

*HOSTILE AND ALIEN EVIDENCE FOR CHRIST
AT PASSIONTIDE.*

To a dispassionate student of history the evidence of events which comes from indirect or even hostile sources is often more convincing than the categorical statements of the writer. This is certainly true in regard to the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Words uttered with a hostile intent at this momentous crisis seem by a kind of irony to acquire a strange and deep significance in an opposite sense. Several actors come upon the scene in those last hours, who are either actively hostile, or, from their position, hitherto indifferent to the great events which are taking place. These men, by their words and actions, give incidental but valuable testimony to the truth of the Gospel record; and the object of this paper is to exhibit the force and use of this kind of evidence in its proper light by collecting it from the various narratives of the Passion in which it appears.

It will be convenient to consider the evidence in three divisions: I. The Testimony of Pilate. II. The Testimony of the Jewish Priests and People. III. The Testimony of the Roman Soldiers.

I. The Testimony of Pilate. (a) *The title on the Cross.* Whatever be the reason for the discrepancies in the versions given by the different Evangelists of the title on the cross, there can be no reasonable doubt that there was a title, and that it contained the words "Jesus the King of the Jews," and that this title was not only placed on the cross but expressly defended by Pilate and deprecated by the Jewish chief priests and elders. Indeed it is perhaps the latter circumstance that has caused the Evangelists to record the title, and has given importance to it. For Pilate, indeed, it was a title of

mockery and something more. It was the crowning insult of that sad morning's scornful cruelty, to which the conception of mock sovereignty had given all its point. So Pilate wrote that title partly to please his soldiers, and to complete his cruel jest ; partly, too, to vex the Jews, and to fling back upon them in derision that name which they had for their own purposes used as a lever to enforce the condemnation of Jesus—" If thou let this man go,—who had forbidden to give tribute unto Cæsar, saying He Himself is Christ, a King—thou art not Cæsar's friend." But the word " King " impressed Pilate. He saw in it something more than a clever device to compromise him with the Roman Emperor. In all serious earnestness he asked Jesus, " Art Thou a King then ? " With these mixed motives, then, Pilate wrote the title, and once written, persisted in retaining it over the cross of Jesus. In so doing he bore unconscious testimony to the kingship of Christ.

But it was not only in the soldiers' mockery that the thought of the kingship of Christ was prominent. It gave the key-note to Passiontide, from the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy (ch. xiv. 4) on Palm Sunday to the admission of Christ Himself before Pilate: " Thou sayest it." As divine King of Israel Jesus cleansed His Father's house from pollution ; as King He triumphs over Pharisee and Sadducee in argument, and passes judgment on their works and influence, and as King He foretells His final victory on the judgment day. Lastly, even if we cannot accept the ancient traditional reading of Psalm xcvi. 10, *regnabit a ligno*, it is true that as King He reigned from the cross, and Pilate's word of scorn becomes a testimony to truth in history and a wonderful summing up of the lessons of Passiontide.

Something may be said about the precise term " King of the Jews." It is not an Old Testament expression, and in the New Testament it is found only in connexion with the Nativity and in connexion with the Passion of Jesus Christ.

The Magi's inquiry was, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" (Matt. ii. 2). In the scenes of the Passion the phrase is used by the soldiers and by Pilate, but not by the chief priests and scribes, who taunt Him with being the King of Israel (Luke xxiii. 37), which is indeed a Messianic title, as we see from Nathanael's address to Jesus, "Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel" (John i. 49).

To the Oriental Magi and the Romans, however, the title "King of the Jews" would connect itself with the vague Messianic expectation, which had become prevalent in the East. For Herod it is equivalent to the predicted Christ, for as soon as he hears that inquiry is being made for the "King of the Jews" he puts the question to the Sanhedrin where the Christ should be born.¹

The title on the cross, then, was distinctly Messianic both to Jew and Gentile, and as such is a valuable testimony to a claim which Christ Himself made before both tribunals.

(b) *The assertion of the innocence of Christ.* But Pilate's witness did not end here. He also bore remarkable testimony to the sinlessness of Christ. When Jesus was brought before His judgment-seat, it was the interest of Pilate to please the Jews and find their prisoner guilty. We may well believe that he listened with keen anxiety to detect some point of technical guilt, on which, consistently

¹ See Schürer, i. 1-292, Eng. Trans. Aristobulus (B.C. 105-104) was the first of the Maccabean family to assume the style of King (Joseph. *Antiq.* xiii. 11, 1, and *Wars of the Jews*, i. 3, 1), and even he did not use the designation on his coins. The nearest approach to the title previous to Aristobulus is that of Simon, the high priest, the governor and leader of the Jews (*στρατηγός και ἡγούμενος Ἰουδαίων*, 1 Maccabees xiii. 42), of whom there is a striking eulogy in Ecclesiasticus, ch. 1. There can be little doubt that in our Lord's day the vision of a restored Kingdom of Israel (Acts i. 6) with many of the Jews took shape and colour from the Maccabean ascendancy. It is a mark of accuracy in the synoptic Gospels that the title "King of the Jews" is always put in the mouths of Gentiles. It is the chief priests who say: "Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross" (Mark xv. 32); but the soldiers mocked Him, saying, "If Thou be the King of the Jews, save Thyself" (Luke xxiii. 37). The title was fatal to Jesus now, being used to force Pilate to condemn: as it would have been fatal to Him in His childhood if the will of Herod had prevailed.

