

# THE TESTIMONIUM FLAVIANUM CONTROVERSY FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

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In modern times a brief passage about Jesus Christ known as the Testimonium Flavianum found in Book 18 of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* has been considered to be the only extra-biblical witness to his historicity. In ancient and medieval times it was the most frequently quoted passage from Josephus' works,<sup>1</sup> and it played no small role in making Josephus the most widely read Greek-language historian of the pre-modern Western world.<sup>2</sup> In the sixteenth century the text was for the first time pronounced a forgery by some scholars, creating an intellectual controversy that has not been resolved even today. As a result of its great popularity from antiquity to modern times and the controversy over its authenticity since early modern times, the text may very well be the most discussed non-Biblical passage in all ancient literature.<sup>3</sup>

Josephus' reputation as the most widely read Greek-language historian in the medieval and early modern West was created by the many Christian writers of late antiquity who cited and appropriated his works. As previously stated, the Testimonium Flavianum was the passage from his works they most often cited, although the passage about Maria (*War* 6, 201-213), the Jewish woman who ate her own child during the siege of Jerusalem, was almost as popular during this period as the Testimonium Flavianum.<sup>4</sup> Although the Testimonium was often cited for anti-Jewish apologetics in the late antique and medieval periods, it was first cited, by church father Eusebius of Caesarea, not for anti-Jewish apologetical purposes, as is often assumed, but

rather for anti-pagan apologetical purposes.<sup>5</sup> Since it did not occur to the first Christian who cited the text to use it for anti-Jewish purposes the argument of many that the text was forged to prove something to Jews about Christ is not very convincing<sup>6</sup>. The first author to have used the Testimonium Flavianum for anti-Jewish apologetics was “Pseudo-Hegesippus,” the late fourth century or early fifth century anonymous author of a Latin adaptation of Josephus’ *War*, known as *De excidio Hierosolymitano*.<sup>7</sup>

There is no evidence that the authenticity of the passage was questioned by the writers of late antiquity. The fact that the passage is quoted by Jerome in a slightly variant form in this period, which reads “he [Jesus] was believed to be the Christ” rather than the *textus receptus* “he was the Christ” is not proof of Jerome's own doubts about its authenticity, as is occasionally alleged. Rather it is evidence that in addition to the *textus receptus* a variant version of the Testimonium in Greek was still in circulation in late antiquity. This is indicated by the existence of a medieval Syriac version of the Testimonium reading, like Jerome’s text, “he was believed to be the Christ” rather than “he was the Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

In the High Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for Jewish scholars in Western Europe to argue that the Testimonium Flavianum was a forgery. However, their charge was not based on a critical examination of relevant sources but on their *a priori* assumptions that a Jewish historian could not have written so favorably about Jesus. Although they cited as evidence the lack of an analogous Testimonium in most copies of the medieval Hebrew adaptation of Josephus' works, now known as the *Josippon*, this lacuna was itself a product of such *a priori* assumptions on the part of its Jewish author and copyists. Jewish charges against the authenticity of the Testimonium in this period were ignored or dismissed without critical

examination by Christian scholars. On the other hand, there is suggestive evidence that the twelfth century Christian historian Otto of Freising entertained a doubt about the exact wording of the Testimonium Flavianum that was based on a comparison of the relevant extant sources, namely the variant of the Testimonium quoted by Jerome and the textus receptus Testimonium of the Latin *Antiquities*.<sup>9</sup> However, since Otto never explicitly voiced such doubt and since contemporary Jewish charges against the text were not taken seriously by Christians, there was no public controversy over its authenticity in the medieval period either in the West or the East.

The earliest evidence that the authenticity of the Testimonium Flavianum was being challenged by someone other than Jews appears in the first two volumes of Cardinal Caesar Baronius' monumental, anti-Protestant church history, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, which are respectively dated 1588 and 1590.<sup>10</sup> Baronius wrote a heated defense of the Testimonium's authenticity, but did not specify who was challenging the passage's authenticity in the first place. The first written work known for certain to have actually challenged the passage's authenticity was an anti-Catholic ecclesiastical history, partly meant as a counter blast against Baronius' church history, which was published in 1592 in Tübingen by a Lutheran theologian named Lucas Osiander.<sup>11</sup> Osiander's work was very much focused on the task of showing that a number of the sources used by Roman Catholics to write church histories such as Baronius' *Annales Ecclesiastici* were inauthentic. For Osiander, the Testimonium Flavianum was just one more of these spurious texts, which he thought should not be used to write Christian history or bolster Christian theology. Thus the first challenge to the authenticity of the Testimonium made on the basis of the text itself, without recourse to dubious evidence such as that of the *Josippon*,

appeared in the apologetical writings that different sects of Christians directed at one another rather than in the apologetical writings that Christians and Jews directed at one another.

