



JESUS MYTHICISM 7: JOSEPHUS, JESUS AND THE ‘TESTIMONIUM FLAVIANUM’

📅 October 11, 2020 👤 Tim O'Neill 💬 43 Comments

Mythicists like to claim that the issue of the authenticity of Josephus' account of Jesus – the so-called “Testimonium Flavianum” – is settled. They insist that the passage is a wholesale forgery, inserted by Christians. But while a scholarly case can be made for this position, one can also be made for the partial authenticity of the passage. Unless new evidence appears, the question remains moot.



Of all the source material pertinent to the question of the historicity of Jesus, none is more controversial or widely discussed than the “Testimonium Flavianum” (TF): the 88 word account of Jesus found in Book XVIII of Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*. In the *textus receptus*, it reads:

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οὗτος ἦν
(64) καὶ αὐτὸν ἐνδείξει τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν παρ' ἡμῖν σταυρωῖ
ἐπιτετιμηκότος Πιλάτου οὐκ ἐπαύσαντο οἱ τὸ πρῶτον ἀγαπήσαντες.
ἐφάνη γάρ αὐτοῖς τρίτην ἔχων ἡμέραν πάλιν ζῶν τῶν θείων
προφητῶν ταῦτά τε καὶ ἄλλα μυρία περὶ αὐτοῦ θαυμάσια εἰρηκότων.
εἰς ἔτι τε νῦν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀπὸ τοῦδε ὠνομασμένον οὐκ ἐπέλιπε
τὸ φῶλον.

[[63] And there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed it is necessary to call him a man, for he was a doer of paradoxical works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure, and many Jews on the one hand and also many of the Greeks on the other he drew to himself. He was the Messiah.

[64] And when, on the accusation of some of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first loved him did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, the divine prophets having related both these things and countless other marvels about him. And even till now the tribe of Christians, so named from this man, has not gone extinct.)

(AJ XVIII.63-4)

There are several elements in this passage which do not ring true as something a devout Jew and non-Christian like Josephus (Yosef ben Matityahu) would say. After all, it does not make much sense for a Jew like Josephus to declare that Jesus “was the Messiah” or attest “he appeared to them on the third day, living again”. As early as 1592 the Protestant scholar Lucas Osiander (1534–1604) doubted the authenticity of this passage on exactly these grounds, noting:

If Josephus had felt what he asserted in that testimony, he would have been a Christian; however, nothing with even a whiff of Christianity can be found in his writings.

(Epitomes historiae ecclesiasticae centuriae decimae sextae, 1, Book 2, Ch. 7.17)

Later scholars took up this argument and noted other perceived problems with the passage. Louis Cappel (1568–1658) pointed out that the passage does not seem to fit well into its surrounding narrative and Tanaquilus Faber (1615–1672) noted that the passage contradicts Origen’s repeated assertion that Josephus “did not believe in Jesus as the Christ” (*Contra Celsum* 1.47, *Commentarius in Matthaeum* X.17). As the centuries passed, the number of defenders of the authenticity of the passage dwindled, and by the end of the nineteenth century Benedikt Niese (1849–1910) placed it in brackets in his 1890 critical edition of Josephus, indicating it a probable interpolation. By then its wholesale inauthenticity was widely accepted.

This situation changed in the later twentieth century, when both Christian and Jewish scholars began to significantly reappraise the origins of Christianity in the context of Second Temple Judaism and its aftermath. The idea that Josephus would have been necessarily hostile to Jesus and his message was greatly weakened by this review of Jesus in his

religion in the ancient world.” – Professor James F. McGrath, Butler University

“Tim O’Neill is a known liar an asscrank a hack a tinfoil hatter stupid a crypto-Christian, posing as an atheist a pseudo-atheist shill for Christian triumphalism [and] delusionally insane.” – Dr. Richard Carrier PhD, unemployed blogger

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widely varying backgrounds and perspectives; by conservative Christians, liberal Christians and Jewish scholars, as well as by secular non-believers. This position has been espoused by, among many others, scholars as diverse as John P. Meier, Steven Mason, Paula Fredrikson, E.P. Sanders, Geza Vermes, John D. Crossan, Paul Winter, S.G.F. Brandon, Morton Smith, James H. Charlesworth, Carlo M. Martini, Wolfgang Trilling, A.M. Dubarle, Robert Van Voorst, R.T. France, F.F. Bruce, Craig L. Blomberg, Ben Witherington III, James D.G. Dunn, Darrell L. Bock, Alice Whealey, Luke Y. Johnson, J. Carleton Paget and Graham Stanton. This range of scholars shows this position cannot be dismissed as one held out of ideological bias or apologetic impulse, but is one based on evidence and reasoning.

There is, of course, a minority view that still maintains the passage is a wholesale interpolation. Most prominently, Ken Olson (“Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavianum”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 61 (2): 305, 1999 and also “A Eusebian Reading of the Testimonium Flavianum”, 2013), and Paul Hopper (“A Narrative Anomaly in Josephus: *Jewish Antiquities* xviii:63,” in Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob, eds., *Linguistics and Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers*, 2014, de Gruyter, pp. 147-169) both make arguments that the passage is a wholesale later insertion and not a Josephan text with later Christian additions. These are solid pieces of scholarship, made by reputable and qualified scholars who do not seem to have any obvious ideological agenda. They remain, however, in the minority.

