

A RESPONSE TO DAVID ALLEN'S  
'A MODEL RECONSTRUCTION OF WHAT JOSEPHUS WOULD HAVE  
REALISTICALLY WRITTEN ABOUT JESUS'

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In a recent article attempting a formidable reconstruction of a negative *Testimonium Flavianum* (*TF*), David Allen reconstructs part of his passages on the basis of Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44. The authenticity of the *TF* has been long contested, though most scholars seem to agree that it was authentic in some capacity; various theories have been proposed.<sup>1</sup> A growing minority, however, has recently been contending that it was entirely inauthentic and that

1. Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, 'Was the Hypothetical "Vorlage" of the "Testimonium Flavianum" a "Neutral" Text? Challenging the Common Wisdom on "Antiquitates Judaicae" 18.63-64', *JSJ* 45 (2014), pp. 326-65; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 61-69; Paul Garnet, 'If the *Testimonium Flavianum* Contains Alterations, Who Originated Them?', in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica. Vol. XIX: Papers Presented to the Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1987* (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), pp. 57-61. On the basis of Ulrich Victor, 'Das *Testimonium Flavianum*: Ein authentischer Text des Josephus', *NovT* 52 (2010), pp. 72-82, Zinner proposes that the entire *TF* is authentic (see Samuel Zinner, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas and the Canonical Gospels in Conversation with Josephus* [Journal of Higher Criticism Supplement Series; Salem, NC: Journal of Higher Criticism, 2020], pp. 200-208). See also Alice Whealey, 'Josephus, Eusebius of Caesarea, and the *Testimonium Flavianum*', in Christoph Böttrich, Jenz Herzer and Torsten Reiprich (eds.), *Josephus und das Neue Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 73-116, who proposes that the vast majority of the *TF* is authentic.

none of it was original.<sup>2</sup> Allen's proposals are rather interesting for complicating the picture of the *TF*'s development and potentially finding pre-Eusebian layers present; however, I think that there are some weaknesses which can be noted, particularly in the passages where Allen utilizes Tacitus, and which ultimately render the reconstruction unconvincing upon closer scrutiny.

In this response, I wish to specifically argue against Allen's usage of Tacitus and contend that we cannot reconstruct those specific passages from Josephus on the basis of Tacitus's work. I argue there are a number of reasons for this: (1) that Tacitus's familiarity with Josephus is extremely questionable, given how his work fails to align with Josephus's own on numerous points; and (2) that the similarities between *Ann.* 15.44 and the *TF* either cannot be distinguished from Christian creedal statements, or are the result of Allen using Tacitus as a source for his reconstruction. This also calls into question other parts of the reconstruction as well, including what justifications Allen has for utilizing specific sources. As a result, while the reconstruction is rather attractive, it is unconvincing to me.

### *Allen's Reconstruction of Josephus*

Allen's total reconstruction of the *TF* reads,

And there was about this time a certain man, a sophist and agitator, if one may call him a man, for he was a deceiver and an imposter. A teacher of men who worship him with pleasure. [He claimed the Temple would be destroyed and that not one stone would be left standing on another and that it would be restored in three days.] And he led many of the Judeans, along with many of the Galilean (element) in a tumult. He was believed to be a King [for he opposed paying the tax to Caesar]. And many souls were roused, thinking that thereby the

2. Ken Olson, 'Eusebius and the "Testimonium Flavianum"', *CBQ* 61 (1999), pp. 305-22. Olson (p. 306) cites Tessa Rajak, *Josephus, the Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 67, 131 n. 13; J. Neville Birdsall, 'The Continuing Enigma of Josephus Testimony about Jesus', *BJRL* 67 (1985), pp. 609-22; Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, his Works, and their Importance* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), pp. 222-23. See also Joshua Efron, *Studies on the Hasmonean Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), p. 333.

tribe of Judaeans could free themselves from the Romans. And, on the accusation of the first men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross. *Many of his followers, the Galileans and Judaeans, were slain and thus repressed for the moment. The movement again broke out with great abundance, when it was believed he appeared to them living again.* Those that followed him at first did not cease [worshipping] only him, who is their leader in sedition. And this tribe has until now not disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

The sections in brackets were Allen's own creations, which he posited were likely there as otherwise the reconstruction would be 'vacuous', as he states.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I wish to complicate these readings and give reason as to why we should probably not accept them as going back to a pre-Eusebian *TF*. Additionally, I will raise some concerns with Allen's usage of the pre-Eusebian sources in general.

