

Josephus' Testimony to Christ



FOR the Christian apologist, and especially for the Christian historian, the question of the testimony of Josephus to Christ, is most important. Yet, there are those who claim that Josephus does not mention Christ. They would have us believe, as a consequence, that Our Lord was a very obscure personage, and not one, whose new doctrine of Charity, echoing for the first time from the Hills of Galilee, would be calculated to move all the nations of the earth to their very foundations. Catholic critics, however, have always held, and with very good reason, that this famous historian, who lived in the Apostolic Age, bore witness to the existence, as well as to the supernatural character of the mission of Christ. This is so well authenticated, in fact, that it would seem to be foolhardy, and flying in the face of history to deny it. The evidence on which Catholic writers base their arguments is plain,—the arguments themselves, are logical.

Flavius Josephus was a Jew of the Levitical tribe, and inherited royal blood from his mother. He was born shortly after the Crucifixion of Our Lord, i. e., in the year 37. As a youth the future historian proved to be very bright, as well as diligent, and learned with such ease as to betray the possession of rare intellectual gifts. While still a lad, he passed through the schools of the three principal Jewish sects, viz., those of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Having absorbed much of the learning of the time, he repaired to the desert with one companion, where he devoted a short period of his life to contemplation in the vast solitudes—which afforded him an opportunity to digest those things which he had acquired in the schools. At nineteen, upon returning to Jerusalem, his native city, he entered the ranks of the Pharisees. At 26, being sent to Rome in order to plead the cause of some Jewish priests who were brought before the Emperor Nero, he became acquainted with the Empress, Poppea. A few years later, as Governor of Galilee, he distinguished himself in the defense of that place in its revolt against the Romans. This intrepid commander with-

stood a large Roman army for forty-seven days, but finally was compelled to surrender his besieged capital, and later on we find him giving valuable aid to Titus in the siege of Jerusalem. When Titus returned to Rome, Josephus accompanied him having won his favor by prophesying that he would one day become Emperor. He resided in Rome (where he wrote most of his works), until his death, which occurred about the year 100 A. D.

The importance of Josephus as an historian cannot be questioned. His works, no longer extant in the original, afford us a complete chronicle of events transpiring during the lifetime of Our Redeemer and also during the Apostolic Age. While they are, for the most part, an apology for the Jews, their author at the same time had an eye to his own welfare as a Roman citizen and the favorite of the Emperor. Most important among them may be named "The Antiquities of the Jews," and "Wars of the Jews," with the first-named of which it is our purpose to deal.

In the English translation (Winston's) considered by most scholars to be the best, we find a quotation that refers directly to Christ. "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, and 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 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. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, is not extinct at this day." *Antiq. Bk. xviii., Ch. iii, p. 47.*

This statement is indeed of the greatest historical value as a testimony to Christ given by a great contemporary historian, who was at the same time a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, residing at the very court of the Emperor. Those who desire to discount everything Christian have been for centuries attempting to prove that the passage in question is either entirely false, or else interpolated in those portions that would show Our Lord to be anything more than merely an historical character. In the light of true historical criticism, however, it may be proved that this passage is certainly wholly genuine, as will appear from the following arguments.

The above quotation is contained as above in all the Greek manuscripts now extant. It must be remembered that the original was written in that language, and it is not likely that all of these documents would err in such an important particular. For we must consider that our present MSS. are copies, in the original language, of other MSS., which were made, either from the original itself, or else from very ancient copies going back, some of them perhaps, to the days of Josephus himself. This proves that either the early copyists erred concerning the same point, or else each separate MS. has been altered in the same way during the ages, else we would have had an indication of the doubtful origin of the passage in that it would now appear in the Greek documents either in part, or else as a reference to a personage whose existence would be of little moment to us. But such is clearly not the case; for wherever it appears, it is always given in full by the early writers, which would seem to be an irrefutable argument in favor of the entire genuineness of the now disputed passage.

