THE VALUE OF JOSEPHUS AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

I. THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

In the writings of Josephus we possess the most voluminous and detailed account of the history of the Jews in ancient times which has ever been written. While to a great extent they expand and augment information which other authors have passed on to us, at the same time we are indebted to certain parts of them for important historical knowledge, which otherwise would have been denied to us. Indeed, were it not for the record of Josephus, the period of four hundred years from the close of the Old Testament to the commencement of the Christian Era would have presented a great hiatus in the story of the Holy Land, almost the only stop-gap being supplied by the Apocryphal writings—and especially the Books of Maccabees—which cover but a scant fraction of this period. Of the twenty books of his *Antiquities* more than six are devoted to the interesting occurrences of this interval. Further, had his works not come down to us, we should have been left in almost entire ignorance of the line of the Herods, and in particular of the amazing life of Herod the Great; of the manner of Caligula's death and Claudius's accession; and of the siege and overthrow of Jerusalem by Titus.

At the end of the *Antiquities* Josephus tells us that he is writing in the thirteenth year of the reign of Domitian—that is, A.D. 93-94—and that he himself is fifty-six years old. This statement enables us to fix his birth in the first year of Caligula's principate, A.D. 37-38. His home town was Jerusalem. Undeterred by the normal restraints of modesty, he remarks (*Life*, 2) that his proficiency in learning and his powers of memory and understanding were so extraordinary, and the fame of his erudition so widespread, that the high priests and principal men of the city frequently sought him out to consult him concerning the accurate interpretation of different points of the Law. It is also his boast that at the age of sixteen he had made a thorough study and trial of the three Jewish sects—Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes—to prove which was the

best; and that before he was out of his teens he spent three years in the desert at the feet of an ascetic hermit named Banus. After that he returned to Jerusalem and threw in his lot with the Pharisees. Some seven years later, when the first indications of a Jewish revolt against the Roman sway were making their appearance, he informs us that he made strenuous endeavours to dissuade the revolutionaries from their project (*Life*, 4). Later, however, his efforts in the cause of peace having failed, he was appointed commander-in-chief of Galilee, and in A.D. 67 fell into the hands of the Romans when they captured the fortress of Jotapata (*Wars*, iii. 8. 7f.). He assures us (ibid. iii. 8. 9) that he had foretold the exact day of the fall of Jotapata and also his own capture by the besiegers, and that, through a prophecy of his to the effect that Vespasian would rise to the imperial power, he had gained the interest and favour of that general and of his son. Two years later this prophecy was fulfilled (*Wars*, iv. 10. 7), and Josephus was liberated and his future assured. He exercised a great influence over Titus (*Life*, 75), with whom he remained till the close of the war; and then he sailed with his young patron to Rome where he was treated with remarkable respect and consideration by Vespasian, who gave him apartments in his own house in which he had lived before he was proclaimed emperor, made him a Roman citizen, and granted him an annual pension (*Life*, 76). He enjoyed the same favours and privileges, so he tell us, under Titus and Domitian. And so it was that he had the means and the leisure to devote himself to his literary labours.

It is not difficult to form an estimate of Josephus's character. Vanity and self-praise were prominent features of his make-up, and these were supplemented by a spirit of servility and adulation towards those from whom he might expect commendation or benefit. In the Jewish War he had played the part of a dishonourable and traitorous general, preferring to save his own skin by transferring his allegiance and loyalties to the Roman banners, rather than brave the uncertainties of the future together with his fellow-countrymen: and the sense of his own importance led him to do this with the utmost equanimity and a complete absence of shame. Even so, it must be admitted in his favour that, although passing his life in the capital of the Empire as a privileged Roman citizen, he did not turn his back on his own people, desirous of forgetting his

origin, but expended the powers of his intellect in writing their history from the earliest times and in refuting the calumnies which were levelled at them as a race.

