

The *Testimonium Flavianum*: A Translation for the Modern Christian Tradition

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Introduction

Among the most controversial works of the (ever-controversial) Jewish historian Flavius Josephus is his *Testimonium Flavianum*. Written at the end of the first century AD, the *Testimonium Flavianum* is a report about the life of Jesus Christ. It appears in the eighteenth book of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, a lengthy treatise on the history of the Jews from the creation up to the time of the Jewish War. The *Testimonium* is one of the few ancient historical accounts of the life of Jesus, and aspects of its authenticity have been widely debated for centuries. The purpose of this project, however, is not to contest the motives of Josephus or his later translators, but to make a clear translation of the *Testimonium* for Christians interested in the historical aspect of Jesus' life and impact. In my translation I assume my readers have no knowledge of Latin or Ancient Greek; my goal is simply to provide an intelligible text of the *Testimonium* for those who would otherwise be unable to access it.

The advanced seminar from which this translation arose focused on the translation of Josephus' works from Ancient Greek to Latin. The Latin editions of Josephus sparked much controversy over various authors' word choice, exclusions, and interpretations. Most denizens of the Roman Empire, if they could read at all, read Latin, and the extreme popularity of Josephus' works led to the creation of many Latin translations. Even those unable to read and write were able to experience the popularity of Josephus' works through oral repetition. Considering that the English language is now about as widespread as Latin once was, it seems appropriate to develop an accessible English translation of the *Testimonium Flavianum*. For the purposes of my translation, I identify the *Testimonium* as an historical report on the life of Jesus. In short, this account describes Jesus as a man who performed miracles, who appealed to Jews and Gentiles alike, was sentenced to death on the cross, was resurrected in fulfillment of a divine prophecy, but

whose name was bestowed unto a line of people that existed not only until the time of Josephus, but until today.

Translation

I have chosen the Latin translation of the *Antiquities* (*LAJ*) as my textual reference. The *LAJ* was first produced in the sixth-century in the Vivarium monastery under the direction of the Roman writer Cassiodorus.¹ The manuscript tradition of the *LAJ* is extensive and complicated, and the text I use here is the critical edition compiled by Levenson and Martin.² Any translation from Latin into English necessarily encounters many barriers: the meaning attached to an individual word of Latin often cannot be expressed by a single corresponding English word, and Latin inflections afford the language a sentence structure that is much freer than that of English. I have translated as literally as possible to not only avoid confusion in syntax but also to provide useful and informative Latin grammar instruction. At the same time, my translation will provide colloquial interpretations for antiquated expressions. Many particles in Latin and Greek have no semantic implication, but exist solely to separate thoughts and phrases within a very complicated sentence structure or to provide an untranslatable emphasis. I have done my best not to include these colorless conjunctions, and to separate clauses in order to avoid losing the essence of the translation within Latin's complex sentence structure. An appendix with select phrases and explanations follows.

Jewish Antiquities 18:63-64:
The Testimonium Flavianum

63. Fuit autem eisdem temporibus Ihesus sapiens uir, si tamen uirum eum nominare fas est. Erat enim mirabilium operum effector et doctor hominum eorum qui libenter quae uera sunt audiunt. Et multos quidem Iudaeorum multos etiam ex gentibus sibi adiunxit. Christus hic erat.

64. Hunc accusatione primorum nostrae gentis uirorum cum Pilatus in crucem agendum esse decreuisset, non deseruerunt hi qui ab initio eum dilexerant. Apparuit enim eis tertio die, iterum uiuus, secundum quod diuinitus inspirati prophetae, uel haec uel alia de eo innumera miracula futura esse praedixerant. Sed et in hodiernum Christianorum, qui ab ipso nuncupati sunt, et nomen perseuerat et genus.

English Translation

63. There was, in those times, Jesus, a wise man, if really it is right to call him a man. He was the doer of miraculous works and the teacher of men who gladly hear things that are true. He joined to him many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ.

64. When Pilate, upon an accusation of the most important men of our race, decreed him to be lead to the cross, those who had loved him from the beginning did not desert him. He appeared to them on the third day, alive again, according to what the divinely inspired prophets had predicted—that both these and innumerable other wonders about him would occur. But even until today, both the name and descendants of the Christians, who were called from him, have persevered.

Appendix

Fuit eisdem temporibus Ihesus sapiens vir: Here a plural “ablative of time when” is used to convey the span of time in which Jesus lived. Josephus was born after the death of Jesus, so his contextual frame is continuous, as were the many years Jesus lived. The “to be” verb (*fuit*) and its predicate (*Ihesus sapiens vir*) are translated according to the Latin word order. This decision might help the reader understand the construction of the sentence, by being able to visually compare the verb, subject, and predicate according to a pattern in Latin construction. I will proceed with my translation in this fashion.