This argument appears in a much stronger light when we consider that it was only in the sixteenth century that the authenticity of the controverted text was first brought in question. It was the age when men first began the attempt to lead the world astray by filling the minds of the unwary with doubt as to the genuineness of the writings of the early Christian apologists, and even of the Evangelists themselves, so it is little wonder that such a valuable historical truth as the foregoing suffered from the attack. After the way was opened by Gifanius, it is but a short time until we find many others following in his footsteps in the mad effort to discredit everything Catholic, and Christian, in order, no doubt, to excuse themselves from the observance of the moral law.

It is stated by some critics that the style of Josephus which appears in the paragraph under discussion is not the same as that of the rest of the book; implying, of course, total interpolation. That this argument is without foundation may be seen immediately upon a critical examination of the works of Josephus, and especially of that part of the Antiquities in which this text appears. As it fits in with the context perfectly, there would seem to be no reason for stating that it was brought in merely to bolster up the assertion that Our Lord was something more in the eyes of the Jews than simply an innovator and

disturber of the peace, as was stated by the Chief Priests in the accusation before Pilate during the Passion.

Tacitus, (55-120 A. D.) the Roman historian and contemporary of Josephus, when referring to the Christians says: "Nero, in order to divert the suspicion of his having set Rome on fire, inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those men who, under the regular appellation of Christians, were already detested for their strange practices. They derive their name and origin from Christ, who, in the reign of Tiberius, had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator Pilate." Now it is evident from the works of Tacitus that when writing of the Jews, he used the writings of Josephus, so it is not too much to suppose that in writing of Christ, he had that page before him, which in modern times has caused so much discussion.

Other arguments might be brought forth to support the contention that this text is entirely genuine, but suffice it to add that Josephus, whom one would naturally expect to have been held in high esteem by those of his own nation, has always been detested by Orthodox Jews. The chief reason that may be assigned for this, according to many authorities, is the fact that he paid such a glowing tribute to Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified as a malefactor for having defied the Chief Priests and Princes of the Jewish nation.

Many arguments have been brought forward in order to prove that the text in question has been interpolated in part, which space does not allow to be set down. But taken all together, they are not convincing; and in the light of those presented above, one would be thoughtless indeed, who would follow the few moderns who attempt to dismiss the whole question by the mere assertion that this famous paragraph is spurious. Such authorities are in the minority, and it would seem that the age-old desire to discountenance all things Christian has blinded their intellectual vision and rendered them incapable of doing some clear thinking along the lines of true historical criticism.

This text is in truth a wonderful testimony to the Messiah. Josephus, in the face of the criticism that he must have foreseen would be levelled against him, and in spite of the fact that he was himself one of the priestly caste that had been instrumental in bringing about Pilate's sentence of Crucifixion, did, in this short passage, justice to One Who had suffered at the hands of his (Josephus') fellows. He gives a short review of the Mes-

sianic character of Our Lord, indicates the great number of miracles, which we know from the last chapter of St. John's Gospel were performed but will ever remain unrecorded; and concludes with the trial, death and resurrection of the Christ. The reader, studying this passage, is suddenly struck by its Messianic tone. It sounds, somehow, like a miniature—and at the same time, a very sincere—credo.

THOU ART THE CHRIST

By BRO. HUGH HARTNETT, O. P.

Thou art the Christ in swaddling bands of white,
Thou art the Dawn of Heav'n's eternal Light,
Thou art our Guide from out the darkest night;
 May we Thee love the more.

Thou art the Christ, all bruised on rack of shame,
Thou art the Price of sin—Jehovah's claim,
Thou art the Son of God, blest be Thy Name;
 Thy mercy we implore.

Thou art the Christ in spotless living bread,
Thou art the Resurrection of the dead,
Thou art the Strength of which our souls are fed;
 O Jesus we adore.

Thou art the Christ in Gabriel's final call,
Thou art the Hope that dost the saints enthrall,
Thou art the Love that dies not with the pall;
 Indeed, Thou art the Christ.