

Jesus passage in Josephus

Article by D.M. Murdock



Jesus passage in Josephus is a forgery, says expert

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The passage about Jesus Christ in Jewish historian Josephus's writings (*Antiquities* 18.3.3/63) has been debated for centuries, as concerns its authenticity totally, partially or not at all. This brief *Testimonium Flavianum* ("TF") is put forth by Christian apologists as the "best evidence" for the historicity of Jesus, but it has been declared many times to be a forgery *in toto*. A recent study by a renowned linguist confirms this analysis of the entire passage as an interpolation by a Christian scribe, likely during the fourth century.

The most popular view of the Testimonium these days among critical scholars is the "partial interpolation theory," which posits that a number of Christian-sounding phrases were inserted into the passage, which is nonetheless original to Josephus. Nevertheless, many scholars, historians, researchers and writers over the past centuries have held to the analysis that the Testimonium *in toto* is an interpolation into the text by a later Christian hand.

Most of the reasons for questioning the TF's authenticity can be found in my book *Who Was Jesus?* and articles "The Jesus Forgery: Josephus Untangled" and "[Does Josephus prove a historical Jesus?](#)" Suffice it to say that there are a dozen or so scientific and convincing arguments against authenticity, including its abrupt introduction into the text and its omission in early Christian writings, as well as its pious language.

However, this pious language is not simply part of the supposed Christian insertions postulated by the partial interpolation theory but is present in the entire passage. The recent linguistic examination of the Testimonium's original [Greek](#) shows the assessment of the entire passage as an interpolation to be correct, as it gives other scientific reasons to view the whole TF as a Christian profession of faith, rather than a report by a sober historian.

The author of this study published in 2014 is a professor of Humanities at Carnegie Mellon University, Dr. Paul J. Hopper, a longtime scholar who has been publishing peer-reviewed articles in journals for over 40 years. Hopper's linguistic analysis of the TF in his article "[A Narrative Anomaly in Josephus](#)" is definitive and adds significantly to the numerous other arguments against the passage's authenticity evinced over the centuries.

In this regard, Hopper comments:

"It is suggested that the Jesus passage is close in style and content to the creeds that were composed two to three centuries after Josephus."

He further explains:

"The Testimonium itself is, when compared to the surrounding episodes, unusually short. Its very brevity is a suspicious feature, one that has led some defenders of its authenticity to suggest that while parts of the text are genuinely Josephan, the text has been tampered with by later Christians wanting to erase scandalous content.... "

In fact, however, the syntax of the *Testimonium* does not display the kinds of discontinuities we might expect to find if substantial changes such as major deletions or insertions had been made.

Here the linguist states that the syntax or arrangement of words and phrases of the TF shows no sign of either removals or insertions, the former put forth to explain the TF's brevity and the latter as in the partial interpolation theory.

After discussing the history of TF criticism, Hopper concludes:

“There is, then, reason to suspect that **the Jesus episode is a later insertion**, dating from more than two hundred years after Josephus's death, and probably absent from most manuscripts of the *Jewish Antiquities* until even later. The *Testimonium's* syntax and morphology indicate it was written as an apology or profession of faith, rather than a historical report. The passage seems to be addressing criticisms, as if written for those who had challenged Christian doctrine at some point after the religion had been established. Its structure reflects *protest*, and “Methinks it doth protest too much.”

The problems with the TF, therefore, go beyond a few Christian-sounding interpolations and extend to the syntax of the sentences themselves. To wit, they are composed not in typical narrative styles, but resemble more closely the writings of early Church fathers and apologists of succeeding centuries.

As concerns plot, the TF as a whole represents a summary of the gospel story, as recounted in the New Testament, not drawn from separate historical reports or oral history. As Hopper remarks:

“...it is from the Gospels, and the Gospels alone, that the Jesus Christ narrative in the *Testimonium* draws its coherence and its legitimacy as a plot, and perhaps even some of its language. It is not just that the Christian origin of the *Testimonium* is betrayed by its allegiance to the Gospels, as that without the Gospels the passage is incomprehensible. ... the *Testimonium* does not so much narrate to first century Romans new events, but rather reminds third century Christians of events already familiar to them.”

The evident Christian context of the TF speaks also to genre or category of subject matter, likewise examined by Hopper, who states:

“The *Testimonium* is anchored in a radically different discourse community from that of the rest of the *Jewish Antiquities*. The *Testimonium* reads more like a position paper, a party manifesto, than a narrative....”

Again, the *Testimonium Flavianum* as a whole sounds like a Christian “political statement,” creed or profession of faith, precisely as so many have averred in the past.

Hopper next says that the “closest generic match for the *Testimonium* is perhaps the various creeds that began to be formulated in the early fourth century, such as the Nicene Creed (325 CE).”

Hopper's linguistic analysis is yet another nail in the Testimonium coffin and should convince fence-sitters, although Christian apologists likely will never relinquish this "best evidence" because without it their claims to historicity are threadbare indeed. In conclusion, Hopper states:

"The narrative grammar of the *Testimonium Flavianum* sets it sharply apart from Josephus's other stories of the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate. The most likely explanation is that **the entire passage is interpolated**, presumably by Christians..."

In the end, it can be argued convincingly that the Testimonium Flavianum as a whole is a forgery and therefore does not provide evidence for a historical Jesus of Nazareth crucified during the reign of Pontius Pilate.

A longer and more in-depth analysis of Paul J. Hopper's work on the Testimonium Flavianum can be found at "[Josephus's Testimonium Flavianum Examined Linguistically: Greek Analysis Demonstrates the Passage a Forgery In Toto](#)." See also "[Jesus passage in Josephus a forgery](#)."
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