Si tamen... fas est: *nominare* (“to call”) is a complimentary infinitive with the verb *fas est* (“it is right”); *tamen* translated as “really” rather than “nevertheless” to communicate the author’s hesitation to call Jesus a man.

erat enim mirabilium operum effector et doctor hominum: This sentence is an excellent example to help the reader understand Latin sentence structure. The verb beginning the sentence makes it easier to translate literally, and the reversal of predicate nominatives and descriptive genitives is a common literary device. *enim* was omitted in translation to avoid confusion of the English word “for” (a looser word for “because”).

eorum qui libenter quae vera sunt audiunt: This is an orderly Latin sentence, in which the main verb appears at the end of the sentence. The relative clause is translated afterward to avoid confusion with the main verb *audiunt*. It should also be noted that there is an understood *ea* (“those things”) that is the object of the verb *audiunt* and the antecedent to the relative pronoun *quae*.

Et multos quidem Iudaeorum multos etiam ex gentibus sibi adiunxit: The main verb and reflexive pronoun are placed at the beginning of the sentence to emphasize the action of the verb. I chose to translate *gentibus* as Gentiles, which is parallel to *Iudaeorum* even though the latter is a genitive of the whole and the former is the object of the preposition *ex*.

Christus hic erat: This sentence is perhaps the most controversial one in the *Testimonium Flavianum*. There is a good deal of debate as to whether Josephus wrote “This man was the Christ” or something like “This man was called the Christ” (as some manuscript traditions attest). We know that Josephus remained a faithful Jew even after the fall of Jerusalem, as seen for example in his defense of Judaism in his apologetic work *Contra Apionem*. We also know, however, that Josephus thought God had destroyed Jerusalem because of the impiety of his people. In light of these facts, we can see why this line has caused so much controversy and why it is still debated whether Josephus actually claimed that Jesus was the Messiah.

Hunc accusatione primorum nostrae gentis uirorum: “Upon” with an accusation is standard idiomatic English; *primorum* has many translations, but here communicates the designation “most important” men (likely the High Priests, as in the Gospel account). *gentis* is translated as race to differentiate from Gentiles.

non deseruerunt hi qui ab initio eum dilexerant: The relative clause with subject *hi* (plural demonstrative) and verb at the end of sentence *dilexerant* is translated first to present the subject of the sentence, followed by the main verb *non deseruerunt*.

uel haec uel alia de eo innumera miracula futura esse: Neuter plural demonstrative (*haec*) and the noun *miracula* are subjects of indirect statement with *futura esse* as the infinitive functioning as main verb; *de eo* is the prepositional phrase referring the entire clause back to Jesus. The demonstrative and noun *miracula* are both objects of the verb *praedixerant*.

Sed et in hodiernum Christianorum...et nomen perseuerat et genus: *nomen* and *genus* are both subjects qualified by the genitive *Christianorum*. They are translated together at the beginning of the sentence to communicate their connection to Christ, and linked to the relative pronoun *qui*.

Comments

Although historians and linguists have studied the *Testimonium* for centuries, very little attention is paid to its application in the Christian Church today. The modern age, informed by post-Enlightenment rationalism, is reluctant to accept the reality of anything not scientifically quantifiable. Although no historical work can make the same claim to empirical evidence as the hard sciences can, and although Christians are ultimately less concerned with the “historical Jesus” than they are with Christ the Savior and Son of God, Josephus’ account does provide some testimony to the former. One could spend an entire lifetime debating the trajectory of a work from which we lack a great deal of evidence, and fail to realize the potential impact it may have on our world today. The *Testimonium* condenses the several important major aspects of Christian belief, and therefore is a key contribution to the Christian curriculum. This work deserves the kind of celebrity today that it has received in centuries past, and accessibility is the first step. I would hope that one day a translation, such as the one I have produced, will be circulated among all Christians and held as an accessible, authoritative piece of evidence when considering the life and miraculous works of Jesus Christ.

Bibliography

- Levenson, David R. and Thomas R. Martin. "The Latin Translations of Josephus on Jesus, John the Baptist, and James: Critical Texts of the Latin Translation of the *Antiquities* and Rufinus' Translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* Based on Manuscripts and Early Printed Traditions." *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 46 (2014): 1-76.

Notes

¹ Levenson and Martin (2014) 4.

² Ibid. 18-19.