On the other hand, it is clear from both Osiander's and Baronius' works that the first charges against the Testimonium's authenticity were also prompted by the same sort of *a priori* assumptions about Jewish hostility towards Jesus that had animated Jewish medieval scholars' rejection of the text. In the beginning of the early modern debate over the text's authenticity, the fact that the *Josippon* lacked a parallel to the Testimonium was for the first time seen as significant by some Christian scholars. This was partly because in this period some scholars erroneously assumed that the *Josippon* was an ancient text. But the silence or even hostility of the *Josippon* towards Jesus raised the question for the first time in the minds of even those scholars who knew quite well that the *Josippon* was not an ancient source, and that it thus had no direct relevance to assessing the authenticity of the Testimonium, why Josephus had not been likewise silent or hostile towards Jesus. In short, the initial controversy over the Testimonium was prompted by two sorts of *a priori* assumptions: sectarian assumptions by Protestants that many of the texts cherished by the Roman Catholic church, including the Testimonium, were inauthentic, and the assumption that Josephus could not have written favorably about Jesus because he was a Jew and Jews were supposed to be uniformly hostile to Jesus. Thus the initial controversy over the text's authenticity was not prompted by any sort of new evidence about the Testimonium itself but rather by a reformulation of *a priori* attitudes.

It was only in the mid-seventeenth century that critics of the Testimonium's authenticity began to enlist textual evidence to support their *a priori* assumption that the Jewish Josephus could not have possibly written something about Jesus as favorable as the Testimonium. The

first scholar to point to such textual evidence was the Reformed theologian Louis Cappel (1585-1658) who noted that the passage does not fit into its surrounding context very smoothly.<sup>12</sup> Cappel was followed by fellow Reformed scholars Tanaquilius Faber (1615-72) and Jean Daillé (1594-1670), who respectively claimed that the passage contradicted statements about Josephus' attitude toward Jesus made by the early church writers Origen and Theodoret.<sup>13</sup> Following widespread exposure of Faber's arguments in particular the mainstream of scholarly opinion moved towards the view that the text had indeed been proven a forgery, and for that reason by the mid-eighteenth century, controversy over the question of the text's authenticity had largely come to an end.

The birth of a controversy over the authenticity of the Testimonium in the early modern period was the product of new intellectual currents originating in the Renaissance and Reformation, including a stronger belief than was typical of the ancient and medieval periods in the possibility that Hebrew literature like the *Josippon* could shed light on early Christianity; doubts among Protestants in particular about the scope of the miraculous, which caused them to doubt that Josephus could have miraculously written something he did not believe; and above all a greater skepticism towards the authenticity of many ancient sources than was typical of the late antique and medieval periods, particularly, at least among Protestants, towards the sources that had been used to write church histories. The fact that all the early critics of the Testimonium's authenticity who based their argumentation on relevant textual evidence were Protestants, and the great majority were Reformed Protestants, suggests that Protestants were particularly receptive to these intellectual currents, which adds ammunition to the arguments of those who would posit a connection between the Reformed tradition in particular and the origins

of intellectual modernity.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the controversy over the authenticity of the *Testimonium* first appeared in polemical histories that Protestants and Catholics directed against each other in the tense Reformation and Counterreformation period rather than in more secular historical works should raise doubt about the arguments of those scholars who draw a strong opposition between the intellectual character of an allegedly rational, non-sectarian Renaissance and that of an allegedly non-rational, sectarian Reformation.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the literature of the *Testimonium Flavianum* controversy, sectarianism apparently encouraged rather than discouraged skepticism.

Enlightenment-era skepticism added relatively little new to the *Testimonium Flavianum* debate since the text had already been so vehemently denounced earlier by religious Protestant scholars like Osiander and Faber. During this period for the first time in Western Christendom the argument that Jesus Christ had never existed was advanced in certain unusually skeptical intellectual quarters. This argument may have been prompted by the prior denunciation of the *Testimonium* as a forgery, although the evidence for this is unclear. Certainly it can be asserted that during the Enlightenment era, for the first time, positive hostility towards religion became a factor in some critics' rejection of the text, the most famous of whom was Voltaire. In contrast, the attempt to prove the text a forgery was originally made by devout Protestants who had entertained no doubts about Christ's existence. Yet one should not characterize this era as one of uniform hostility towards the text among critically-minded scholars. Scholars such as Johann Friedrich Cotta (1701-1779)<sup>16</sup> and Charles Daubuz (ca. 1670-1740)<sup>17</sup> made reasonable criticisms of those who rejected the text, and although William Whiston (1667-1725), the great eighteenth-century English translator of Josephus, did not always rely on a very critical approach

