JESUS AND JAMES
MARTYRS OF THE TEMPLE

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The Temple and Psalm 118 point to significant common ground shared by Jesus and James. A careful probing of these traditions may clarify the nature of their respective ministries and the factors that brought both into deadly conflict with the Jerusalem Temple establishment.

THE DEATHS OF JESUS AND JAMES

According to the four New Testament Gospels, Jesus engaged in controversy with the ruling priests, a controversy which included a demonstration in the Temple precincts, and was subsequently handed over to the Roman governor, who executed him as “king of the Jews.”¹ The essence of this sequence is independently attested in the so-called Testimonium Flavianum (Josephus, Ant. 18.3.3 §63-64), the authentic part of which reads:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of amazing deeds, a teacher of persons who receive truth with pleasure. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. And when Pilate condemned him to the cross—the leading men among us [Ἰων ἐπὶ θέτῳ Πηδρουν παρ' ἡμῖν] having accused him—those who loved him from the first did not cease to do so. And to the present the tribe of Christians, named after this person, has not disappeared.²

¹ The *titulus* and its reference to Jesus as “king of Jews” (Mark 15:26) enjoy wide acceptance by critical scholars. There is literary evidence of such posting of an inscription that refers to the crime (Lat. *causa poenae* = al-tia in Mark 15:26; Matt 27:37) and/or the name of the victim (cf. Suetonius, *Caligula* 32.2 and *Domitian* 10.1; Dio Cassius 73.16.5). In one case the victim carried a placard around the Forum before his crucifixion (Dio Cassius 54.3.6-7). According to Eusebius one of the Christian martyrs was led around an amphitheatre carrying a placard “on which was written in Latin, ‘This is Attalus, the Christian’” (Hist. Eccl. 5.1.44; cf. John 19:20: “it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek”).

² For a compelling defense of the authenticity of this part of the *Testimonium*, see J. P. Meier, “Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal,” *CBQ* 52 (1990) 76-103.
There is good reason to believe that the “leading men among us” (lit. “first men among us”) are in this context the ruling priests, just as the New Testament Gospels relate.† Jesus encounters opposition from the ruling priests, is handed over to the Roman authorities, who then put him to death. The juridical process that unfolds is parallel at many points to that which overtook Jesus ben Ananias some thirty years later (J.W. 6.5.3 §300-309).‡

Although different at points, the fate that overtook James, the brother of Jesus, is similar. Again Josephus (Ant. 20.9.1 §197-203) provides the following account:

And now Caesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator. But the king (Agrippa) deprived Joseph of the high priesthood, and bestowed the succession to that dignity on the son of Ananus, who was also himself called Ananus. Now the report goes that this eldest Ananus proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons who had all performed the office of a High Priest to God, and who had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly, which had never happened to any other of our High Priests. But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he

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† The author of Luke-Acts refers to Israel’s leaders as the “first of the people”: “And he was teaching daily in the Temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people [οἱ πρῶτοι τοῦ λαοῦ] were seeking to destroy him” (Luke 19:47). Luke links these “first” ones with “the ruling priests and the scribes.” More importantly, elsewhere Josephus refers to ruling priests as the “first men”: “There came to (Ezra) certain men who accused some of the common people as well as Levites and priests of having violated the constitution and broken the laws of the country . . . No sooner did he hear this than he rent his clothes for grief . . . because the first men among the people [τοὺς πρῶτους τοῦ λαοῦ] were guilty of this charge” (Ant. 11.5.3 §140-141). Here, the “first men” are synonymous with the Levites and priests. In a text closer to the one that concerns us, Josephus describes Vitellius’ movement against Aretas: “Since he had started to lead his army through the land of Judea, the Jews of the highest standing [ἀνδρές οἱ πρῶτοι] went to meet him and entreated him not to march through their land. For, they said, it was contrary to their tradition to allow images . . . to be brought upon their soil” (Ant. 18.5.3 §121). These “first men” who are concerned that Roman icons not be allowed to pass through Judea were in all probability religious leaders.