



Scientia Coronati Research Lodge No. 4 F&AM

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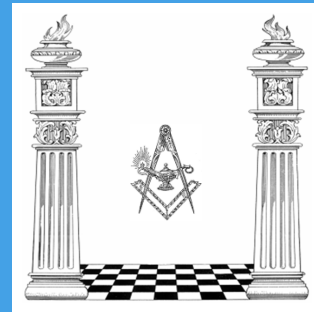
Essays, Papers & Articles

Masonic Topics

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And the Earth was without

form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, and God said, 'Let there be light'



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We have all heard it, many times before. Many of us have stood in Lodge and looked at a candidate, and said "... at a time when (as the great Jewish historian Josephus informs us) peace and tranquility pervaded the world ... ". Minutes later we add "and as a striking evidence of the approbation and interposition of Divine Providence, we are informed by the great Jewish historian Josephus ... ". The authors of our ritual were no doubt familiar with the history of the man, and his works. But in a time when the depth and breadth of education in general, and history in particular, are no longer what they once were, there are many among us to whom the name may be naught but an empty reference. Who then, was the "great Jewish historian Josephus", and what caused him to be considered 'great'?

The man we know as Flavius Josephus was born in Jerusalem in 37 C.E., the first year of the reign of Gaius Caesar, a few years after the time of Jesus the Christ. His proper name was Joseph ben Mattathias, Josephus being the Latinized form of the Hebrew, and his patriarchal name being changed, when he became a Roman citizen, for the family name of his patrons, Flavius. His father, Jehoiarib, was a priest of the first of the twenty-four orders (1), and on his mother's side he traces his ancestry to the Hasmoneans (the family of Judah Macabbee, hero of the Hanukkah story). Bentwich, however, tells us that "His genealogy... is a little vague, and we suspect that he was not above improving it."(2). He was brought up, along with his brother Matthias, to fit himself for the priestly office, and "received the regular course of Jewish education in the Torah and the tradition"(2). He claims to have been a child prodigy, stating that when but fourteen years old "I was commended by all for the love I had of learning; on which accounts the high priests ... came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understanding of points of the law"(1). At sixteen, he decided to experience all three of the Jewish sects – the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essens -and in three years returned to Jerusalem and began to conduct himself according to the rules of the sects of the Pharisees(1).

At the age of 26 (64 C.E.), he traveled to Rome, to "procure deliverance" for several Jewish priests who had been sent by Felix, then Roman Governor of Judea, to be tried by Caesar. On the way, the ship he was on sank during the night. Of the six hundred on board, he and eighty others, after swimming all night, were rescued by another ship. In Rome, with the help of a Jewish actor, he met Nero's wife, Poppaea Sabina, and through her interaction, procured the liberty of the priests(1).

Returning to Jerusalem in 65 C.E., he found his country in the state of rebellion against Rome. After having seen the power Rome flaunted, he openly opposed the Jewish revolt, knowing the damage his people would receive from Rome's reaction. Two legions of Roman soldiers marched on Jerusalem; but not only did they fail to squelch the uprising, they were defeated by the Jewish Zealots. In 65 C.E., Josephus, even though he possessed no military experience, was appointed military commander of Lower and Upper Galilee. Besieged by the Roman Vespasian at the fortress of Jotapata, Josephus and his soldiers held out for forty-two days. When the fortress fell, Josephus "did not shine in the last days of his command or in the manner of his surrender."(2). He and some of his comrades took refuge in a deep pit, where they were discovered and reported to the Romans. He and his supporters entered into a suicide pact, which Josephus oddly survived(2). Taken prisoner by Vespasian, and upon hearing that he was likely to be sent before Nero for trial, Josephus presented himself as a prophet, predicting that

Vespasian would become Emperor. With news of Nero's death, and the possibility that Josephus's prediction could come true, Vespasian, "without setting him at liberty, bestowed favors on him, and made him easy about his future."(2). In 69 C.E., when Vespasian was proclaimed Emperor, he rewarded Josephus with his complete freedom. Josephus was then adopted by Vespasian, and assumed the family name of his Imperial patrons, becoming Flavius Josephus.

At this point, Josephus was a little over thirty years old, a time in life when men usually have begun to achieve their life's ambitions. But for Josephus, being now a libertus (freedman) of Vespasian, he owed certain definite obligations to his patron and his patron's family. In essence, he had to submit to being Romanized not only in name, but also in spirit. For the rest of his life, which would encompass his entire literary career, he was to act, speak, and write to order, at the veritable direction of the will of his masters. This included his writing, and therefore placed him in the unenviable position of not being an independent historian, and not being able to express, as he may wish, an independent Jewish point of view. From the time of his surrender until his death, he lived and wrote as the client of the Flavian house, and all his works had to pass the Imperial censorship.

