Moreover, in Jewish War I.9 Josephus claims that while his account does not ignore the brutality of the Romans, he also seeks to make clear that it was the folly of many among the Jewish people which led to the destruction of their holy city. Interestingly, later on in the present work, Eusebius argues that the Christians too are punished for their own sins through the Diocletianic persecution, whereby the Romans can similarly be seen as acting in part as divine agents against the wayward Church (see VIII.1.7-2.2).

The emphasis on the immediacy of Vespasian’s sieging of the Jewish holy city in Eusebius’s account is highly significant for his rhetorical strategy (verse 18). Painter states that “the assertion of the sequence, first the death of James and then, immediately, the siege, might be thought to imply a causal relationship” (James the Just, p. 207). I would state the case more assertively than Painter, however—establishing a direct connection is precisely what Eusebius is doing. It was Vespasian’s son, the future emperor Titus (reigned between 79 and 81 CE), who ultimately destroyed the Temple with his armies in 70 CE (this is famously commemorated on the Arch of Titus in Rome, and the dynastic aspect of the conquest is also emphasised in Valerius Flaccus, Argyonautica I.5-17; Silius Italicus, Punic III.594-629; and Martial, Epigrams II.2). Ultimately, as far as Eusebius is concerned, the Romans are helping to bring about a punishment which had been due to the Jewish people for several decades.

Keywords in the original language:

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Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History II.23.12-20
Published on Judaism and Rome (http://www.judaism-and-rome.org)

Thematic keywords in English:
- destruction of the Temple
- divine punishment
- James the Just
- Jewish sin
- Jewish war
- Josephus
- martyrdom
- Pharisees
- scribes
- siege of Jerusalem
- Vespasian


Other sources connected with this document:  Text

**Silius Italicus, Punica III.594-629**

While Hannibal is about to conquer Italy, Jupiter comforts Venus by foretelling Rome's future splendour under the Flavians.

  - Read more about Silius Italicus, Punica III.594-629

Text

**Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica I.5-17**

The affirmation of the dynastical principle in the proem of the Argonautica.

  - Read more about Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica I.5-17

Text

**Martial, Epigrams II.2**

Comparison between Domitian's victory in Germania and the successes of Vespasian and Titus in Judea.

  - Read more about Martial, Epigrams II.2
Arch of Titus, Roman Forum (81-82 CE) _Architecture

Western façade of the triumphal arch of Titus

Inscription on the western façade of the triumphal arch of Titus

- Read more about Arch of Titus, Roman Forum (81-82 CE) _Architecture

Text

**Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5**

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

- Read more about Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5

Text

**Origen, Against Celsus II.13**

How the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem to punish the Jews for killing Christ