#### *Source and Reconstruction Issues*

Searching for outside attestation to the *TF* in wider Greco-Roman literature and thus the possibility to use it to reconstruct a pre-Eusebian variant of the passage is a notable endeavor, and a direct challenge to the recent interpolation theories of Olson and others. However, there seems to be some rather questionable reasoning in place here, particularly where Tacitus's knowledge of the *TF* is concerned, and there are some distinct reasons for thinking that the texts are independent of each other.

First, outside of the *TF*, which is found in Josephus (*Ant.* 18.63-64) (which lies in contention at present), the only evidence which Allen is able to demonstrate which may point to Tacitus's knowledge of Josephus's writings is his description of the fall of Jerusalem and the fulfillment of the prophecy of Vespasian from *War* 6.312-13 (cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13).<sup>5</sup> The comparison,

3. David Allen, 'A Model Reconstruction of What Josephus Would Have Realistically Written about Jesus', *JGRChJ* 18 (2022), pp. 113-43 (128-42) (emphasis mine). I have italicized some sections/one section that concern/s me in this current response, as they rely principally on the works of Tacitus for reconstruction (Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', pp. 139-40).

4. Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', p. 132.

5. Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', p. 139.

however, on closer inspection showcases a number of divergences.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Josephus claims that one million people were slain in the siege of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Tacitus claims that it was 600,000 instead. Josephus never mentions this number anywhere. The sayings which the voices utter are different in Josephus's and Tacitus's works. In *War* (6.299-300) the voices of the multitude declare 'Let us remove hence.' Meanwhile, Tacitus's account indicates instead that the voices declare that the gods themselves are abandoning Jerusalem to its fate (*et audita maior humana vox excedere deos*), which is not in accordance with Josephus's text. Meanwhile, there are also other noted differences (was it Varus or Gratus who killed Simon of Perea? [see Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.9; cf. Josephus, *War* 2.57-59]). It is my view that Tacitus likely had no knowledge of Josephus, but instead the rather surface similarities are simply due to these being stories that fluctuated and circulated within the courts of Rome, accounting also for the even more variant version of events recorded in Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4-5. There seems to have been little consistency, and further as Olson has again pointed out, Josephus was not positively viewed by his Roman contemporaries, further decreasing chances of them reading his work at all.<sup>7</sup>

As I noted in my response to Mason, as well, it should be asked why this even matters? If Tacitus did rely on *War* this does not speak to whether or not he had access to the *Antiquities*. As I state,

As we know from Tacitus's own reception history, it was not hard for an author with multiple titles to have only one which gets cited or acknowledged (as is the case with Tacitus's *Histories* while the *Annals* are virtually unknown until Sulpicius). Thus, demonstrating that Tacitus's *Histories* may have relied on Josephus's *Jewish War* [sic] has little bearing on whether Tacitus's *Annals* used Josephus's *Antiquities*.<sup>8</sup>

6. These are discussed in depth in Christopher M. Hansen, 'The Problem of Annals 15.44: On the Plinian Origin of Tacitus's Information on Christians', *JECH* 13 (2023), pp 62-80 (4-6).

7. This is again indebted to Olson, who pointed to Suetonius, *Vesp.* 5.6. One can add to this as well Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 66.1 which has Josephus captured and then laughing at Vespasian saying that he would soon be freed. Josephus seems to have become a character for negative caricature, rather than a source of information.

8. Hansen, 'Problem of Annals 15.44', p. 5.

Given this, Allen would need to demonstrate clear reliance of Tacitus upon the *Antiquities* outside of the *TF* (as this is under question). This also leads us to a few issues specifically regarding the reconstruction as well, however.

