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Two Roman Writers: Suetonius and Tacitus

SUETONIUS (ca. 69–135 CE). Suetonius served as secretary to the emperor Hadrian and became one of the most important historians of the Roman Empire. His book *Lives of the Caesars* covers the emperors from Julius Caesar through Domitian. Although he has a penchant for telling salacious stories, he also had access to the imperial archives and is able to quote directly from numerous letters and other documents related to Roman rule. In one place he writes that the emperor Claudius “banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus” (*Life of Claudius* 25). Most scholars think that this “Chrestus” is a mangled spelling of the Latin for “Christ.” The event to which Suetonius refers, then, is the same as that reported in the book of Acts, where we hear that Christian Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius (Acts 18:2).

TACITUS (ca. 56–117 CE). Tacitus was a Roman historian whose two works, *Annals* and *Histories*, cover the period from the death of Caesar Augustus to the end of Domitian’s reign. His work is considered to be fairly accurate, though it is obvious that he wanted to portray the emperors in the worst possible light. Unfortunately, only portions of the two books have survived; the *Histories* breaks off just as the author is beginning to tell about the fall of Jerusalem.

Tacitus does, however, mention the crucifixion of Jesus in one passage, and he also describes the persecution of Christians:

Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned. . . . Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by wild dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. . . . Despite their guilt as Christians and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied, for it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest. (*Annals* 15.44)