with his Roman sense of justice, he could bring himself to convict and sentence the innocent man before him. If so, the endeavour was in vain. The admission was forced from his unwilling lips: "I find no fault in Him." It was as when Jesus Himself appealed to the Jews: "Which of you convicteth Me of sin?" The only reply was a wild and frivolous charge which confuted itself (John viii. 46).

(c) *The deference of Pilate to Christ.* But perhaps the most interesting confirmation of the Gospel narrative will be found in the attitude of the Roman Procurator towards the lowly Galilean peasant who stood before him to be judged.

It would have seemed inconceivable to Pilate himself, or the officers of his court, or even to the Jews, that a prisoner so mean and so unsuccessful could have the slightest influence on the highly placed Roman official, to whom the question of the life or death of the Jewish prisoner must have been of small account. And yet, as the questioning went on, Pilate felt himself first interested, and then awed. He asked the question, "Art Thou a King then?" in all sincerity. And soon; possibly to his surprise, he found himself in the position of a disciple of Christ, asking, not scoffingly, but in earnest: What is truth? Pilate had come under the wonderful influence of Christ and felt His ascendancy.

II. The Testimony of the Jewish Priests and people.

(1) The most noteworthy, both from the person and position of him who uttered it, was the word of the high priest, Caiaphas. St. John alone has recorded it. It dwelt in his mind, and long years afterwards he recalled it as a divinely inspired, though quite unconscious utterance of one who had almost a prophetic right to speak. "It is expedient," he said, "that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (John xi. 49, 50. See Westcott, *ad loc.*).

The intention of the unscrupulous judge was, of course,

that Jesus should be slain, innocent and holy though He was, in order to end for ever His dangerous popularity. And yet how deeply true that word was! How impressively was it fulfilled! No short formula could express more clearly the truth about the Atonement, and the sacrifice of the death of Christ.

(2) St. Matthew and St. Mark distinguish between the mockery of the passers by and the mockery of the chief priests, scribes and elders. St. Luke does not record the first, which would not be fully intelligible to his Gentile readers, but adds the mockery of the soldiers, omitted by the other Evangelists.

The report of St. Matthew is as follows:—"And they that passed by railed on Him, wagging their heads, and saying: Thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days, save Thyself: if Thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross. In like manner also the chief priests, mocking Him with the scribes and elders, said: He saved others; Himself He cannot save. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe on Him. He trusted on God; let Him deliver Him now, if He desireth Him: for He said, I am the Son of God" (ch. xxvii. 39-43).

This passage contains the testimony by the enemies of Jesus in regard to: (a) The prediction of the Resurrection; (b) The Godhead of Christ and the divine birth; (c) Salvation in Christ; (d) His self-sacrifice.

The enemies of Christ, gathered round the cross in mingled hate and triumph, eagerly produce the once dreaded prediction and the high asserted claim of this leader of a lost and ruined cause. In so doing they place on record in broad lines precisely those parts of the teaching of Jesus, and those notes of His mission, which had become popularly known.

(a) *The Prediction of the Resurrection.* Though the

saying about the destruction and the rebuilding of the temple is cited in perverted fashion, it is valuable evidence of the authenticity of the prediction, and of the impression which it made on the people. The Evangelist St. John has explained the words as relating to the Resurrection of Jesus; so that, at the moment when they were cited in mockery, the temple of the body of Christ was being destroyed on the cross in order that in three days it might be raised again.

In another sense also those words were on the eve of fulfilment through the actual destruction of the material temple and all that it implied, and in the rebuilding of it in the purer form of religious life and worship to be moulded and inspired by the divine Sufferer on the foundation of the sacrifice of the death on the cross.

(b) *The Godhead of Christ.* Both priests and people agree in bearing witness by their words to the all-important fact that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God in the highest sense. This is an admission which the enemies of Christ would often refuse to make in these days. It is therefore a note of much importance. These open adversaries who stood before the cross thought they saw the refutation of that high claim visibly made in the dying Victim; but in that dark hour the Christ was "verily a God who hid Himself" (Isa. xlv. 15).¹

(c) *Salvation in Christ Jesus.* There is a special interest in that other taunt, "He saved others." Hollow, insincere and contemptuous though the words are, they enshrine a truth very dear to Christian thought. Perhaps they were intended to bear a close relation to the name of Jesus—the Lord Saviour. To others He was a Jesus, a Lord Saviour; He cannot be a Saviour to Himself. In any case the

¹ It is worthy of note also that both priests and people tauntingly demand a test of divine powers almost in the words of Satan in the Temptation. Compare, "If Thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. xxvii. 40) with "If Thou art the Son of God, cast Thyself down" (Matt. iv. 6).

truth is uttered. The claim of Jesus Christ to be a Saviour is affirmed by those who thought Him impotent to save.

