

'If it be lawful to call him a man...'

An Introductory Exercise in the Practice of Biblical Criticism

Part I: Understanding & Applying the Methods of Biblical Criticism

This assignment will introduce you to the importance of several methods of criticism used by scholars to understand the meaning of the Bible. 'Criticism' in this sense does not mean *pointing out errors or flaws*, like when a teacher or parent criticizes the bad behavior or study habits of a student. Rather, criticism simply means *to examine objectively, setting aside biases, prejudices and unwarranted assumptions* that might tempt us to distort what the text we are studying is trying to say. This may require the acknowledgement of errors or flaws, but that is not the purpose; rather, the purpose of Biblical Criticism is to get at the author's original meaning as best we can in light of what we know. If we are going to treat the Bible as a text with the authority to tell us how to live our lives, then it is surely important that we understand it correctly. There are many methods of Biblical Criticism, but this assignment focuses on two of the most important: *Textual Criticism* and *Historical Criticism*.

Textual Criticism considers the manuscript evidence for the Bible, studying the numerous papyri and parchments of Biblical texts that have been discovered over the centuries, comparing them, cataloguing their similarities and differences, and then trying to explain the differences in an effort to distinguish the original reading from later 'corruptions' of the text. This is important because of the process of hand-copying Biblical manuscripts that went on for over a millennium before the invention of the printing press, a process that is prone to human error and that allowed later scribes or copiers to alter the text either by accident or intentionally. Textual Criticism is guided by the principle that *the earlier (or older) a particular manuscript is, the closer it is likely to be to what the author actually wrote*. This may not always be true and it is not always easy to determine, but it nevertheless serves as good general rule and guiding principle.

Historical Criticism considers the impact of historical events that happened around the time a text was produced on the meaning of the text itself. An author may assume to share with his or her readers a common background of events and beliefs that would influence the way a text was read, but that background may not be shared with later readers who would therefore have to reconstruct it for correct understanding. Without careful reconstruction of the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic conditions contemporaneous with the production of any Biblical text, later readers are always in danger of projecting their own unconscious beliefs and assumptions onto it, corrupting or distorting its meaning. Thus, Historical Criticism is guided by the principle that *a text cannot be accurately understood apart from an adequate reconstruction of its historical context*. Since history cannot be reconstructed with certainty, Historical Criticism is always a matter of probability and always remains open to later revision in light of new information.

Your Assignment, Part I

The first part of this assignment requires that you 'earn your PhD' in Biblical Studies, by applying what you have learned about these two forms of criticism to a particular case study. To complete this part, you will do the following:

1. Read the accompanying email from the Israeli Institute of Antiquities addressed to Biblical Archaeologists & Textual Critics. It details your assignment.
2. **Use Worksheet I** to answer the questions contained in the email.

Due Date for Part I: Tuesday, February 8, 2011

Part II: Josephus & The 'Testimonium Flavianum'

It is important to realize that the methods of these two 'schools' of criticism are not only important to the study of the Bible, but to the study of any text from antiquity, as all ancient writings that are preserved to the present day were inevitably subject to the same process. More may be at stake with the interpretation of the Bible than with other writings, but often times those other writings offer insight into the historical context in which the Bible was produced, and understanding them accurately enlightens our understanding of the Bible in the process. One ancient author whose writings are subject to the same issues as the Bible yet useful for understanding the Bible's meaning is Flavius Josephus.

The Life & Writings of Josephus

One very valuable source of information about Ancient Judaism is the collection of writings by the Jewish historian Joseph ben Matthias, or as he has come to be known to us, Flavius Josephus- A Latin name derived from the fact that Josephus' patrons (supporters) were the Flavian emperors (Vespasian, Titus, Domitian). Josephus, who lived from 37 to about 100 AD, is our single most important non-Biblical source of information about Palestine in the First Century, the time of Jesus' ministry and the birth of Christianity. But his writings are not without problems, and understanding those problems requires knowledge both of the nature of ancient writings and of the man himself.

Four of Josephus' writings have survived to the present time, and two of them, *Life* (his autobiography) and *Against Apion* (a defense of Judaism against a pagan philosopher and critic), are very valuable for understanding who he was. From them we learn that Josephus had visited Rome fairly early in life and greatly admired the city and its culture. As a result, Josephus was not entirely opposed to Roman rule over Palestine and even came to see it as beneficial. He was also a very serious student of Judaism, examining the beliefs of all of the major sects in existence at the time before joining the Pharisees at age 19. As far as we know, he remained devoted to Pharisaic Judaism for the rest of his life.

When the first Revolt broke out between Palestine and Rome in 66 AD, Josephus' loyalties were no doubt torn between his religious convictions and his Roman sympathies. Nevertheless, he became leader of the Jewish Galilean forces, and was among the first Jews to face the invading Romans. He lost the battle, and according to legend fled into a cave with forty of his men, who decided to commit suicide rather than surrender to Rome. The men cast lots to determine the order in which they would kill each other, and conveniently, Josephus and a friend drew the last two numbers. Each man turned and killed the man who drew the number before him, but when it came Josephus' turn, he thought better of it and he and his friend decided to surrender to the Roman general Vespasian instead.