The value of Josephus as a historian has been variously assessed at different periods. In the early centuries of this era, for example, his works were viewed with remarkable deference, and Jerome even refers to him as the "Greek Livy". In the middle ages, too, they were thought highly of, and later they received a place on the Christian's bookshelf alongside of the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. At the hands of more modern critics, however, he has met with unfavourable judgment, and very often, it must be confessed, their criticisms can only have been the outcome either of shallowness or of prejudice. Perhaps we are in a better position to make an estimate to-day, and, as Schürer wisely remarks, "it will probably be found that the truth lies midway between these extremes" (*The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, I. i. p. 97).

Two factors that detract rather seriously from the value of his writings are, firstly, that he wrote with the object of presenting a picture of the Jewish people, their history and their customs, favourable to the Gentile eye, and secondly, that he purposely omitted or distorted anything which his Roman readers were not likely to find palatable. Of his works the most trustworthy as a historical document is undoubtedly the *Wars of the Jews*, which is told with much particularity and minuteness of detail. And this is not surprising, for he played the rôle of either an eye-witness or an active participant in a large number of the incidents which he describes, so that there is no cause for doubting his veracity, excepting in some passages which describe his own personal exploits. The same remarks apply, of course, to his Autobiography. The *Antiquities of the Jews*, which is truly a *magnum opus*, contains numerous errors and inexactitudes, due probably to carelessness or negligence in the consulting and verifying of sources, and also, it has been said, to the wearisomeness of completing so laborious a task.

But, after all, these failings are by no means peculiar to Josephus, as one might almost be led to imagine after reading some of the censures passed upon him; they can be attributed in general or in part to almost any of the ancient—and, indeed, to some of the modern—historians. In any case, one should always bear in mind that it is possible to shew bias just as

much in dwelling unduly upon an author's shortcomings as upon his achievements; and if the works of Josephus are approached in this spirit, it will soon be seen that there are many places in which he displays great eloquence and learning.

II. THE SOURCES USED BY JOSEPHUS

In compiling his encyclopaedic history of the Jewish people Josephus, like all historians, must have had recourse to numerous earlier authors for information. Although we are ignorant of the identity of many of his sources, yet, by investigating his writings and by drawing various reasonable inferences, it is possible to discover some of the quarters from which he derived his knowledge. At the outset it can be stated that Josephus did not always use his sources at first hand, but often culled his information from relatively unreliable " universal histories ".

As was to be expected, for the early history of the Hebrews up to the time of Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century B.C.—to which the first ten, and part of the eleventh, books of the *Antiquities* are devoted—far and away his most important source was the Old Testament. But that this was not his only source is evident from the fact that the Biblical narrative is frequently expanded and augmented—as, for example, in the case of Moses and the patriarchs that preceded him. We must assume that, apart from the rhetorical speeches which are his own composition, he made considerable use of the ancient Hebrew traditions and interpretations of the Scriptures. It is tolerably certain, too, that he referred to the Hellenistic versions of Old Testament history written by Demetrius, Artapanus, and others, and that he owed a debt to the expository writings of Philo. Besides these sources, however, he cites a number of pagan historians who deal with this period, such as Herodotus, Hellanicus, Hecataeus, Ephorus, Berossus, Manetho, and Menander of Ephesus.

For the period 440-175 B.C., he depends, as Schürer says, " almost entirely upon two legendary productions, the Alexander legends and the pseudo-Aristeas " (op. cit., p. 86). For his information about Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabean, revolts Josephus made good use of 1 Maccabees. Polybius, whose history ends in 146 B.C., was also consulted (*Ant.* xii. 9. 1). In dealing with the hundred years commencing 135 B.C. he constantly referred to the works of Strabo and Nicolaus of

Damascus. In a couple of places it is clear that these two historians in turn were giving quotations from still earlier authorities (*Ant.* xiii. 11. 3; xiv. 8. 3). Nicolaus was historiographer at the court of Herod the Great, and must have been a most valuable source for the history of Judaea in his own time. Occasionally Josephus ventures to offer some criticism or appraisement, generally slight, of his sources. As previously remarked, he made frequent use of traditional legends for providing details and incidents in the lives of the characters he depicts. There is little doubt, too, that he had access to and utilised to advantage the Commentaries of King Herod (*Ant.* xv. 6. 3) and the Roman state records, to which he refers several times, especially for enumerating the various privileges granted to the Jews by the Romans. About the final portion of the *Antiquities*, Schürer says:

"For the history of the last decade preceding the war, he would be able to rely upon his own personal recollections. The quite unparalleled completeness with which the events, even those which do not relate to the Jewish history, occurring in Rome at the time of Caligula's death, and at the beginning of the reign of Claudius in A.D. 41, are narrated, is very remarkable (xix. 1-4). There can be no doubt that this portion of the history is borrowed from a special source by the hand of a contemporary" (op. cit., p. 89).

