

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Brit Hadasha: Josephus and the New Testament**

When we consider the historical reliability of the writings that make up what we call the *Brit Hadashah*, or the New Testament, we ought to expect the historical facts contained in those writings to align with other historical sources. Are the claims of the New Testament concerning Yeshua and His disciples confirmed in outside historical sources? What can we determine from the evidence?

Much can be said about this, and we will explore this in more depth in a future teaching, but right now we’re going to focus specifically on a key historian from the first century—Flavius Josephus.

Josephus was a Pharisaic Jew born in Jerusalem around 37 AD. He was an eyewitness to many important historical events, including the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. His writings give us valuable insights into first century Judaism and the historical context of the New Testament writings. In addition, he serves as a primary source confirming some important details of the gospel accounts.

For example, here is a quote from one of the writings of Josephus in which he directly references Yeshua and His original followers:

*“Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. [1]*

Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 18.3.3

Remarkably, this piece of external historical evidence confirms several key facts recorded in the gospels about Yeshua:

- 1) He existed as a historical figure
- 2) He was a religious teacher

- 3) He had many followers
- 4) Pilate sentenced Him to death by crucifixion
- 5) After His death, His disciples believed that He appeared to them

The significance of these historical facts being confirmed in the writings of Josephus cannot be overstated. We literally have external historical confirmation that Yeshua was crucified and that His disciples believed to have seen appearances of Him after His death. These are key facts that substantiate the New Testament's claim that God raised Yeshua from the dead, which of course entails that Yeshua is who He claimed to be—the Messiah of Israel. For more information on why these historical facts are important as it pertains to Yeshua's resurrection, see our teaching, "*Why Yeshua is the Messiah.*"

An objection to this passage from Josephus is that we know that Josephus was not a follower of Yeshua, and yet he says that Yeshua was the "Christ." Therefore, some scholars have concluded that this passage was interpolated—that is, a later Christian copyist is believed to have made additions. But does that mean that we should completely dismiss the entire passage? Not at all. While it was possibly slightly altered, most scholars still consider the core of the passage to be original to Josephus.

In 1971, an Israeli scholar by the name of Shlomo Pines discovered an Arabic version of this passage contained in the writings of Agapius, a 10<sup>th</sup>-century Arabic Christian writer and historian. Scholars suggest that this version represents an authentic, uninterpolated version of Josephus' passage.

Here is the passage as it is quoted in Agapius' *Kitab al-'Unwan* ("Book of the Title"), translated from Arabic:

*"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders."*

Shlomo Pines, "An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and its Implications." pg. 9-10

In examining the differences between the Greek and Arabic versions of this passage, Pines concludes that the Arabic version accurately represents what Josephus actually wrote since it excludes the verbiage indicative of later Christian interpolation. In his book, "An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and its Implications," Pines writes:

*"All these traits appear to indicate that the author of this version need not have been a Christian. Indeed, it is hardly conceivable that a Christian, even if he set out to compose a piece of writing that was to be passed off as Josephus', would have consistently referred to Jesus with the lukewarm admiration and the lack of superlatives characteristic of Agapius' version and would have taken care (as the author of this version evidently has done) to avoid any statement in which the appearance of Jesus after his death and his Messiahship are unequivocally referred to as facts. In other words, the main, or the philologically most valid, objection to the authenticity of the Testimonium does not apply to Agapius' version. Agapius' Arabic text of the Testimonium is in all probability translated from a Syriac version of the Greek original."*

Ibid., pg. 22-23

So based on the passage found in the Arabic manuscript, which more accurately represents the original, we still have confirmation of our five historical facts recorded in the gospels about Yeshua. Again, they are:

- 1) He existed as a historical figure
- 2) He was a religious teacher
- 3) He had many followers
- 4) He was sentenced to death via crucifixion by Pilate
- 5) After His death, His disciples believed that He appeared to them

Josephus also confirms another significant historical fact recorded in the gospels—that the brother of Yeshua was James. Josephus records that when a successor of Pilate, Festus, died in the AD 60s, the high priest Ananus seized the opportunity to sentence James to death:

*Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananus] assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned. [3]*

While a few skeptics question the authenticity of this passage, the overwhelming majority of scholars agree that the reference to Yeshua and James is original to Josephus. As Professor Louis Feldman writes in, “Josephus, Judaism and Christianity”:

*“That, indeed, Josephus did say something about Jesus is indicated, above all, by the passage—the authenticity of which has been almost universally acknowledged—about James, who is termed the brother of ‘the aforementioned Christ.’”*

Louis H. Feldman, “Josephus, Judaism and Christianity,” Introduction, pg. 56

Scholar and theologian, Dr. Robert E. Van Voorst, echoes Feldman’s sentiments and lists several arguments in support of the conclusion that the text ought to be considered authentic:

*“The overwhelming majority of scholars holds that the words ‘the brother of Jesus called Christ’ are authentic, as is the entire passage in which it is found. The passage fits its context well. As for its content, a Christian interpolator would have used laudatory language to describe James and especially Jesus, calling him ‘the Lord’ or something similar [...] he would have used the term ‘Christ’ in an absolute way. Josephus’s words ‘called Christ’ are neutral and descriptive, intended neither to confess nor deny Jesus as the ‘Christ.’ Thus Josephus distinguishes this Jesus from the many others he mentions who had this common name. Moreover, the very reason the identifying phrase ‘the brother of Jesus called Christ’ appears at all is for the further identification of James, whose name was also common. The use of ‘Christ’ as a title here reflects Jewish usage, and is not typically Christian [...] The present passage, then, makes authentic mention of Jesus, made all the more certain by its brief, matter-of-fact character. It states that Jesus was also known as ‘the Messiah/Christ,’ and tells us that his brother James was most prominent among those Ananus killed.”*

Robert E. Van Voorst, “Jesus Outside the New Testament.” pg. 83-84

To summarize, the verbiage in the passage appears to be objective and neutral and therefore isn't indicative of later Christian interpolation.

But wait! There's more! In another passage, Josephus also confirms the New Testament account of John the Baptist being put to death by Herod Antipas. The passage reads:

*“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man [...] Now, when others came about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious tempter, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.”*

Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 18.5.2

This quote confirms several details about John the Baptist as they are also recorded in the gospel accounts:

- 1) He was known for the baptisms that he performed
- 2) He was imprisoned by Herod Antipas
- 3) He was sentenced to death by Herod Antipas

Again, there is overwhelming scholarly consensus that this passage from Josephus is authentic and original. There is no indication that the passage was interpolated by later Christian copyists. As Feldman notes:

*“One would have expected that an interpolator would have modified Josephus' passage about John the Baptist so as to make the occasion of John's death accord with the Gospels and to indicate that he was a forerunner of Jesus.”*

Louis H. Feldman, “Josephus, Judaism and Christianity,” Introduction, pg. 56

So what can we conclude from these passages from Josephus? What we have here are independent, first-century references confirming the following historical facts about Yeshua and His original followers as recorded in the New Testament:

- 1) He existed as a historical figure
- 2) He was a religious teacher
- 3) He had many followers
- 4) He was sentenced to death via crucifixion by Pilate
- 5) After His death, His disciples believed that He appeared to them
- 6) His brother was James
- 7) John the Baptist was a historical figure who was executed by Herod Antipas

In conclusion, the historical facts contained in the gospel accounts are confirmed by other historical

sources from that time period—namely, the writings of Flavius Josephus. Through Josephus, we have extra-biblical support that Yeshua was a real person, had a brother named James, was a leader of men and was crucified for it, and that some of his followers believed to have seen him again on the third day. This summary of Yeshua, by Josephus, is consistent with the New Testament account of Yeshua; even acknowledging the resurrection. Thus, we have good reason to accept what the New Testament claims about Yeshua's life and ministry to be historically reliable.

We pray that this teaching as blessed you, and remember, continue to test everything. Shalom.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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