But the idea that the TF is a “forgery” is almost an article of faith for online Jesus Mythicism enthusiasts; to the extent that it is stated as though this is a hard fact and not a minority interpretation. Some random samples from Reddit are illustrative here:

“Tacitus and Pliny the Younger are two hearsay sources, and there exists a confirmed forgery by Josephus called “Antiquities of the Jews” written in 93-94 AD.” (“Wagenator” on /r/exchristian in a post entitled “Reasons I am no longer a Christian)

“We’ve known it was fake for a long time. The religious will never admit it because they need all the help they can get and they don’t really care about reality.” (“BitchspotBlog” on /r/atheism)

“The Josephus “reference” to Jesus is also a well known fraud. The ink is marked out, the writing is different, the tone and quality and voice of the writing is also different. Furthermore, it includes the word “christian” which wasn’t coined at all until decades later.” (“Sandi_T” on /r/exchristian)

“There is little to no historical evidence for the resurrection, or Jesus himself, with the earliest records being written 40-70 years after the fact, and no first-century records of him other than Josephus, which is a known forgery.” (“Buck_McBride” on /r/changemyview)

Clearly these people definitely *do* have an obvious ideological agenda and some of them are also working from garbled memories or even outright fantasies, as the nonsense about how “the ink is marked out” in the

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this kneejerk retort, even if the Josephan passage referred to is not the TF but his other Jesus reference in *AJ* XX.200 – the one that is almost universally accepted as authentic (see [Jesus Mythicism 2: “James the Brother of the Lord”](#)).

But it is not just confused online zealots who insist that the TF is a “proven fake” and “known forgery”. This is also a key argument by the fringe Mythicist polemicists, who have to insist that both Josephan references to Jesus are later interpolations to avoid the problem of two mentions of him by precisely the ancient author who we would expect to refer to him if he had existed. So the atheist activist who calls himself “Aron Ra” bumbles things badly (in typical style) by [declaring](#) that Josephus’ “only mention of Jesus is now known to have been a forgery or redaction inserted later by someone else.” This influential atheist is, apparently, unaware that Josephus mentions Jesus twice and also thinks doubt about the TF is something only entertained “now” and not something that has dominated scholarship on the passage for about 428 years.

Similarly, the self-published amateur Mythicist writer David Fitzgerald insists that “there are several strong indications that the entire passage is an interpolation” and blithely dismisses the majority view that it is partially authentic as being held by “wishful apologists” (*Nailed: Ten Christian Myths That Show Jesus Never Existed at All*, Lulu.com, 2010, p.52). I am sure that Jewish and non-Christian scholars like Vermes, Fredriksen, Ehrman and others would be amused to learn they are “apologists”.

Unsurprisingly, the indefatigable Jesus Mythicism advocate, Dr. Richard Carrier PhD., is characteristically strident in his claims for the wholesale inauthenticity of the TF. In a piece on his blog entitled “[The Josephus Testimonium: Let’s Just Admit It’s Fake Already](#)” (2015) Carrier cites the articles noted above – Olson and Hopper – as well as (of course) himself and dismisses the whole idea that any part of the TF could have been written by him, declaring with typical chutzpah and ringing finality:

[I]t definitely wasn’t.

Especially with all the other evidence stacked on: its uncharacteristic narrative style (including its bizarre brevity and naive simplicity); the narrative illogic of its position in the text; its not being known to Origen or anyone else before Eusebius a century later; its containing patently ridiculous and fawning remarks only a Christian would make.

So just get over it already.

It’s fake.

Two years later he rang the death knell on partial authenticity again in another piece, “[Josephus on Jesus? Why You Can’t Cite Opinions Before 2014](#)” (2017), again citing Olson, Hopper and (of course) himself. Anyone who trusted Carrier on the matter would have to conclude that the case is closed: the TF is a wholesale forgery. Except, unsurprisingly, actual

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“Jesus, a Wise Man”

The reason so many scholars accept the partial authenticity position is there are a number of elements in and attributes to the TF that arguably indicate a passage original to Josephus that has been adjusted and added to by later Christian scribes rather than a wholesale interpolation. To begin with, the phrase “if indeed it is necessary to call him a man” reads like an addition modifying or correcting the opening reference to him as “Jesus, a wise man”. Calling Jesus “a wise man” would be odd for a Christian interpolator, since they would clearly have regarded him as far more than this and no New Testament or Ante-Nicean descriptions of Jesus refer to him this way. On the other hand, as many commentators have noted, it is a phrase found elsewhere in Josephus: he uses it to refer to Solomon (*AJ* VIII.53) and Daniel (*AJ* X.237). So the phrase “if indeed it is necessary to call him a man” makes sense as a Christian scribe’s way of dealing with an original Josephan description of Jesus (“a wise man”) that does not quite fit Christian conceptions of him. As J.P. Meier notes:

A Christian scribe would not deny that Jesus was a wise man, but would feel that label insufficient for one who was believed to be God as well as man.

(Meier, “Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal”, Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Jan 1990, Vol. 52, Issue 1, pp. 76-103, p. 85)

So while a Christian would not *disagree* that Jesus was a “wise man”, they would be motivated to add something to bolster their belief he was much more than this.

It is also noted that the passage is strangely brief and restrained for something inserted for Christian apologetic purposes. If a Christian scribe was making a wholesale interpolation, it is odd that they did not make more of the opportunity and insert a whole gospel synopsis and take full advantage of putting a much longer and more detailed apologetic statement in the mouth of Josephus. But what we have in the *textus receptus* of the TF is extremely short and – apart from a slightly ambiguous reference to his miracles, a brief note on prophecy about him and a mention of the Resurrection – light on apologetic details. This is in contrast to other places where we know Christians did embellish or comment on Josephus for apologetic purposes: As J.C. Paget notes:

Where we can be certain of the existence of Christian additions to Josephus as well as glosses, they strike a more aggressively Christian note. In this respect I would draw attention to the pseudo-Josephan passage about James, the Slavonic Josephan passage about Jesus and some Christian glosses of Josephan manuscripts.

(J.C. Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity”. The Journal of Theological Studies. 52 (2): 539–624, p. 600)

Origen Paganism Paul
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Harris Tacitus Tertullian

someone whose “nature and form were human but whose appearance was more than human and whose deeds were divine” and “everything, whatever he did, he did by some unseen power, by word and command”. All the elements of the TF are to be found in the Slavonic interpolations, but in greatly expanded form, with plenty of details derived from the gospels.

This gives us an indication of what a wholesale interpolation would look like. By contrast, the TF appears more like a brief Josephan account that a Christian has simply adjusted and made some small additions to.