to the works of Josephus in general, his radical suggestion in defense of the Testimonium that Josephus may have been a Jewish Christian<sup>18</sup> did contain one insight lacking in the attitudes that almost all prior scholars had brought to the Testimonium Flavianum debate: that in Josephus' day the difference in attitude towards Jesus between Jews outside the church and Christians was not as polarized as it was later to become, nor as it was assumed to be by the early modern Protestant and Jewish assailants of the text.

Over two centuries after scholars such as Tanaquilus Faber appeared to have conclusively proven to both contemporaries and posterity that the Testimonium Flavianum was a forgery, controversy over the authenticity of the text was revived by twentieth century scholars, who claimed to have found variants of the text or indeed variants of whole works by Josephus in long-overlooked sources from the margins of the Western historiographical tradition--a tradition that until then had produced so much of the literature on the Testimonium Flavianum controversy. These sources were an Old Russian adaptation of *Jewish War* and two medieval Christian Semitic chronicles. In the case of the former, the scholars Alexander Berendts, Viktor Istrin, and, most notoriously, Robert Eisler<sup>19</sup> tried to argue that the Slavonic *War* was a translation of the Aramaic version of *War*, which Josephus claims to have written prior to the Greek *War* (*War* 1.2). More likely, however, the work dates from the medieval period, sometime before the thirteenth century. Although the author(s) of the Slavonic *War* almost certainly was familiar with the New Testament it is far from clear that he (or they) was an Orthodox Christian, as has been widely assumed. There is some internal evidence within the Slavonic *War* to suggest that the author(s) may have been a recent Jewish convert to Christianity, a Judaizing Christian, or a Christian convert to Judaism. It has still not been

conclusively shown by either Byzantinists or medieval Slavicists whether the original adapter responsible for the interpolations in the Slavonic *War* was a Greek whose work was merely translated by a medieval Russian, or whether a medieval Russian authored the interpolations, which he then inserted into his translation of Josephus' Greek *War*.<sup>20</sup>

In the second major twentieth century controversy over the authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, the erudite Near Eastern studies scholar, Shlomo Pines, tried to argue that the paraphrase of the *Testimonium* that appears in a Christian Arabic chronicle dating from the tenth century might be more authentic than the *textus receptus Testimonium*.<sup>21</sup> Reaction to Pines' thesis was mixed, but the most important piece of evidence that Pines' scholarship on Christian Semitic sources brought to light was not the Arabic paraphrase of the *Testimonium* that he proposed was more authentic than the *textus receptus*, but the literal Syriac translation of the *Testimonium* that is quoted in a twelfth century chronicle compiled by the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch (1166-1199).<sup>22</sup> It is this version of the *Testimonium*, not the Arabic paraphrase of it, that has the greatest likelihood of being, at least in some ways, more authentic than the *textus receptus Testimonium* because, as noted earlier, this version of the text agrees with Jerome's Latin version of the text in the same crucial regard. The medieval Syriac *Testimonium* that Pines uncovered is very strong evidence for what many scholars had argued since birth of the controversy over the text in the Renaissance, namely that Jerome did not alter the *Testimonium Flavianum* to read "he was believed to be the Christ" but rather that he in fact knew the original version of the *Testimonium*, which he probably found in Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which read "he was believed to be the Christ" rather than "he was the Christ."



Twentieth century controversy over the Testimonium Flavianum can be distinguished from controversy over the text in the early modern period insofar as it seems generally more academic and less sectarian. While the challenge to the authenticity of the Testimonium in the early modern period was orchestrated almost entirely by Protestant scholars and while in the same period Jews outside the church uniformly denounced the text's authenticity, the twentieth century controversies over the text have been marked by the presence of Jewish scholars for the first time as prominent participants on both sides of the question. In general, the attitudes of Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish and secular scholars towards the text have drawn closer together, with a greater tendency among scholars of all religious backgrounds to see the text as largely authentic. On the one hand this can be interpreted as the result of an increasing trend towards secularism, which is usually seen as product of modernity. On the other hand it can be interpreted as a sort of post-modern disillusionment with the verities of modern skepticism, and an attempt to recapture the sensibility of the ancient world, when it apparently was still possible for a first-century Jew to have written a text as favorable towards Jesus of Nazareth as the Testimonium Flavianum.