At the moment of his arrest, Josephus made a flattering prediction to the general, claiming that he would be the next Emperor of Rome. Vespasian spared his life, and not long after, in the wake of the chaos ensuing after the death of Nero, Vespasian was called back to Rome and declared emperor by his fellow generals, just as Josephus had predicted. He was released from prison and appointed as Roman historian of Judaism, a position he held for the rest of his life. He returned to Palestine to witness the end of the First Revolt, but this time as an observer for Rome rather than as a Jewish soldier. He even supposedly rode on horseback around the walls of Jerusalem, shouting to the Jews inside to surrender. Some Jews tried to escape from the city during the Roman siege, but they were captured and brought to Josephus, who would interview them about the conditions of the city and its residents as the siege wore on. These interviews, along with his own observations, became the basis for his histories.

After the Revolt was over, Josephus returned to Rome and wrote two books that tell us a great deal about Jewish life under Roman rule: *The Jewish War*, written shortly after the First Revolt, and *Jewish Antiquities*, a history of Judaism from its origins up to Josephus' own time, written between 91-96 AD. Both of these books give detailed accounts of precisely the period of history in which most of the books of the New Testament –most importantly and Letters of Paul and the Gospels- were written. They mention such important New Testament figures as John the Baptist, James 'the Brother of the Lord,' Herod the Great and his sons, Pontius Pilate, and others. They also mention various unsuccessful messianic claimants who caused civil unrest around Jesus' time, offering valuable insight into the ambivalence with which Jesus was received by his Jewish contemporaries. *Antiquities* is particularly important because it contains two references to Jesus, making them the only references to Jesus in a non-Biblical source written at about the same time as the gospels. One of these references, the so-called 'Testimonium Flavianum' (or 'Testimony of Flavius') is a brief outline of Jesus' ministry that confirms important details of the gospel stories about him.

But these writings are not without problems. As it turns out, Josephus was viewed as a traitor by his Jewish contemporaries because of his involvement with the Romans at the conclusion of the First Revolt. As a result, they rejected his Histories (which are, of course, sympathetic to Rome) and did not preserve them. In fact, the group most responsible for preserving and copying Josephus' writings is a group that, although seen at the time as a sect of Judaism, did not participate in the First Revolt and

therefore had no hostility towards Josephus. This sect also had a vested interest in preserving his works, because they recorded the time in which the sect itself had been founded. Today, we call that sect "Christians." As you might guess, scholars suggest that this raises a spectre of doubt regarding the reliability of his writings as we now have them, after having been passed on by hand copying for centuries (remember- the printing press was not invented until the 16th century).

Your Assignment, Part II-a

Is it possible that Christian scribes corrupted Josephus' writings, particularly with regard to what he says about Jesus? In this assignment, you will examine the evidence and make your own educated judgment. Follow the instructions below to complete this assignment.

1. **Use Worksheet II for this part of the assignment.** Read through Josephus' famous testimony to Jesus' existence (the 'Testimonium Flavianum') at the top of that worksheet.
2. Examine the Testimonium passage by passage to determine if it is reasonable that Josephus himself would have written what we now have, in light of what we know both about him and about the transmission of his writings.
3. The Testimonium is broken down into specific passages on Worksheet II. For each passage, mark the box in the column that corresponds to your evaluation:

A= Authentic.

Josephus could have said this, and I can see no apparent reason in light of what we know to doubt that he did, so it is likely authentic.

P= Possibly authentic.

I can see good reasons for both accepting and doubting the authenticity of this passage, and the evidence on both sides seems strong. I will accept the possibility of its authenticity but I remain suspicious.

I= Inauthentic.

It is almost impossible for me to believe that Josephus would have said something like this, in light of what we know about him. It seems certain to be a corruption or interpolation.

4. In the space below each passage on Worksheet II, offer a brief explanation of the reasoning behind whatever decision you make.
5. Finally, re-write the Testimonium in the space provided on Worksheet II, including only those passages you marked as authentic. Answer the remaining questions on the worksheet.

Due Date for Part II-a: Thursday, February 10, 2011

Your Assignment, Part II-b

Now see for yourself what Biblical Scholars think about the authenticity of the 'Testimonium.' For this part of the assignment, you will do the following IN CLASS:

1. Read an important article from *Bible Review* by John Meier, a Catholic priest and respected Biblical Scholar, on the validity of the Testimonium and the methods used by scholars to determine its value for New Testament studies.
2. **Use Worksheet II-b to answer questions on the Meier article.**

Due Date for Part II-b: Tuesday, February 15, 2011

Part III: Biblical Criticism & The New Testament

For the final part of this assignment, you will turn your attention to the New Testament itself, and examine a passage in one of Paul's letters that has been the source of much controversy among Biblical scholars. By this point, you should be able to use what you have learned to determine the best way to understand the passage in question. You will do the following IN CLASS:

1. Use a New American Bible to read the passages from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians necessary to **answer the questions on Worksheet III.**

Due Date for Part III: Wednesday, February 16, 2011