

The Mystery of the Testimonium Flavianum

A History from 93 CE to the Present

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Louis Feldman, the pre-eminent Josephus scholar, has succinctly discussed the problem of the Testimonium Flavianum (TF) in several works. The most readily available is his footnote to his translation of Josephus in the Loeb edition, Books 18-19, found on p. 48-49.

In his work Feldman describes the chief arguments for and against the Testimonium authenticity. Briefly they are as follows:

Arguments for authenticity

Found in all surviving manuscripts

Quoted in full by Eusebius, c. 324 CE

A more accepted reference to Jesus in Book 20 indicates that he must have been described earlier in the Antiquities, logically at the discussion of Pilate.

Vocabulary and style are generally consistent with that of Josephus

Arguments against authenticity

Christian content unlikely from a Jewish writer (esp., "He was the Messiah.").

Writers earlier than Eusebius do not cite the passage; Origen states that Josephus did *not* believe Jesus was the Messiah.

The passage breaks the continuity of the narrative concerning Pilate.

There are stylistic peculiarities that are not found in Josephus, such as the use of

No other passage in the Antiquities has been seriously questioned, so the burden of proof is on the skeptics.

the first person in "the principal men among us".

Interpolations have been found in isolated manuscripts of Josephus, such as accounts of Jesus in the Slavonic version.

Chronology of the Debate

The history of scholarly argument is as follows. For sources, see Feldman, Whiston, and the authors listed in the Books and Articles section. One can also read the [quotations](#) from Josephus and Agapius to which this chronology refers..

93 CE

The book *Jewish Antiquities* by Josephus is published in Rome. It contains at least one reference to "James, the brother of Jesus called the Christ." Manuscripts surviving today also contain a description of Jesus. But was this description present in the year 93?

c. 230-250

The Christian writer Origen cites Josephus' section on the death of James "the brother of Jesus" in Book 20 of the Antiquities; but states Josephus did not believe in Jesus, and does not cite the TF passage in Book 18.

c. 324

Eusebius quotes the TF in full, in the form that survives today in all manuscripts.

10th Century

The Arab historian Agapius quotes a version of the TF that differs from that of Eusebius. It does not have the most obvious Christian elements. However, this version will be lost to scholarship until 1971 (see below).

16th Century

Joseph Scaliger first suspects authenticity of the TF due to its Christian content.

17th Century

Richard Montague, Bishop of Norwich, declares phrase "He was the Messiah" a later Christian addition.

1737

Whiston publishes his translation of Josephus, and argues that the TF we have is entirely authentic. He argues that the passage should be read from the perspective of a contemporary of Josephus, in which case the Christian elements are not so alarming; and that, in any case, Josephus could very well have been a Jewish believer in Jesus (a Jewish Christian or "Ebionite").

18th - early 20th Century

Other scholars argue the passage is forged in whole or in part. Later scholars opposing authenticity include:

Schurer
Niese
Norden
Zeitlin
Lewy
Juster

1929

H. St. J. Thackeray supports the interpolation theory, credits Josephus' "Greek assistants" for variation in styles throughout the Antiquities. Also notes several correspondences (but not the TF) between the Gospel of Luke and the Antiquities, and suggests that Luke may have been present at readings of Josephus' work in Roman, and that the two may even have met.

1931

R. Eisler, in his influential *The Messiah Jesus*, suggests Christian censors *deleted* large portions of the original text, and offers a reconstruction by inserting new text into the passage.

1941

Ch. Martin identifies select portions of the Testimonium as probably interpolations, while the rest he considers authentic.

1954

Paul Winter argues that there are just three interpolations in the TF, and the rest is genuine. "He was the Messiah" and "if indeed he can be called a man" are considered most suspect, as is the latter section describing the resurrection and the prophecies. This identification of the interpolations becomes a popular view (reiterated by John Meier, 1991).

c. 1960

Hans Conzellman notes that the TF resembles "the Lukan kerygma", the essential beliefs presented by Luke in his gospel and in Acts; he therefore concludes the passage must be entirely forged by a Christian.

1963

Feldman writes: "The most probably view seems to be that our text represents substantially what Josephus wrote, but that some alterations have been made by a Christian interpolator." (p. 49, Loeb edition)

1971

In a startling find, Shlomo Pines publishes citations of the TF appearing in Arabic and Syriac works of the 9th-10th century. These quotations substantially resemble our current Testimonium, but do not have two of the most suspicious phrases: "he was the Messiah" and "if indeed he can be called a man". Pines suggests these editions may have used an authentic, uninterpolated version of Josephus' work.

1973-1983

Karl Rengstorff publishes his massive concordance of Josephus' work, listing references to every word, allowing scholars for the first time a tool to study Josephus' style quantitatively.

1984

J. Neville Birdsall uses Rengstorff's new concordance to study the style of the TF, concludes that there are too many discrepancies for the passage to be genuine, and may be entirely forged.

1991

John Meier studies the question again, repeats support for Winter's view. This work is influential among contemporary scholars, including John Dominic Crossan and John O'Connor-Murphy.

1995

G. J. Goldberg identifies a regular series of correspondences between the TF and the Emmaus narrative of Luke. He argues these are so close the two must have been derived from a common source, a Christian document now lost.

Moreover, the correspondences are not plausibly what would be expected of a Christian forger, nor can later interpolations have been made or the relationship between the texts would have been destroyed.

The significant variations between the two texts is that the Luke texts have neither the phrase "if indeed he can be called a man" nor "he was the Messiah" at appropriate locations, in accordance with the Arabic version published by Pines (1971) and verifying the speculations of Winter.

However, both texts contain the resurrection and the prophecy in parallel locations and with unusual overlapping vocabulary, again in accordance with the Arabic version, but in disagreement with the speculations of Winter, Meier, and others.

The questions raised by scholars are answered, from the perspective of this theory, on the [Questions](#) page.

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