It has been suggested that this contemporary source might be Cluvius Rufus.

Altogether, then, Josephus stands in a class by himself, in the matter both of the quantity and the content of his works. Nobody will deny that, while some of the documents to which he had recourse for information were of the highest order, others were of a distinctly inferior historical stamp; but, be that as it may, his writings constitute a historical source of the greatest importance, which, when approached with due caution and discernment, may be read and consulted with no small benefit. Schürer, referring to his own voluminous history, pays Josephus an appropriate compliment when he says:

"To the literary leisure of Josephus at Rome we are indebted for those works, without which our history could scarcely have been written" (op. cit., p. 82).

And this, too, provides an apt summing up of the value of Josephus as a historical source.

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THE DISRUPTION

IT is fitting that *The Evangelical Quarterly* should take notice of the centenary of the Disruption which falls to be remembered by the Scottish Churches this year. It is not my purpose now, nor is it necessary—authoritative pens are engaged upon the task—to retell the story that reached its climax in the dramatic scene of 18th May, 1843. Nor shall I attempt any original interpretation. All I offer is my personal tribute of appreciation.

New and urgent problems have arisen to perplex both Church and State, problems in the relations of Religion and Politics undreamt of a hundred years ago. And to-day our thoughts are engrossed with events fraught with tremendous issues for the nations, for the Church, for Christian civilisation. Nevertheless it is impossible to treat the Disruption issues as no longer relevant or important. They have to do with the permanent and essential nature of the Church. Nor can the Disruption be regarded simply as one example among many of the " fissiparous tendency " of Scottish Presbyterianism (a phrase beloved by its critics of other orders). Still less is it to be dismissed as a peculiarly virulent outbreak of the alleged *perfervidum ingenium Scottorum.*

The word, disruption, has, indeed, an explosive sound in our ears; more violent than, e.g., Secession, Separation or Schism. We are being reminded by the authorities that in the language of the time and in the thought of the responsible leaders it was not held to imply the shattering of the Church of Scotland. It implied, in the polite language of diplomacy, the " denunciation " of its alliance with the State. In the providence of God, as many to-day must believe, it proved impossible for a party even with a majority in the Church Courts to achieve this result in actual fact; God having some better thing in store.

One cannot think of the Disruption without pausing for a moment to pay tribute to the moral grandeur of the thing; the self-sacrifice of upwards of 400 ministers who for a principle left their Churches, manses and stipends; and, not least, the loyal liberality of those who undertook the unwonted burden of supporting the Free Church. We may well look back with reverence on an event which moved contemporary observers

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to admiration for an impressive and unexpected demonstration of the vitality of Christian principles. It is a page of Scottish Church History of which every Scot, whatever his ecclesiastical affiliation, has reason to be proud. Certainly we have seen nothing like it until our own time when we witness the Churches of Europe engaging in an even sterner struggle, and winning once more the world's awed attention.

Further, we must acknowledge with gratitude the infusion of new vigour into the religious life of Scotland. Primarily this is apparent in the Free Church itself, which rapidly realised its programme of nation-wide extension of its ministry and educational system, culminating in three Theological Colleges soon to be world-famous, as also of the missionary enterprise to which it fell heir. But the "Auld Kirk" too, left stunned and seemingly discredited and derelict—a nonentity as Dr. Chalmers said—experienced a revival of energy and effectiveness. This goes far to counterbalance the regrettable legacy of bitterness which it required more than two generations to efface.