Paget also notes that it would be odd for a wholesale interpolator to leave Josephus’ account of John the Baptist (*AJ* XVIII.109-119) as it is and to not place his interpolation about Jesus *after* the reference to the Baptist, rather than *before* it. This is the order we find in the gospels and when Eusebius gives his summary of the origins of Christianity in his *Ecclesiastical History*, he cites Josephus as a historical source on John the Baptist (*HE*, I.11.1-6) and then cites the TF on Jesus (*HE*, I.11.1-7-8), restoring the gospel sequence of events. It is odd that a wholesale interpolator would not do the same, but instead we find the TF earlier in Book XVIII of *Antiquities*, indicating that this uncanonical positioning of the two stories is due to Josephus’ placement of them.

It is similarly odd that the TF contains other elements that are not in accordance with what we find in the gospels or with early Christian ideas. The passage is strangely neutral about the Jewish leaders (“the principal men among us”) who accuse Jesus, given that much later Christian material is strongly anti-Jewish and follows the gospels in casting the Jewish leaders as the villains of the story. Again, the Slavonic Josephus sticks to the gospel depiction, inserting a lurid paragraph on the Jewish leaders’ scheming and perfidy. Josephus, on the other hand, is less likely to be as condemnatory of the actions of these “principal men” and likely to give a more matter-of-fact account.

Likewise, the TF states that Jesus won over “many Jews on the one hand and also many of the Greeks”. Yet the gospels and the subsequent Christian tradition consistently maintain that Jesus’ mission was wholly to the Jewish people and evangelism to Gentiles came only after his death. So this depiction of Jesus winning over Greek converts in his lifetime is contrary to the canonical narrative and is unparalleled in any early Christian literature. This odd element makes more sense if it was original to Josephus, with him projecting the state of affairs with the Jesus Sect in his time back onto the lifetime and career of Jesus.

Then there are the phrases in the passage which are not distinctively or obviously Christian, but can be found elsewhere in Josephus’ corpus. The use of the term σοφὸς ἄνθρωπος (a wise man) falls into this category, as has been noted above. Another example is the term παραδόξων ἔργων (paradoxical works) to refer to Jesus’ reported miracles. This is a phrase Josephus uses elsewhere. He uses it to describe the deeds of the prophet Elisha (*AJ* IX.183) and he uses forms of the adjective παράδοξος (paradoxical, unexpected, strange) often, including to express a degree of scepticism.

322,383, II.49, 177, 341, IV.643, V.562 and *AJ* VII.194 and XX.98. The term *πρώτων ἀνδρῶν* (principal men) is also common in Josephus: see *AJ* XVII.81, XVIII.7, and 98.

Other elements in the TF are more unusual but not without parallels in Josephus. *φῶλον* is a word that usually refers to a “nation” or “tribe”, but strictly speaking it means “a distinct set of people or other beings”. Early Christian writers do not use it to refer to their sect, but Josephus does use it elsewhere to refer to a distinct group, such as *AJ* II.306 (to refer to a swarm of locusts) or XIII.430 (to refer to the female gender).

There are no direct textual variants that indicate partial authenticity for the TF, as all surviving manuscripts include the passage as we find it (with a few very small variants). But there is some indirect textual evidence that is relevant here. This is because there are several texts that quote, translate or paraphrase the TF in ways that vary from the Greek *textus receptus* and which can be argued to indicate an earlier, unedited Josephan version.

One of these is the so-called Pseudo Hegesippus’ *De excidio urbis Hierosolymitanae*: a loose paraphrase of Josephus’ *Jewish War* dating to the late fourth century. This text includes a paraphrase of the TF which includes all of its elements except two. This version does not mention that Pilate sentenced Jesus to death and also omits anything like the statement that “he was the Messiah” (*De excidio*, II.12). The first omission is understandable, given that the author is using the passage in an anti-Jewish context and wants to put the blame for Jesus’ death squarely on the Jewish leaders. But the omission of the reference to his status as the Messiah is unusual. Pseudo Hegesippus also seems, unlike other Latin translators and commenters, to be working from a version of Josephus that is independent of the versions found in Eusebius, indicating a textual line that did not include some of the later interpolated elements (see Paget, pp.566-67 for the evidence on this). Similarly, in the later Greek textual traditions, we find the sixth century historian John Malas, the tenth century Pseudo Simon the Logothete and the twelfth century Georgias Kedrenos, whose renditions of the passage all omit the statement “he was the Messiah”.

The variant that differs most from the *textus receptus* is found in the tenth century Arabic Christian writer Agapius, who paraphrases the TF in his chronicle (*Kitāb al-'unwān* II:15-16) and not only omits the “he was the Messiah” claim, but also the “if indeed it is necessary to call him a man” comment. Then we have a twelfth century Syriac version of the TF by Michael the Syrian (*Chronicle* 10:20) which says “he was *thought to be* the Messiah” instead of the bald assertion that he was the Messiah. Finally, we have Jerome’s Latin paraphrase in his *De Viris Illustribus* 13 which renders the Messiah line as “et credebatur esse Christus” (he was *believed* to be the Messiah).

Much ink has been spilled on how these indirect variants can be explained, what texts these writers were working from and what all this may mean for the issue of wholesale interpolation versus partial authenticity. The issue is complex, because it is not clear if any of these writers were working from now lost textual variants of Josephus that were independent of our current *textus receptus*. It can be argued that

evidence is difficult” (p. 570). He notes the issues regarding the lines of textual dependence mentioned above and points out that there is no clear pattern to the variants: “their versions never precisely chime in with each other.” Despite this, he feels that there may well be some fire beneath all the smoke:

[B]efore dismissing the case for supporting certain textual emendations witnessed in the indirect tradition, we still have to ask why a variety of Latin, Greek, and Semitic authors, many of whom wrote independently of each other, do hint at a possibly more neutral version of the TF than the one which stands in our received text, particularly as this relates to Jesus’ messianic identity, while other witnesses, often contemporary with the ‘neutral’ versions, produce the received version.