In late 69 C.E., he returned to Palestine with the Roman commander Titus, Vespasian's son, who had been appointed by his father to finish the Jewish war. During the remainder of the war, Josephus assisted Titus with understanding the Jewish nation and in negotiating with the revolutionaries. After the return of John of Gischala to Jerusalem after the fall of the Galilean fortresses, he roused the Zealots against the high priest Ananias, who felt that resistance to Rome was hopeless, and was anxious to make peace with Rome. With the slaying of Ananias, along with 8500 other Roman sympathizers, the Zealots took charge of Jerusalem and the Temple, setting the stage for the siege, and ultimate fall, of Jerusalem. As the various walls, battlements and towers of the City were breached or taken by the Romans, Josephus was sent by Titus to persuade the Zealots to abandon their cause. This included lectures on the ancient history, in attempts to show that they as a people had never been successful in aggressive warfare(3). These actions, as well as Josephus's position as a vassal of the Emperor of Rome, did little if anything to endear him to his people. Called a traitor, he was unable to persuade the defenders of Jerusalem to surrender to the Roman siege, and instead became a witness to the destruction of the city and the Holy Temple

In 71 C.E., he arrived in Rome in the entourage of Titus, becoming a Roman citizen. In addition to Roman citizenship he was granted land and holdings in conquered Judea, and a decent, if not extravagant, pension. It was while in Rome, and under Flavian patronage, that Josephus wrote all of his known works.

Josephus's first literary work, *The Wars of the Jews*; or, *The History of the Destruction of Jerusalem*, was written when he about forty years old. While it contains what is probably the only full record we have of the events of that war, it also contains many involuntary errors brought about by Josephus's not being fully aware of several circumstances from the beginning of the revolt, and again, was written with a Romanized point of view, to meet the approval of his censors and his audience(3). The informational short-comings he corrected when he published his *Antiquities of the Jews*, some eighteen years later, when he was much more completely acquainted with those ancient times, having read ancient histories such as the first book of *Maccabees*, and researched and written the chronicles of the priesthood of

John Hyrcanus, among others(3). The Wars consists of seven books, and covers an interval of one hundred and seventy-five years, from the taking of Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes, to the death of Herod the Great(3). The work also served to flatter his patron and to warn other provinces against the folly of opposing the Romans. He first wrote in his native language of Aramaic, then with assistance translated it into Greek (the most-used language of the Empire), although we are told by Bentwich that “ he was never able to speak Greek fluently or with sufficient exactness... .”(2). Josephus then undertook a massive work in Greek explaining the history of the Jews to the general non-Jewish audience. He emphasized that the Jewish culture and Bible were older than any other then existing, and so called his work the Jewish Antiquities. In the preface to the Antiquities he explains that while he wrote the Wars because he “was forced to give the history of it, because I saw that others perverted the truth of those actions in their writings”(4), he undertook the writing of the Antiquities “as thinking it will appear to all the Greeks worthy of their study; for it will contain all our antiquities, and the constitution of our government, as interpreted out of the Hebrew Scriptures”(4). Approximately half the work is a rephrasing of the Hebrew Bible, while much of the rest draws on previous historians. Bentwich tells us that “For the most part he paraphrases it, cuts out its poetry, and reduces it to a prosaic chronicle of facts”(2). This work was published in 93 or 94 C.E., and along with the Wars, provides valuable background material to historians wishing to understand first-century Judaism and the early Christian period. In the Jewish Antiquities, Josephus writes what is called the 'Testimonium Flavianum': “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of the people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out(6).” While there has been a lot of scholarly debate about the explanation of this strange remark, and whether it was written by Josephus or added to the text at a later date, Josephus remains the only first century non-Christian writer mentioning Jesus' life, teachings and death independently of the gospels. Josephus also wrote at least two smaller books, including his autobiography, The Life of Flavius Josephus, in which he recounts his life from birth until the writing of the Antiquities, and Against Apion, which was written as a defense of Judaism as a classical religion and philosophy, stressing its antiquity against what he perceived as more recent traditions of the Greeks. It also defines which books he viewed as being in the Jewish Scriptures: “For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, [as the Greeks have,] but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death.”(5). Another short work often credited to him and called Josephus's Discourse To The Greeks Concerning Hades, is considered to be an adaptation of "Against Plato, on the Cause of the Universe" by Hippolytus of Rome, a prolific Roman writer from the second half of the second century, which would place him well after the life of Josephus. Because, and in spite of his actions and his life, Josephus's works have survived and are given the credit they are due. Because of his recognition of the power of Rome, and his unwillingness to defend his Faith and his Country to the death like the Zealots, he was deemed a traitor to and by his own people. Forced

to modify his writings to suit the tastes and attitudes of his benefactors, he was unable to write in a style and scope more acceptable to the Jewish people. Yet because he did survive, and because he did present the stories and history of his people in a light appropriate to his audience, his works were preserved and distributed by the very enemies of the Jews and the Jewish faith. For centuries, the works of Josephus were more widely read in Europe than any book other than the Bible. They are invaluable sources of eyewitness testimony to the development of Western civilization, including the foundation and growth of Christianity in the 1st Century.

Two recent events point out that to this day, Josephus continues to inform us, if we will but listen. In May of 2007, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem announced that King Herod's tomb had been found at Mount Herodium. Herod's funeral was described in the Wars, Book V, Chapter 33. And in September of 2007 it was reported that an ancient escape tunnel had been discovered in Jerusalem, used by the Jewish residents used to flee the Romans 2,000 years ago. The existence and use of an elaborate network of tunnels as shelter was also reported and detailed by Josephus in the Wars.

The Life of Flavius Josephus, Josephus

Josephus, Norman Bentwich, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1914

The Wars of the Jews; or, The History of the Destruction of Jerusalem, Josephus

Jewish Antiquities, Josephus

Flavius Josephus Against Apion, Book 1, Josephus

Jewish Antiquities, Josephus, Book 8, Chap 3