

## WERE THE JEWS RESPONSIBLE FOR CHRIST'S DEATH?

**I**T has been assumed for so many centuries that the Founder of Christianity was put to death by the Jews that most persons would hesitate about undertaking to refute the assumption. A learned Hebrew who is a French writer of prominence, M. Theodore Reinach, has, however, not shrunk from the task, and an article by him in the *Revue des Études Juives* (Paris, September) presents an acute argument in vindication of the Jews. The basis of his argument is a close and careful study of the four Gospels and the Acts. He begins by reminding us that the only non-Christian testimony to the life and person of Christ are found in a brief sentence of Tacitus and a paragraph of Josephus. Tacitus simply confirms the material fact of the punishment of Jesus ordered by Pontius Pilate, and there are some reasons for believing that the Roman historian knew nothing of what he told save what he had read in Josephus. This leaves the latter the only writer who can complete or control the story of the Evangelists.

The paragraph of Josephus has given rise to an immense literature. Every word of that paragraph has been studied and commented on. All the works of Josephus have been cherished by the Christian Church as a sort of preface to the Evangelists. He was neglected by the synagog because he had for personal reasons broken with it. It is certain, however, that he was all his life an orthodox Jew, firmly convinced of the truth of Judaism and without the slightest sympathy with Christianity. During the last fifty years, those who have studied most closely the paragraph of Josephus have come to the conclusion that there are interpolations in it which date very far back. After eliminating all these supposed interpolations, the text which all agree to be authentic reads thus :

"About this time appeared Jesus, called the Christ, a wise man (for he was a worker of miracles), who preached to men greedy of novelty; and he seduced many Jews and also many Greeks. Altho Pilate, upon the denunciation of leading men among us [*i.e.*, the Jews], had condemned him to the cross, those who had loved Him from the beginning of His public career did not cease to be attached to Him, and there still exists the sect which, from Him, has taken the name of Christians."

This text, so M. Reinach points out, besides the confirmation it gives of the story of the Gospel, contains two pieces of information of the highest importance :

"1. According to Josephus, Jesus had not preached the new doctrine to the Jews alone; He had also 'seduced many Greeks.' The Gospels say not a word about that. They declare the theater of the activity of Jesus to have been Galilee and Judea, to the exclusion of Greek towns. It is possible to infer from Matt. xv. 21-34 and Mark vii. 24-37, that Jesus made a journey to Phœnicia or the frontiers of that country; but save an insignificant miracle, performed in some sort unwillingly, He did nothing remarkable in that country; not a word indicates that He had made conversions there, and He says Himself explicitly to the Canaanitish woman: 'I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' . . . . .

"Josephus, in attributing to Jesus the 'seduction,' that is, the conversion, of many Greeks, was either guilty of an anachronism (quite excusable, considering the length of time which had elapsed between the events and his description of them), or has revealed to us a side of the activity of Jesus which is completely ignored by the Evangelists. The first of these explanations is the one I prefer. Luke, who, in his quality of companion of St. Paul, was a decided partizan of the propaganda among the Gentiles, could not have failed, in his Gospel, to give some hint of the efforts and success of Jesus among the Greeks if tradition

had furnished the slightest support for such a thing; his silence proves that, in the best-informed circle, it was a matter of public notoriety that Jesus had limited His mission to the 'sheep of Israel' alone. From all this it follows clearly that, among the charges made against Jesus on His trial, there was not alleged conversion of Greeks.

"2. The story of the trial of Jesus in the four Gospels is conflicting. Various efforts have been made to harmonize the four but the efforts have but partially succeeded. The result of these harmonies has been to give the idea that Pilate was a good natured but weak man, disposed to be clement, but not daring to resist the pressure of the crowd, and that he finally left the supreme decision 'to the voice of the people.' Apart from the fact that such a course would have been entirely alien to the Roman administration of the law, it is certain that this view of Pilate misrepresents him altogether. What was the real character of Pilate we know certainly from the pages of Philo and Josephus, who agree in depicting him as of an arbitrary and despotic nature, completely indifferent to the religious sentiments of those whom he governed, and shedding their blood without the slightest scruple. His conduct in two famous affairs relating to the standards and the aqueduct, the brutal vigor with which he stifled the movements of a Samaritan prophet, leave no doubt as to the ferocious and arbitrary character of the man who was finally recalled to Rome to answer for his brutal use of his powers. It is then morally certain that if Pilate sentenced Jesus to capital punishment, it was not to satisfy the outcries of the Jews, but to chastise an offense committed against the majesty or the security of the empire. In fact, even the narratives of the Evangelists enable us to see that the true reason, the only *legal* reason for the condemnation, was the usurpation, by Jesus, of the title of 'King of the Jews.' What then was the part played by the chiefs of the Jews in this proceeding? It has been inferred from the efforts made to harmonize the Gospels that there was a trial prior to that before Pilate, purely religious, held before the little Sanhedrin, in which Jesus was convicted of blasphemy and of seducing Jews from their faith, in disobedience of Hebrew laws, for which the punishment was death; but as the Sanhedrin had not the power to inflict capital punishment, the culprit was handed over to the secular authority. Now Josephus, in his 'Antiquities,' explicitly declares that the Roman Government prohibited the Sanhedrin from being convoked to try a criminal matter, without the express permission first had and obtained of the Roman procurator. No authorization of this kind is mentioned in the case of Jesus; and if it had been requested, it seems certain, from the well-established character of Pilate, that the request would have been refused.

"The paragraph of Josephus, with its laconic clearness, explains the true state of the case. Jesus was condemned by Pilate, says Josephus, upon the *denunciation* of leading Jews. These played the part of accusers, perhaps of witnesses, but not of judges, even in the first instance. The conclave of elders, counsellors, and scribes who decided to bring Jesus before Pilate can not be considered a regular tribunal, but a simple informal meeting. Surely, also, these improvised accusers took good care not to mention before the Roman governor the alleged crimes of Jesus against the Jewish religion, crimes about which they must have known that Pilate would not trouble himself at all. These alleged crimes were, indeed, the reasons for their intervention, but reasons which they kept to themselves. It was as a disturber of public order, as an aspirant to the crown of Judea, that they denounced Jesus; it was for this offense alone that Pilate, exercising freely his sovereign jurisdiction, condemned the prophet of Nazareth and sentenced him to be crucified—a punishment exclusively Roman—with the derisive inscription which declared the reason for his condemnation. Pilate did well to wash his hands; it is upon them, and upon them alone, that the blood which was shed, as on Macbeth, has left its ineffaceable traces.

"Jesus was put to death under an inexorable, tho perhaps barbarous, law, and for what was, under that law, a crime, which he tacitly confessed. Judaism has been expiating for nearly sixteen centuries, by daily humiliations and incessant persecutions, a pretended crime which it never committed and which it had not even the power to commit. It is not then the execution of Jesus, it is the long martyrdom of Israel, which constitutes the greatest judicial error in the history of man. It would seem to be full time to have done with this old legend and this old iniquity."

*Translated for THE LITERARY DIGEST.*