(p. 571)

While there is no clear line of argument through all these variants to a definitive original, neutral Josephan text, their existence in so many different strands of tradition is significant, as is the fact they are found in exactly the parts of the passage that are already suspect on other grounds. Culminatively, they indicate an original neutral passage that was added to in various different ways, even if this is not conclusive.

Finally, the Jesus-James reference in *AJ* XX.200 is almost universally considered authentic by Josephus scholars (again, see [Jesus Mythicism 2: “James the Brother of the Lord”](#)). While it is far from unknown for Josephus to identify figures in his narrative by reference to people he does not mention elsewhere, a number of scholars have noted that the reference to “that Jesus who was called Messiah” in Book XX makes a great deal of sense as referring the reader back to an earlier account of this Jesus.

Taken together, all the attributes of the passage outlined above have led many scholars to accept that it is partially authentic, with some added Christian elements. By examining the elements which are and are not most likely Josephan in style and content, several scholars have suggested reconstructions of what the original passage may have said. In his paper noted above, Meier offers the following:

“At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when [or better: although] Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians (named after him) has not died out.”

(Meier, p. 87)

Meier arrives at his “modest proposal” regarding the likely original text largely by removing three elements from the TF which he argues “interrupt the flow of what is otherwise a concise text carefully written in a fairly neutral—or even purposely ambiguous-tone” (p. 87). These are (i)

the Greco-Roman world thought marked such men; miracles and effective teaching. However, this also attracts the animosity of some leading Jews and so he is executed, but his followers continue to hold him in esteem. Meier argues that the clearly Christian elements he has removed break up this flow of thought, but once these elements are removed, the language in the passage conforms to Josephus usage quite neatly.

The esteemed Jewish scholar, the late Geza Vermes, proposed a very similar reconstruction, using much the same lines of reasoning as Meier. His reads:

“About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man...For he was one who performed paradoxical deeds and was the teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews [and many Greeks?]. He was [called] the Christ. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him... And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”

(Vermes, “Jesus in the Eyes of Josephus”, Standpoint, 14 December, 2009)

Some scholars who accept partial authenticity disagree with the inclusion of some elements Meier and Vermes have retained – particularly the “startling/paradoxical deeds” reference – while others, such as Whealey make arguments for retaining even more of the *textus receptus* than is found in these reconstructions. But it is clear that there is far more to this position than merely assuming partial authenticity and simply removing the most obviously Christian elements. And given that this position is accepted as readily by many Jewish and non-Christian scholars as Christian ones, Mythicist attempts to dismiss it as merely the hopes of “wishful apologists” are patently absurd.

But it is important to emphasise that all of the arguments above can and are challenged and this argument is not in any way definitive, even if it has majority acceptance. A valid and scholarly case can be made against it and for the position of wholesale interpolation.

“The Tribe of the Christians”

It would take a vast effort to go over all of the arguments against the case for partial authenticity sketched out above, let alone all the counters to those arguments. Paget’s article on the matter runs to 84 closely argued and extensively annotated pages and is still not comprehensive. Whealey has written a whole 231 page book on the reception history of the TF which, given the ongoing scholarship on the question, is already out of date – see *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York, 2003). Suffice it to say that this majority position is supported by solid argument even if it is not conclusive or at all definitive.

to the perception that a Jew like Josephus could not have written what the passage says about Jesus, particularly the references to him being more than just a man, being the Messiah and rising from the dead. Many modern Mythicists argue that even if we remove these highly Christian elements, the tone of the passage is still too positive for it to be something Josephus would say about a figure like Jesus. Amateur Mythicist Earl Doherty argues:

[I]n the case of every other would-be messiah or popular leader opposed to or executed by the Romans, he has nothing but evil to say.

(Doherty, Jesus: Neither God nor Man – The Case for a Mythical Jesus, (Ottawa; 2009), p. 535)

But given that the reference to him being the Messiah is one of the elements in the passage that virtually everyone agrees is not original, this argument loses most of its force. Even if the original TF simply said he was “called Messiah” (as per *AJ* XX.200) or was “thought to be/believed to be the Messiah” (as per the indications of the indirect textual evidence), the key point here is the passage does not depict Jesus as leading any kind of popular rebellion or political mass movement, as Josephus does with, say, Simon of Perea (*AJ* XVII.273-277), Theudas (*AJ* XX.97-98) or the “Egyptian Prophet” (*AJ* XX.169-171). This passage is more like the Josephan account of John the Baptist – a wise man who runs afoul of the Jewish establishment and is executed as a result (*AJ* XVIII.116-119) – than an account of a rebel or anti-Roman rabble rouser.

Doherty also objects to the idea that Josephus would call Jesus a “wise man” who taught “such men as receive the truth with pleasure”. This line of argument has a long pedigree and is based on an outdated conception of the early Jesus Sect as a distinct religion that was wholly incompatible with and so opposed by the Judaism of the day. More recent appraisals see the first century followers of Jesus as very much a part of Second Temple Judaism, with the drift toward conceptions of Jesus that made it incompatible with the Jewish tradition only developing later – on this see Paula Fredriksen’s excellent *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (Yale: 2018). So Doherty’s argument depends on a rather old fashioned conception of how a Jew like Josephus would see Jesus. It is entirely consistent with what we know that Josephus could see Jesus as a wise teacher in the Jewish prophetic tradition without necessarily agreeing with everything he taught (assuming he had any detailed knowledge of what his teachings actually were).

Another very early objection to the authenticity of the passage which is still argued by Mythicists is that the TF is out of place and does not fit well with the surrounding narrative. This remains a popular argument for wholesale interpolation among Mythicists. Fitzgerald summarises it:

Many commentators, including Doherty, G.A. Wells and Peter Kirby, have noted that without the Testimonium passage, the two passages flanking it flow seamlessly into each other. This fact alone is a tremendous indication that the passage is entirely fraudulent.