Notably, Tacitus's version of events and Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63-64, especially on Allen's reading, are highly divergent to the degree that it is hard to see how Tacitus was reliant upon the version of the *TF* that Allen describes. For instance, while the neutral *TF* previously posited by Stephen Carlson and others was already problematic and showed numerous variances,<sup>9</sup> Allen's reconstruction only exacerbates the issue: Tacitus, as an example, never mentions any Γαλιλαῖος people at all. In fact, to the contrary, he mentions Judeans and Romans, instead. This was already a problem for Carlson and others who had to bridge the difference between the Ἰουδαίους and Ἑλληνικοῦ neutral reconstructions, and somehow map this onto Tacitus's *Iudaeam* on the one hand and Rome on the other (Rome being the *urbem* where horrible and pernicious superstitions always broke out). While identifying Ἑλληνικοῦ with Romans may be more understandable to an extent, the shift from Galileans to Romans is completely inexplicable in my view. How one could derive this from Tacitus's text is strange.

There are also details present in Tacitus's text which do not appear to have arisen from Josephus's either. For instance, Pilate is referred to as *procurator* in Tacitus's text,<sup>10</sup> but not in Allen's reconstruction of the *TF*, and Tacitus lacks any mention of the so-called 'first men' (πρώτων ἀνδρῶν); instead the blame is entirely on the procurator for these events. Since 'procurator' is likely an anachronistic title for Pilate,<sup>11</sup> it is apparent that this must have derived

9. Hansen, 'Problem of Annals 15.44', pp. 5-6.

10. Anthony A. Barrett (*Rome Is Burning: Nero and the Fire that Ended a Dynasty* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020], pp. 170-74) posits that the reference to Pilate may be an interpolation. But there is no reason for thinking this (see Willem J.C. Blom, 'Why the Testimonium Taciteum Is Authentic: A Response to Carrier', *VC* 73 [2019], pp. 564-81 and Margaret H. Williams, *Early Classical Authors on Jesus* [London: T. & T. Clark, 2022], pp. 67-70).

11. Fernando Bermejo-Rubio (*La invención de Jesús de Nazaret: Historia, ficción, historiografía* [Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 2021], p. 57) notes that the title of prefect was changed to procurator during the reign of Claudius. A curious—though unconvincing—argument that there was never any such change in titles and that they were used interchangeably or dually has been offered in Richard

from somewhere.<sup>12</sup> The Latin traditions titled Pilate as the procurator and Tacitus was of course very close with Pliny the Younger, including the fact that they exchanged work with each other and Tacitus would solicit Pliny for information.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it appears that this information would have been derived from Pliny's interrogations of Latin Christians in the early second century CE under Trajan. Allen himself admits that Tacitus likely used Pliny as a source, so why he needs recourse to the *TF* is strange, other than that he requires Tacitus for his reconstruction.<sup>14</sup> Notably, Tacitus's statement (as Olson has pointed out) looks almost identical to standard Christian creeds of the time:

Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judæa, in the times of Tiberius Cæsar; and that we reasonably worship Him, having learned that He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third, we will prove.<sup>15</sup>

Tacitus also mentions that Jesus was known as *Christus* (i.e. the messiah), but this information appears nowhere in Allen's reconstruction, who instead refers to Jesus as a 'king' (βασιλεύς). As a result, we have to ask where does this come from? Again, the evidence best points to Pliny and his Latin Christian sources from Bithynia-Pontus. Why the *TF* is necessary at all for

Carrier, *Hitler Homer Bible Christ* (Richmond, VA: Philosophy Press, 2014), pp. 131-40.

12. It is true that Josephus does refer to Pilate as 'procurator' elsewhere (see Paul R. Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], p. 182). But because Allen has not established that Tacitus was reliant on *Antiquities* and there are the numerous divergences and because the only portion that Allen proposes of *Antiquities* that Tacitus used was the *TF* (where the title is not mentioned), there seems no reason to posit this as Tacitus's source of information. As such, we should look elsewhere.

13. Anthony A. Barrett, Elaine Fantham, and John. C. Yardley, *The Emperor Nero: A Guide to the Ancient Sources* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 165.

14. Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', p. 139.

15. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 13 (William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint [eds.], *Christian Apologetics: Past and Present, A Primary Source Reader* [2 vols.; Wheaton: Crossway, 2009], I, p. 48).