(d) *The self-sacrifice of Christ.* "Himself He cannot save." So Jesus would have said Himself. In a true sense He could not, and He would not save that life which He came to offer on the Cross for our sins. Himself He cannot save; for as He Himself taught, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it."

III. The testimony of the Roman soldiery. (a) *The Roman centurion.* It has often been noted that the centurions named in the Bible are distinguished for the integrity and excellence of their character. This is not to be wondered at, for as the Roman centurion was not chosen so much for impetuous courage as for judgment, firmness and presence of mind, there were doubtless many noble and thoughtful characters among them. (Comp. Polyb. Hist. vi. 24-9: Βούλονται δ' εἶναι τοὺς ταξίαρχους οὐχ οὕτω θρασεῖς καὶ φιλοκινδύνους ὡς ἡγεμονικοὺς καὶ στασίμους καὶ βαθεῖς μᾶλλον ταῖς ψυχαῖς κ.τ.λ.)

In this instance the wonderful scene of which he was witness made a deep impression on the centurion's mind. According to the first two Synoptists the words in which his thought found utterance were: "Truly this was the Son of God"; according to St. Luke: "Certainly this was a righteous man." It is possible that both utterances were made; it is also possible that St. Luke interpreted the expression for his Gentile readers. But the interest of the word is that it was probably suggested by the taunts of the chief priests, and that what the centurion had heard and seen in that eventful watch compelled him to turn the word of mockery into a confession of the truth. It was another instance of the effect of that wondrous personality working on a heart prepared for faith.

(b) *The guard at the Sepulchre.* The proceedings of the

soldiers of the guard are narrated with a minuteness which seems to imply that one or more of them became personally known to the disciples of Christ. The most interesting part of their evidence is concerned with what they witnessed at the sepulchre. It is recorded by St Matthew xxviii. 4 and 11. From these passages it appears that the guard saw the angel of the Lord descend and roll back the stone from the entrance to the sepulchre, and they did shake (*ἐσεισθησαν*) and became as dead men. The two Marys were also at the sepulchre, experienced the earthquake, and saw the angel, who consoled them with the tidings that the Lord had risen. As the women were returning some of the watch entered the city and announced to the chief priest all that had taken place.

It thus appears that these soldiers were the first to bring the news of the Resurrection to the Jewish priesthood. They became unconsciously the first messengers of good tidings to Sion. But it is clear that we have not the whole of their evidence. Part of it is for ever inaccessible. That they had assured themselves of the disappearance of the body of Jesus is proved by the action of the chief priests. But we may be certain that the risen Lord did not show Himself either to these or, at that moment, to the women.

The action of the priests is striking, and characteristic of themselves, and of the times in which they lived. The precautions taken beforehand to guard the sepulchre indicate a knowledge of the prediction of the Resurrection, and a fear of its fulfilment. The enormous bribe, which would be necessary to commit the guard to a statement which would be fatal to them, unless supplemented by a further enormous bribe¹ to secure their immunity from

¹ The confidence with which the chief priests calculated on bribing Pilate throws light on the vicious administration of Roman provincial government. It was a confidence justified by many precedents. The trial of Verres Prætor of Sicily gives ample illustration of this. See Cic. in Verrem, i. 40 foll. In a letter of Agrippa I. cited by Philo the "corruptibility" of Pilate is spoken of.

punishment, is a measure of the importance they attached to the soldiers' message. The absolute incredibility of their story was probably one of the causes which facilitated the Apostles' witness to the Resurrection on the Day of Pentecost and afterwards.

Although the testimony thus cited does not prove the truth of the Resurrection, or the divine nature of the Christ, it does prove that the prediction of the Resurrection was widely known in Jerusalem; and that the knowledge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God was not confined to the narrow circle of the disciples, but had spread both among the people and the chief priests and elders. It is also valuable as proving the complete inability of the enemies of Jesus to formulate any genuine charge against Him. Like Pilate they too could find no fault in Him.

Further, the attitude of so cruel and unscrupulous a judge as Pilate towards Jesus, and the conviction of the stern Roman centurion that he had been witnessing the death of a just and innocent man, or even the Son of God, as the priests had called Him in cruel mockery, proved as clearly as the attestation of a disciple how commanding and impressive were the presence and personality of Jesus Christ.

Still more valuable is this unwilling testimony of the enemies of Christ for the encouragement which it gives to the Church in the darkest hour for hope and final victory, though at the moment every external sign may point to failure and defeat. For never did cause seem more irretrievably lost, or hopes more fatally crushed, than when the Son of God hung upon the cross, exposed to cruel taunts and mockery, and deserted by His nearest friends; and yet, even then, the victory was being won and the hopes assured.

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For the general rapacity of provincial governors see Sueton. Tiberius, 23. Tac. Annal. i. 8, iv. 6.