Josephusforschung Darmstadt 1973, pp. 27–69). But despite Fitzgerald’s enthusiasm, this argument is not as “tremendous” as he makes out. As various other scholars have noted in response to Norden, Josephus has a characteristically meandering style and digressions are common in his narratives. In fact, there are no less than eleven figures mentioned by Josephus whose references can be easily removed from their context without interrupting the flow of the surrounding passages:

- 1. Honi the Circle-Drawer – *AJ* XIV.21–28.
- 2. Galilean Cave Brigands – *War* I.304–313 and *AJ* XIV.415–430.
- 3. Judas son of Hezekiah – *War* II.56 and *AJ* XVII.271–272.
- 4. Simon of Peraea – *War* II.57–59 and *AJ* XVII.273–277.
- 5. Athronges – *War* II.60–65 and *AJ* XVII.278–284.
- 6. Tholomaus – *AJ* XX.5.
- 7. Theudas – *AJ* XX.97–98.
- 8. Eleazar ben Dinai – *War* II.235–235 and *AJ* XX.161.
- 9. The Egyptian prophet – *War* II.259–263 and *AJ* XX.169–171.
- 10. An anonymous prophet – *AJ* XX.188.
- 11. Eleazar, an exorcist – *AJ* VIII.46–49.

Norden also argues that the anecdotes in the passages before and after the TF all detail “disturbances” or θόρυβοι, while the TF does not. Further, the passage following the TF begins with reference to “another sad calamity [that] put the Jews into disorder”, with the argument being that the TF does not present any “calamity” or any “disorder”. This too is tenuous, since the execution of a “wise man” who had won over “many Jews” thanks to “the accusation of some of the principal men among us” could be seen as both a calamity and “disorder” among the Jews. The word θόρυβοι is not used in the TF, but the concept is at least implicit. So the passage is not as out of context as many Mythicists maintain and its digressionary nature is actually quite characteristic of Josephus. Even Doherty has to admit that this argument does not carry much weight as a result.

A seemingly more powerful argument against partial authenticity is an argument from silence. Fitzgerald again:

Perhaps the major giveaway is that this passage does not appear until the 4th century. For the first 300 years of its existence, there is no mention of the Testimonium anywhere. This couldn’t have been simply because no one happened to read it; Josephus’ histories were immensely popular and pored over by scholars.

(Fitzgerald, Nailed, p. 53)

Citing Michael Hardwick’s *Josephus as an Historical Source in Patristic Literature Through Eusebius* (Brown Judaic Studies, 1989), he notes that “more than a dozen early Christian writers are known to have read and commented on the works of Josephus” and questions why none of them mentioned the TF. This looks like a solid argument at first blush, until it is realised it is not “the works of Josephus” generally which are in scope here, but more specifically *Antiquities* alone; since that is where the TF is found. After all, it is not as though these writers had access to a nice modern *Complete Collected Works of Flavius Josephus* edition from the Loeb Classical Library. Then we also need to filter out the references to *Antiquities* which are derived via an intermediary rather from access to the work itself. Once this more precise focus is applied to Fitzgerald’s

(i) Methodius, *On the Resurrection*, (II.18) – Methodius cites Josephus on the destruction of the Temple, though whether he's referring to *Antiquities* or the *Jewish War* is unclear.

(ii) Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, (I.21) – Clement makes an argument about the antiquity of Jewish thought and gives calculations of the years back to Moses based mainly on the *Jewish War*, but which Hardwick and Whealey argue probably also contains elements from *Antiquities*. Whether he had access to the full work, however, is not clear.

(iii) Irenaeus *Fragments* XXXII.53 – This cites Josephus talking about Moses. Whealey thinks this is based on *Antiquities* Bk II, but it's hard to see how Irenaeus could also have read the later books of *Antiquities*, given that he was under the impression Jesus had been crucified in the reign of Claudius, whereas Josephus specifically says in Bk XVIII that Pilate was removed during the reign of Tiberius. So he may have been basing this on a second hand reference or only had access to the earlier books of the work.

(iv) Anatolius of Alexandria, *Pascal Canon*, 3 – Writing on the dating of Passover, Anatolius makes a general reference to evidence from Josephus and Philo, though it's hard to tell from it if he has actually read either or which Josephus work he is referring to.

(v) Origen, *Contra Celsus* I.47, II.13 and *Commentarius in Matthaeum* X.17, all of which clearly reference *Antiquities*.

Of these, the only writer that gives us any definite indication of having actually read the relevant section of *Antiquities* is Origen; which makes the silence of the other pre-Eusebian writers rather less inexplicable. It should also be noted that, contrary to the expectations of Mythicists, early Christian writers before Origen did not use Josephus to refer to figures in New Testament texts. As Whealey notes:

Christians do not cite Josephus for any thing in the New Testament: not only do they not cite him on James the brother of Jesus or John the Baptist Perhaps most surprisingly they do not name Josephus as an authority on King Herod' Christians paid relatively little attention to their history in the second and third centuries.

(Whealey "Josephus on Jesus: Evidence from the first millennium" Theologische Zeitschrift 51 (1995), pp. 285-304, pp. 2887-88)

Of course, this still leaves Origen: who clearly does refer to *Antiquities*, definitely knew of and referred to Bk XVIII and does use Josephus when discussing New Testament figures. So his silence on the TF poses something of a problem for the partial authenticity position. The fact that Origen knew and used *Antiquities* and yet made no overt use of or reference to any form of the TF was one of the reasons the eminent Josephus scholar Louis Feldman, late in his career, changed his position on the authenticity issue and came down in favour of the wholesale interpolation of the passage. Feldman was persuaded in most part by the arguments of Olson (see below), but Origen's silence was also a key factor. However, his reasoning on this point is oddly flawed. He writes:

(Feldman, "On the Authenticity of the Testimonium Flavianum Attributed to Josephus", in New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations, Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (ed.s), Brill, 2011, pp. 13-30, p. 15)

The problem with Feldman's argument here is that Trypho does not make any charge "that Jesus never lived". Here Feldman appears to be referring to a statement by the Jewish critic Trypho in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue*.