Tacitus's information, when he had Pliny at his disposal (and who was a known collaborator on Tacitus's projects), is unexplored by Allen. Given the differences between *Ann.* 15.44 and Allen's *TF*, and also between *Hist.* 5 and *War* 2-6, there seems to be little basis for positing any relationship. It is curious also that there are parts of Tacitus's testimony that Allen does not include, such as the reference to Christians as *odio humani generis* or having a 'hatred of the human race'.<sup>16</sup> No doubt, if Josephus was a polemicist against this 'tribe', he could have said such things.

Allen may ask about the similarities between Tacitus and Josephus, but these are inconsequential in no small part because the similarities are either (a) too close to Christian creedal statements to be of much use (i.e. we cannot distinguish between Tacitus using a creedal statement or Josephus), or (b) derived from Allen's reconstruction utilizing Tacitus. For instance, that both texts mention that movement was 'repressed' is only because Allen used Tacitus's text, thus, the similarity is of no utility as this would be entirely based on circular reasoning.

Given that Allen admits that Tacitus used other sources, which account for the discrepancies between Tacitus and Josephus, the question becomes why we need to posit he knew Josephus at all, except that Allen requires this for his reconstruction. If Tacitus used other sources and showcases numerous discrepancies with Josephus, what justification is there for thinking he knew Josephus at all? The far more parsimonious answer and the one best befitting the evidence at hand would simply be that Tacitus only used his Greco-Roman sources, and probably had no knowledge of Josephus's work. It seems that Allen's proposal is based entirely on the fact that Tacitus provides convenient statements that build up his idea of the *TF*, but I have argued that there is little to no evidentiary basis for this. Excising the questionable passages based on Josephus still leaves Allen's reconstruction as partially coherent, as seen here:

And there was about this time a certain man, a sophist and agitator, if one may call him a man, for he was a deceiver and an imposter. A teacher of men who worship him with pleasure. [He claimed the Temple would be destroyed and that not one stone would be left

16. This specific polemic is particularly Tacitean, comparable to *Hist.* 5.5 where he describes Jews similarly as having this loathing for non-Jews (*adversus omnis alios hostile odium*).

standing on another and that it would be restored in three days.] And he led many of the Judeans, along with many of the Galilean (element) in a tumult. He was believed to be a King [for he opposed paying the tax to Caesar]. And many souls were roused, thinking that thereby the tribe of Judaeans could free themselves from the Romans. And, on the accusation of the first men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross. Those that followed him at first did not cease [worshipping] only Him, who is their leader in sedition. And this tribe has until now not disappeared.<sup>17</sup>

However, this greatly reduces the seditiousness of Jesus and also then raises some questions about what happens with the crowds he roused in a tumult as well. If only he were punished, what happened to the rest of his followers, who were riotous? The narrative seems incomplete as a result of this.

Additionally, it does call the veracity of other parts of this reconstruction into question. Allen's reconstruction, though attractive, is based in no small part on largely reading around various texts of figures like Celsus and Tacitus and then picking fragments from among them that would contextually fit the passage as Allen envisages it, but the basis for doing so seems limited. For instance, Allen notes how Origen claims that Jews did not connect the deaths of John and Jesus together, and it is apparent that *Antiquities* 18 does not either; therefore, it is likely that Origen may have relied upon Josephus. As Allen notes, 'In *Antiquities* it does not connect the Baptist movement with the Jesus movement.'<sup>18</sup> This reasoning is unconvincing on a number of points. First, it is an argument from silence, wherein Allen is asserting reliance on the basis of an absence of information on Josephus. Neglecting the debate on whether or not the Baptist passage is authentic, which has come to the fore in recent years (and recently argued to be an interpolation by Origen himself),<sup>19</sup> this argument is based entirely on a lack of information. Should we also conclude that Origen had access to oral history and traditions eventually to be passed down in the Babylonian Talmud, because they also do not make such

17. Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', pp. 128-42.

18. Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', p. 120.