It is commonly supposed that the cause of the Disruption was the old grievance of Patronage, but this is an over-simplification. It is true that the Patronage question played a great part in the Ten Years' Conflict. The Law Courts were appealed to in defence of the rights of patrons and their presentees, alleged to have been infringed by illegal action on the part of the Church. Non-intrusion was one of the slogans of the Evangelical party, which made them also the popular party at a time of heated democratic political agitation. But the leaders were slow to denounce patronage as evil in itself. Only towards the end of the struggle did they commit themselves to the demand for the repeal of the iniquitous Act of Queen Anne. If in the eighteenth century patronage had worked in favour of Moderatism, in the nineteenth century, with its changed spirit, it might conceivably work the other way. In fact even with patronage the Evangelicals had acquired a preponderance in most of the Presbyteries and in the General Assembly.

Nevertheless the exercise of patronage was giving rise to much local dissatisfaction with consequent alienation from the Church and increase of Dissent. To remedy this state of affairs it was sought to give congregations some voice in the appointment of their ministers by putting substance into the "Call", a necessary if hitherto merely formal document in connection

with the settlement of ministers. The method adopted was something of a compromise. No attack was made on patronage as such, but congregations were given the power to veto the settlement of any particular presentee. Such a veto would imply, it was hoped, no aspersions on his character, but would be clear evidence that his ministry in that particular parish was unlikely to be fruitful. The Patron could nominate another.

There will be different opinions as to the wisdom of this method, even where the purpose is thoroughly approved. Its legality was immediately challenged, and the simple question of the rights of patrons and presentees opened out into a major theological issue touching the powers of government derived by the Church from Christ, its Divine Head—in other words "The Crown Rights of the Redeemer". The Law Courts decided in effect that the Church of Scotland was simply an Ecclesiastical Establishment, created by Statute and deriving from Statute what limited powers it possessed; in fact no Church at all in the sense of its own Confessional Standards. Such a conception is clearly intolerable for any Reformed Church.

In 1843 the Legislature, obstinately conservative in a restive age, would give no relief. Since then it has given the various freedoms demanded. In 1844 the erection of new parishes *quoad sacra* was regularised. In 1874 patronage was abolished. Finally in 1921 Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual were endorsed by the State. These Articles set forth all that the Church claimed to be its inherent jurisdiction in 1843. Thus was the way made open for the Union of 1929. The question arises—Could not all this have been achieved without Disruption, if only men had had a little more patience? I doubt it. Without the plagues of Egypt would Pharaoh have let the people go? That the Church of Scotland has achieved the status of a Church both national and free, a legal recognition of her right to be what she has always claimed to be, she owes to the testimony in word and sacrificial deeds of the men who "went out" in 1843.

There is another angle from which the Disruption must be viewed if it is to be truly judged. It must be seen against the background of the world-wide religious revival of the first half of the nineteenth century. This revival took various forms, not all of them evangelical in our sense of the word, e.g., the Oxford Movement in the Church of England, which was in part a

reaction against Evangelicalism. In the Reformed Churches strictly so-called a new spirit of enthusiasm and warm personal piety began to challenge the prevailing rationalism. In 1845 Alexandre Vinet and his followers founded a free evangelical Church in the Canton de Vaud, and in 1849 the Union des Églises Évangéliques separated from L'Église Réformée de France. A similar movement took place in Holland in 1839. Scotland therefore did not stand alone but shared in a movement that was universal. In part it was a revival of faith in the fundamental Christian verities which rationalism had obscured. Partly it was a renewed feeling for personal individual religion. Partly it was the eager desire to offer the Gospel as the only remedy for the spiritual destitution that men saw around them. Everywhere there was an upsurge of spiritual life, and everywhere it met the same obstacles, legal and ecclesiastical forms, vested interests, and hostility of those who held unmoved to the old ways. Everywhere the new life finding the old channels too narrow or artificially obstructed must break out and find new channels for itself.

The nineteenth century was characterised by divisions. The twentieth has been repairing them by unions. Not that it merely deplores the divisions and would gladly forget them. On the contrary, it recalls them with reverence and thankfulness, and seeks to understand how by such conflicts the Church has been enabled to enter upon a richer and better heritage, a fuller Christian life, and a nobler vision of its mission on earth.

THE EDITOR.