But Christ – if he has indeed been born and exists anywhere – is unknown, and does not even know himself and has no power until Elias comes to anoint him and make him manifest to all. And you, having accepted a groundless report, invent a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake are inconsiderately perishing.

(Justin Martyr, Dialogue 8)

But this is a complete misreading of what Trypho is depicted as saying here. The "Christ" he refers to is the Jewish messiah, who he says has either not been born or, if he has, has not yet been revealed. Then he says that Jesus is not the true Jewish messiah, that the idea he is is "a groundless report" and that in accepting him as the messiah Christians "invent a [messiah] for yourselves". Trypho is not arguing that "Jesus never lived", just that Jesus was not the messiah because the messiah has yet to appear. Elsewhere in the *Dialogue* Trypho is depicted making other arguments that depend on Jesus being a historical person, so the idea he represents some kind of second century Jesus Mythicism is simply wrong. Amateur Mythicists, like the regularly incompetent David Fitzgerald, make this blunder often (see "Easter, the Existence of Jesus and Dave Fitzgerald" on this and other such errors), but for a scholar of Feldman's stature to make such a basic mistake is odd. Paget dismisses an earlier iteration of Feldman using this argument fairly briskly:

Feldman's view that a forgery [of the TF] may have been useful in arguments about whether Jesus existed is anachronistic.

(Paget, p. 602)

And he then adds in a blunt footnote:

Feldman's attempt to argue that Justin, Dial. 8 witnesses to such an argument is a misreading of the passage.

(Paget, p. 602, n. 269)

And this exposes a problem with the argument that Origen should have referred to or used the TF if an unedited original version of it existed in his copy. If all the passage in Origen's version said was that Jesus was merely "a wise man" who was executed by Pilate at the instigation of the Jewish leaders, why exactly would Origen highlight it? None of these ideas was in contention in his time – and the existence of Jesus certainly was not. And if the original form of the passage was neutral toward Jesus, it would not lend itself well to any of Origen's apologetic purposes. The only point where Origen could perhaps have used an original version of the TF is to counter the pagan critic Celsus' charge that Jesus' miracles

merely some kind of magician (though Eusebius does seem to use the TF to counter this charge – see below).

A further problem with any argument based on Origen's silence lies in the basis for the assumption that Origen "should" have mentioned an original version of the TF passage given that he refers to Josephus elsewhere. The second person to use a form of the TF was Jerome. Yet he cites it, even in its current form, just once while citing or referring to Josephus no less than 90 times in his works. Origen, by contrast, mentions Josephus only 11 times. If Jerome used the TF only once out of 90 Josephus references, how much less likely is it that Origen should do so, especially if his version of the passage was a neutral and original Josephus one, minus the Christian additions?

There is also some possible indication that Origen *was*, in fact, aware of an original version of the TF, minus the later Christian elements. In two places – *Contra Celsus* 1.47 and *Commentarius in Mattheum* X.17 – Origen explicitly states that Josephus did not "did not accept our Jesus to be the Messiah" and was "not believing in Jesus as the Messiah". These two categorical statements show that the *textus receptus*' categorical claim "he was the Messiah", at least, was clearly not in Origen's version of Josephus. But it also strongly implies that *something* about Jesus **was** in Origen's text. Of course, this is not definite, given that Origen may have concluded this from the later *AJ* XX.200 reference to Jesus as "who was called Messiah" or simply surmised it from the fact Josephus was a Jew. But these statements remain as a strong possible indicator that while Origen saw no use for an unedited neutral reference to Jesus as a mere "wise man", he was actually aware of the Bk XVIII passage.

Again, it should be emphasised that while none of the arguments for wholesale interpolation noted above are without their flaws, some of which are serious ones, and the counter arguments can be, in their turn, countered. There is no final knock-out argument on either side. But this does not stop Mythicists from claiming their preferred position is definitive and when they do so the villain of their story is always one man: Eusebius of Caesarea.

Eusebius the Liar?

That the TF is "a forgery" has become fixed in Mythicist dogma, as has the idea that Eusebius was the forger. Eusebius has long been a bad guy in the mythology of anti-Christian polemic and his reputation as someone who was happy to commit fraud to further Christianity goes back, like many of these things, to Edward Gibbon. In his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Gibbon damns Eusebius in classic style:

The gravest of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius himself, indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace, of religion. Such an acknowledgement will naturally excite a suspicion that a writer who has so openly violated one of the fundamental laws of history has not paid a very strict regard to the observance of the other; and the suspicion will derive additional credit from the character of Eusebius, which was less

Gibbon had a way of making things stick and his assessment of Eusebius here has been repeated for the last two centuries. Unfortunately, few of those who have repeated it have also bothered to check if the sentiments Gibbon attributes to him can actually be found in Eusebius' works. As it happens, the only passages that could possibly be what Gibbon refers to do not say what Gibbon claims – see [the useful analysis here](#) by Roger Pearse for details.

But this pedigree in anti-Christian polemic, taken with the fact that Eusebius is indeed the first Christian author to use and quote (versions of) the TF, means the claim he is the obvious culprit for wholesale forgery of the passage is too easy for many to resist.

Rather more credibly, a scholarly case can be made to attribute a wholesale interpolation to Eusebius or at least to a textual line that derives from his scriptorium. This was proposed by Solomon Zeitlin back in 1927 (see Zeitlin “The Christ Passage in Josephus”, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, NS. 18, pp.231-55) but has been argued in detail more recently by Olson in 1999 in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* article noted above.

Olson presents arguments against the partial authenticity position; some of which have been argued before and some are original to his paper. For example, he disputes Meier's argument that the most obvious Christian elements in the *textus receptus* interrupt the flow of an argument that makes more sense if they are removed. On the contrary, Olson counters, the argument presented makes more sense with these elements included:

The qualifier “if indeed one should call him a man” calls for the explanation “for he was a maker of miraculous works.” The statement “He was the Christ” is the logical antecedent of “the tribe of Christians, named after him,” while the clause “for he appeared to them on the third day returned to life” explains why “those who loved him at first did not stop”.

