

119

GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Brit Hadasha: Josephus and the New Testament

TEACHING SUMMARY

This teaching examines how the historical claims of the New Testament compare with the writings of Flavius Josephus. Josephus is introduced as a Pharisaic Jew born in Jerusalem around AD 37 who witnessed important first-century events, including Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70. His writings provide information about Judaism and the setting of the gospel accounts.

The first passage considered is Antiquities of the Jews 18.3.3. It describes Yeshua as a teacher with followers and reports his crucifixion under Pilate. The teaching identifies five points of agreement with the gospels: Yeshua existed, taught, attracted followers, was sentenced to crucifixion by Pilate, and was believed by his disciples to have appeared after his death. These points are used as external support for the gospel accounts.

The teaching acknowledges the objection that some wording may have been added by a later Christian copyist. Because Josephus was not a follower of Yeshua, an unqualified declaration that Yeshua was the Messiah raises a question about interpolation. The teaching argues that possible additions do not require rejecting the entire passage and introduces the Arabic version preserved by Agapius, discussed by Shlomo Pines in 1971.

The Arabic wording presents the post-death appearances as reports from the disciples and uses qualified language concerning Messiahship. The teaching follows Pines in regarding this restrained wording as better representing Josephus's original account. It stresses that the five historical points remain even without the stronger expressions in the Greek version. The distinction between reporting the disciples' belief and personally affirming that belief is central to this discussion.

A second passage identifies James as the brother of Yeshua, who was called Christ, and describes the high priest Ananus arranging his execution. The teaching cites scholars who defend the passage's authenticity because its wording is brief, neutral, and appropriate to its context. The phrase identifying Yeshua helps distinguish James and does not read as a Christian confession of faith.

A third passage describes John the Baptist's imprisonment and death under Herod Antipas, who feared John's influence over the people. The teaching notes that this account does not simply reproduce the gospel wording or identify John as Yeshua's forerunner. Taken together, the passages are presented as independent first-century support for key people and events in the New Testament and as grounds for confidence in its historical reliability.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Josephus provides a first-century source for comparison with the New Testament.
- He is described as a Pharisaic Jew and an eyewitness to Jerusalem's destruction.
- Antiquities 18.3.3 is examined for information about Yeshua and his followers.
- The teaching distinguishes a passage's historical core from possible later additions.
- The Arabic version preserved by Agapius uses more restrained wording about Yeshua.
- The disciples' reports of appearances are distinguished from Josephus personally affirming resurrection.
- Both versions are presented as supporting five central historical points.
- The passage about James identifies him as Yeshua's brother.
- Josephus also describes John the Baptist's execution by Herod Antipas.
- The teaching concludes that these passages support the historical reliability of the gospel accounts.

FILL-IN-THE-BLANK

Basic

1. The first-century historian examined in this teaching is Flavius _____.
2. Josephus is described as a Jew associated with the _____ movement.
3. The official who condemned Yeshua to crucifixion was _____.
4. The brother of Yeshua identified in Josephus's account was _____.
5. The ruler connected with John the Baptist's imprisonment and execution was Herod _____.
6. The disciples reported appearances of Yeshua after his _____.

Challenging

1. An addition made by a later copyist is called an _____.
2. The scholar who discussed the Arabic version in 1971 was Shlomo _____.
3. The tenth-century writer who preserved that Arabic version was _____.
4. The high priest who assembled judges against James was _____.
5. The James passage describes Yeshua as "called _____," wording treated as neutral rather than confessional.
6. Josephus's account says Herod feared John's influence might lead to a _____.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the teaching compare gospel claims with an independent first-century writer?

2. Explain the difference between rejecting possible additions and rejecting the entire passage about Yeshua.

3. Why is the Arabic version's restrained wording important to the argument about authenticity?

4. What is the difference between reporting that the disciples believed they saw Yeshua and personally declaring that the resurrection occurred?

5. How does the neutral wording of the James passage support the teaching's assessment of its authenticity?

6. How do the three passages together contribute to the teaching's conclusion about New Testament reliability?

ANSWER KEY – GROUP GUIDE

Basic

1. Josephus — Teaching introduction to Flavius Josephus
2. Pharisaic — Teaching biographical introduction
3. Pilate — Antiquities 18.3.3, as quoted
4. James — Teaching quotation concerning James
5. Antipas — Antiquities 18.5.2, as quoted
6. death — Agapius version quoted through Pines

Challenging

1. interpolation — Teaching definition of interpolation
2. Pines — Teaching discussion of Pines, 1971
3. Agapius — Teaching discussion of Agapius
4. Ananus — Teaching quotation concerning James and Ananus
5. Christ — Teaching quotation concerning James
6. rebellion — Antiquities 18.5.2, as quoted

FACILITATOR DISCUSSION NOTES

Suggested responses follow the teaching. Invite discussion and personal application; these are not additional required answers.

1. The teaching compares claims about people and events with a writer outside the New Testament. Josephus supplies context and corroboration of particular details. Ask which claims the passages actually address; external agreement on some details is not, by itself, proof of every claim in the gospels.
2. An interpolation is wording added during transmission. The teaching distinguishes possible Christian additions from a historical core it considers authentic. Discuss the wording and contextual reasons it offers rather than treating either wholesale acceptance or wholesale dismissal as the only option.
3. The teaching follows Pines in valuing the more restrained Arabic wording preserved by Agapius. Agapius is a tenth-century transmitter, not an eyewitness or a surviving first-century manuscript. Keep the historical-source claim and the later route of preservation distinct, and attribute the reconstruction argument to the teaching.
4. Reporting that disciples said Yeshua appeared is evidence of their reported belief; it is not the same as Josephus personally witnessing or affirming resurrection. The guide's five-point summary retains this distinction. Ask participants to explain what additional reasoning connects such reports to a resurrection argument.
5. The source cites Feldman and Van Voorst on the brief, identifying phrase 'called Christ' in the James passage. It explains why neutral wording and contextual fit count in favor of authenticity. Neutral identification is different from Josephus confessing Yeshua as Messiah.
6. The three passages concern Yeshua and followers, James, and John the Baptist. The teaching takes their overlap with gospel people and events as support for reliability. Invite participants to list the specific agreements and the differences in emphasis without overstating the conclusion.