19. Clare K. Rothschild, 'Echoes of a Whisper: The Uncertain Authenticity of Josephus' Witness to John the Baptist', in David Hellhom (ed.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (3 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), I, pp. 255-90; Rivka Nir, 'Josephus' Account of John the Baptist: A Christian Interpolation?' *JSHJ* 10 (2012), pp. 32-62.



a connection between John and Jesus? I think not. Allen argues that *Cels.* 1.47 'contradicts the *TF* statement "he was the Christ," showing that that statement was not in the earlier version of the *TF*'.<sup>20</sup> This is, of course, a faulty argument for it would be easily surmised by any Christian that a Jewish author like Josephus would not consider Jesus the Messiah. This statement does not require that he had seen anything like a *TF*, and it would make just as much sense in the context of his combatting Celsus, as Celsus uses a Jewish source of his own. As such, here, Origen would want to note that Josephus has no bias in favor of Christianity, because that increases the reputability of the supposed statements which Origen attributes to him. It is also questionable how in Allen's reconstruction Origen, on the basis of Josephus's unnamed seditious actor, would have known this was about Jesus to begin with, as noted above. This is perhaps the most challenging for Allen's reconstruction, however, as his position that Jesus does not appear to have been named in the *TF* at all originally calls into question how he can clearly identify this unnamed seditious actor in the *TF* with Jesus as found elsewhere, and then utilize these texts to further justify his reconstruction. For instance, he does so with his utilization of 1 Thess. 2.14-16 and Jn 11.47-50, where he presumes that his unnamed seditious actor is Jesus and therefore justifies his reconstruction utilizing those passages on this basis. In fact, there seems to be little reason, in my view, to think that this *TF* that Allen has constructed necessarily discusses the historical Jesus. How later scribes came to believe it was Jesus in this passage appears to be a mystery, since there is no clear indication that Tacitus or others would have thought this, given they clearly gathered Jesus' title of *Christus* and such from other sources (as this title is not used in Allen's reconstruction). As Allen notes, Jesus not being named would be typical of others like 'The Egyptian' and 'The Samaritan', but if this is the case how we can distinguish that this figure is Jesus and not just another rabble rouser who was executed like the others is left an open question. Furthermore, how apologists like Eusebius and commentators like Tacitus made this identification is also unanswered, which again calls into question the reconstruction and also Allen's own ability to identify this figure with Jesus (which in turn calls into question the sources Allen uses to justify his reconstruction). In short, the methodology behind this reconstruction seems doubtful.

20. Allen, 'Model Reconstruction', p. 120.

*Conclusions*

It appears that Allen's proposal, though attractive for its possibilities, is belabored with a number of methodological issues that prevent me from finding the reconstruction convincing. In the case of Tacitus, there does not appear to be any convincing reason for thinking that he relied upon any version of the *TF* or even any of Josephus's writings. The best which Allen and others have put forth is that Tacitus may have utilized Josephus's *War*, however, that Tacitus may have read *War* does not mean that he therefore had read *Antiquities*, as we know that it was quite plausible for an author of multiple works to only have one which was regularly read (as was the case with Tacitus, in fact). The supposed similarities between Tacitus and Josephus, in this case, are merely a result of the fact that Allen uses Tacitus as his source for reconstruction, thus, the similarity factor between *Ant.* 18.63-64 and *Ann.* 15.44 is inconsequential.

These problems also belie Allen's usage of other sources. A major issue for Allen's reconstruction is that he posits that Jesus was not originally named, which calls into question how any of the sources which supposedly used Josephus knew that this seditious actor (who looks virtually nothing like the Jesus of the Gospels) was Jesus in the first place. Most certainly, scribes like Tacitus could not have derived the terminology of *Chrestianos* and *Christus* from this version of the *TF*, as it is nowhere mentioned. The arguments for Origen utilizing the *TF* are likewise faulty and seem to posit little creative ingenuity on the part of the ancient apologist, such as the idea that his simple mention of Josephus not believing Jesus was the Messiah somehow indicates that Origen had read the *TF*. As noted above, if Origen had read Allen's *TF*, then there is no reason to think he would even conclude this figure was Jesus to begin with. Instead, it is easily explicable by the fact that Origen was simply stating an easily intuited fact about a Jewish author.

As such, these problems with his sources prevent me from thinking that Allen's reconstruction suffices, and further undermines the concept that there was a pre-Eusebian variant in circulation. In my opinion, a wholesale interpolation (as suggested by Olson and others) on the part of Eusebius appears more likely.