(Olson, p. 308)

This makes sense, but so does the argument left after Meier removes what he sees as interpolated elements. So neither version carries absolute weight as what was originally written.

Olson also sees the reference to Jesus as a “doer of paradoxical works” as too conveniently close to Eusebius' apologetic purposes in his *Demonstratio evangelica* III.5, where he counters the pagan claim Jesus did not do genuine miracles and was simply a trickster, concluding “it is perhaps incredible that Josephus should have written a passage so useful to Eusebius' apologetics” (p. 309). But Whealey is not convinced that the Josephan reference to these “paradoxical works” is as useful to Eusebius as Olson claims, arguing:

Eusebius does not explicitly use Testimonium's straightforward claim that Jesus was παραδόξων ἔργων ποιητής although he seems to allude to this part of the Testimonium indirectly at d.e. III 5, 103 just before quoting it in full. Eusebius apparently did not find this phrase per se adequate to use against such critics ...

analysis of the language of the TF, arguing all of it can be found in the works of Eusebius. So, again, the phrase παραδόξων ἔργων ποιητής (a doer of paradoxical works) can be found several times in Eusebius to describe Jesus (*Dem. Evang.* II.5.115, 123, 125; *Hist. eccl.* I.2.23) and he notes that “Josephus never uses *poiētēs* in the sense of ‘maker’ rather than ‘poet’, and he never combines forms of *paradoxos* and *poieō* in the sense of “miracle-making” (p. 310). Whealey counters that (as already noted above), the term “paradoxical works” is found elsewhere in Josephus to describe miracles, both real and apparent. As for the word ποιητής (maker, doer, inventor, creator), she argues we cannot be sure whether Eusebius wrote this phrase or it is “only evidence that Eusebius has been influenced by the Testimonium itself to describe Jesus in these terms in his early works” (pp. 80-81).

Earlier in her paper arguing against Olson, Whealey makes this point in more detail:

If Eusebius and Josephus were totally independent writers, a comparison of their characteristic language with the Testimonium might lead to relatively conclusive results as to whether the Testimonium were more like Eusebius or more like Josephus in style. However, since Eusebius used Josephus more extensively than any non-Biblical writer except Origen, and since he quoted the Testimonium three times in his works, it would be surprising if Josephus' language had not generally influenced his own language in some way. In particular, the language may have influenced how Eusebius described Jesus in his own works, or how he thought non-hostile Jews perceived Jesus. Thus any study of this topic may ultimately leave us with rather inconclusive results.

(Whealey, p. 76)

Whealey’s extensive critique of Olson’s arguments and detailed, word by word analysis of the TF’s language and how it may or may not relate to that of Eusebius goes a substantial way to undermining the vast confidence of Mythicists like Carrier that Olson’s is the last word on the matter. Feldman is somewhat convinced by Olson’s arguments. Paget is not, saying that his “case is by no means a paltry one but is not as powerful as he thinks” (Paget, p. 577 with some detailed criticisms on pp. 577-78). Carrier confidently declares to his followers that when it comes to the TF “you can’t cite opinions before 2014” because of the work of scholars like Olson (and Hopper – see below), which he chooses to find definitive. But writing in 2016 Sabrina Inowlocki notes Olson’s revival of the theory of Eusebian forgery for the TF and then observes “but this has not found support among scholars” (Inowlocki, “Josephus and Patristic Literature” in *A Companion to Josephus*, H. Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers ed.s, Blackwell, 2016, pp. 356-68, p. 359).

All of these scholars acknowledge that Olson makes sound arguments and presents a fine scholarly case. That is not the issue here. The problem is in the overblown assessment of Carrier that Olson is somehow definitive on the question of language and authorship, when that is absolutely not the case. The question remains moot.

And the same can be said for the other arguments which Carrier trumpets. One of these is, oddly enough, by G.J. Goldberg (“The

correspondences that the two texts are interrelated. In his conclusion he considers three possible explanations for this: (i) co-incidence, (ii) a forger who altered or created the TF drawing on the Emmaus episode or (iii) Josephus and the gLuke author using a common source. Goldman settles on option (iii), rejecting wholesale forgery on some well-established grounds:

This proposal has the weakness of supposing that a writer capable of imitating Josephus' style and daring enough to alter his manuscript would at the same time employ non-Josephan expressions and adhere rather closely to a New Testament text. A forger of the required skill should have been able to shake free of such influences.

(Goldberg, p. 15)

But Carrier happily accepts Goldberg's analysis while totally rejecting his conclusion. In his typically overblown and bombastic style, he grandly declares that Goldberg has "proved" that the two texts are interrelated. Not even Goldberg would claim this, and his work is careful to note evidence that runs counter to his argument. And there is a great deal to be uncertain about when it comes to his argument. A full and detailed analysis of his thesis would take some time, so I would recommend this critique by Colin Green – [Josephus on Jesus – Review: "The Coincidences of the Emmaus Narrative of Luke and the Testimonium of Josephus"](#) by Gary J. Goldberg – which highlights most of the key problems.

But Carrier will accept anything that helps him to bolster his *a priori* positions and Goldberg's argument serves that purpose. However, he rejects Goldberg's conclusion that Josephus and the gLuke author shared a source, arguing "Josephus would never use a source so slavishly and unintelligibly as that". Given that this hypothetical common source no longer exists, we have no idea how "slavishly" Josephus followed it. If Goldberg is correct, all we can say is that both Josephus and the gLuke author used it in similar ways. There is also nothing "unintelligible" about the way Goldberg has Josephus use this posited lost common source.

Then there is the fact that the idea of mere co-incidence is not as easily dismissed as both Goldberg and Carrier claim. Both passages are very short and both are doing the same thing: giving a brief synopsis of the career and death of Jesus in a few sentences. This alone means there is likely to be some overlap in structure and potentially at least some in language. If at least part of the *textus receptus* of the TF was then added to by Christians who would have been familiar with the gospels and therefore with the Emmaus anecdote, further overlaps in language become even more explicable. Finally, given that some scholars are now of the opinion that gLuke is much later in date than traditionally supposed and that its writer actually used *Antiquities* as one of his sources, the overlaps can be explained another way anyway.