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<sup>1</sup> Heinz Schreckenberg, *Rezeptionsgeschichtliche und textkritische Untersuchung zu Flavius Josephus*, Leiden, 1977, 184-85; *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter*, Leiden, 1972, 186-200, esp. 190, 199.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Burke, "A survey of the popularity of ancient historians 1450-1700" *History and theory* 5 (1966) 135-52.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Feldman, *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity*, Wayne State University, 1987, 55. In so arguing, Feldman is probably implicitly excluding Biblical passages.

<sup>4</sup> See n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Whealey "Josephus on Jesus: Evidence from the first millennium" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 51 (1995) 291-96.

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<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the earliest use of any of Josephus' works by Christians, which was of *Against Apion* and *Jewish War* rather than of *Antiquities*, was also for anti-pagan rather than anti-Jewish apologetics (Whealey, "Josephus on Jesus," 285-87).

<sup>7</sup> Albert Bell has shown quite conclusively that Pseudo-Hegesippus was neither a mere translator, adapter or plagiarizer of Josephus' *War*, but an historian, albeit not a terribly accomplished one, in his own right ("An historiographical analysis of the excidio Hierosolymitano of Pseudo-Hegesippus" PhD dissertation. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Latin and Syriac writers did not read each others' works in late antiquity. Both, however, had access to Greek works. The only plausible conclusion is that Jerome and some Syriac Christian (probably the seventh century James of Edessa) both had access to a Greek version of the Testimonium containing the passage "he was believed to be the Christ" rather than "he was the Christ."

<sup>9</sup> Otto quotes the Testimonium from the Latin translation of *Jewish Antiquities* but replaces its phrase "hic erat Christus" with the parallel passage from Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus*: "credebatur esse Christus" (*Chronicon* 3.10 apud MGH 20, 176).

<sup>10</sup> Baronius, Caesar. *Annales Ecclesiastici*. Vol. 1, Annus 34. Vol. 2, Annus 96. Paris, 1864.

<sup>11</sup> Osiander, Lucas. *Epitomes historiae Ecclesiasticae centuria*. Vol. I. lib. 2.cap. 17. Tübingen, 1592.

<sup>12</sup> Cappel, Louis apud Georgius Hornius. *Historia Ecclesiastica, illustrata notis et observationibus, quibus fontes historicae antiquitatis aperiuntur accedit L. Capelli historiae Judaicae compendium*. Leiden, 1687.

<sup>13</sup> Faber, Tanaquilus. *Fabri Epistulae I*. Saumur, 1674, Ep. 43.

<sup>14</sup> The most famous attempt to link the Reformed Christian tradition with certain forms of rationality and intellectual modernity is Max Weber's *Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. More recent and more focused attempts would include such works as George Huppert's *The idea of perfect history*, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1970 and Anthony Kemp, *The estrangement of the past: A study in the origins of modern historical consciousness*, Oxford University, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> This outdated view of the relationship between Renaissance and Reformation appears in such a recent essay as Ronald G. Witt, "The humanist movement" in *Handbook of European history 1400-1600*, Vol. 2, Leiden, 1995, 119).

<sup>16</sup> Cotta, Johann Friedrich. *Des fürtrefflichen judische Geschichte-Schreibers Flavii Josephi sämtliche Wercke*. Tübingen, 1736.

<sup>17</sup> Daubuz, Carolus. *Pro testimonio Flavii Josephi de Jesu Christo, libri duo* apud Sigebertus Havercampus, *Flavii Josephi opera omnia quae repperint...* Vol. 2, Amsterdam, 1726.

<sup>18</sup> Whiston, William. *Six dissertations*, London, 1734.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted, however, that even though Eisler followed Berendts' and Istrin's hypothesis that the Slavonic *War* was basically the remnant of Josephus' lost Aramaic *War*, he, unlike them, also assumed that the text was full of Christian interpolations (Robert Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*, London, 1931, 217).

<sup>20</sup> Louis Feldman summarizes some of the conflicting claims about whether the original author of the Slavonic *War* was a Greek or Slav in *Josephus and modern scholarship*, Berlin 1984, 50-54. One possible

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strategy towards resolving this question would be to examine whether the interpolations in the Slavonic *War* contain the same proportion of transliterations from the Greek as the work as a whole.

<sup>21</sup> Shlomo Pines, *An Arabic version of the Testimonium Flavianum and its implications*, Jerusalem, 1971.

<sup>22</sup> Michael the Syrian. *Chronique*. Vol. 1. Trans. J.B. Chabot. Paris, 1899; reprint Brussels, 1963.