Once again, what Goldberg presents is not as conclusive as Carrier's overly cocky assessment pretends.

differs to Josephus' usage, (ii) that the oblique way the TF refers to Pilate differs to the language used in the other Josephan references to Pilate and (iii) that the other Pilate episodes in Bk XVIII have "an event structure" more detailed and quite different to the way Pilate is presented in the TF.

Once again, Carrier bombastically declares that all this "verifies" the conclusions of Olson and the argument (but not the conclusion) of Goldberg. And, of course, it supports Carrier's own arguments in his Mythicist opus *On the Historicity of Jesus*, which seals the deal for Carrier. Unfortunately, yet again, Hopper's arguments are nowhere near as solid as Carrier insists. The brevity of the TF makes any linguistic analysis of it highly tenuous to begin with and different analysts can come to opposite conclusions. For example, using computer analysis of the TF and Josephus' corpus, David L. Meadland came to the cautious conclusion that the language and style is probably genuinely Josephan – see "On Finding Fresh Evidence in Old Texts: Reflections on Results in Computer-Assisted Biblical Research", *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 74, no. 3 (1992), 67-88. Furthermore, given that pretty much everyone agrees that probably as much as half of the *textus receptus* is *not* Josephan, finding non-Josephan language and style in this brief passage is hardly remarkable. Finally, Hopper's stylistic arguments comparing the Pilate episodes to the TF are highly subjective or can be countered by alternative arguments very easily.

Once again, as with Olson and with Goldberg, this is not to say that Hopper's arguments are necessarily wrong or even badly-argued or weak. They have not been widely accepted, but they are valid, well-presented and published in a peer reviewed journal. The problem lies with the insistence by Carrier that these works supporting the minority position have "proven" or "verified" his preferred thesis on the TF is right and his ludicrous dogmatic assertion that we should "just admit it's fake already". As ever, he overstates his position, presents "maybes" as facts and uses overblown language like a rhetorical sledgehammer. Apparently the case is closed and all that remains is for everyone to "admit" what they secretly must know: that Carrier is (as ever) right.

Carrier is, of course, entitled to his opinion. On this particular question, he at least has some real scholarship to lean on, not his usual scraps of hoary Mythicist stuff from a century ago, fringe arguments by Price and Doherty and his own baroque fantasies, such as his silly "[Celestial Sperm Bank in Outer Space](#)" idea. As far as I can tell, Olson, Goldberg and Hopper are not Mythicists and nor are most of the other scholars who have accepted the TF as a wholesale interpolation over the years. But he presents his preferred position as though the case is closed on the question and – as the analysis above shows – it most definitely is not.

Personally, I find the partial authenticity position more persuasive. Paget, after 84 pages, 238 footnotes and analysis of 97 books and articles, acknowledges the ambiguity of the evidence and cautions against certainty on the question. But he comes down on the side of partial authenticity as well. Feldman, in a brief article that actually summarises the key issues very neatly, also acknowledges the case can be argued either way. Though he finally leans toward wholesale forgery (after having previously backed partial authenticity). Whealey, Inowlocki and

The key problem here is not that Mythicists accept the wholesale forgery thesis – that is an reasonable position to take. The problem is the doctrinaire insistence that no other position can be held. This overblown dogmatism is not credibly sustainable and leads to the blithe insistence by online Myther enthusiasts, who have no grasp of the complexities of the question or the relevant scholarship, that “Josephus is a forgery”. Yet again, Mythicist bad arguments and dogmatic polemic lead to a dumbed down parody of historical analysis being honked as fact at high volume.

Further Reading:

(The scholarly literature on the TF is immense and spans several centuries, so here I will list the main studies I refer to above, rather than a full bibliography of everything I have read on this topic. Of these, I recommend J.C. Paget’s excellent paper over everything else. He is careful, balanced and has a profound grasp of the full breadth of the scholarship on the matter.)

Louis Feldman, “On the Authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum* Attributed to Josephus”, in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (ed.s), Brill, 2011, pp. 13-30

Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (Yale: 2018)

G.J. Goldberg, “The Coincidences of the Testimonium of Josephus and the Emmaus Narrative of Luke”, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 13, 1995, pp. 59-77

Michael Hardwick, *Josephus as an Historical Source in Patristic Literature Through Eusebius* (Brown Judaic Studies, 1989)

Paul Hopper, “A Narrative Anomaly in Josephus: *Jewish Antiquities* xviii:63,” in Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob, eds., *Linguistics and Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers*, 2014, de Gruyter, pp. 147-169

David L. Meadland , “On Finding Fresh Evidence in Old Texts: Reflections on Results in Computer-Assisted Biblical Research”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 74, no. 3 (1992), 67-88

J.P. Meier, “Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Jan 1990, Vol. 52, Issue 1, pp. 76-103

Ken Olson, “Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavianum”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 61 (2): 305, 1999

Ken Olson, “A Eusebian Reading of the Testimonium Flavianum”, 2013

J.C. Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity”, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 52 (2): 539–624

Geza Vermes, “Jesus in the Eyes of Josephus”, *Standpoint*, 14 December, 2009

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43 thoughts on “Jesus Mythicism 7: Josephus, Jesus and the ‘Testimonium Flavianum’”

SenCor32 says:

October 11, 2020 at 9:28 pm

Frick yea, been waiting for this one.

10 2

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Zimri says:

October 12, 2020 at 12:52 am

As to the silence of the Church Fathers on the Testimonium – consider the possibility that Jews copied texts too. In fact Hellenophone Jews were the people most likely to copy Josephus before the Christians got in on it, especially *Antiquities* (and *Against Apion*) which wouldn’t have offended them as *War* might.

There may have existed variants which wholly omitted the Testimonium, and other variants which blew it all out into the scurrilous legends such as have ended up in the Bavli Talmud and Toldoth Yeshu. Origen may well have stumbled upon the latter.

I am speculating, of course.