

APPENDIX 2 – FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

(born AD 37/38, Jerusalem — died AD 100, Rome)

Born Joseph Ben Matthias, Josephus was a Jewish priest and scholar, most famous for writing the definitive account of the Jewish revolt against Rome (AD 66-70) as well as earlier Jewish history. His major works were *History of the Jewish War*, *the Antiquities of the Jews* and *Against Apion*.

Josephus was by his own account, born into an aristocratic, priestly family in Jerusalem. In his early twenties he became a Pharisee — an intensely religious Jew adhering to a strict (though in many ways non-literal) observance of the Torah. Politically the Pharisees had little sympathy for the freedom-fighting Zealots and instead were content to submit to Rome — providing they could maintain their religious independence.

In his mid thirties Josephus travelled to Rome and was greatly impressed by its culture, sophistication and military might. He returned to Jerusalem on the eve of the general rebellion against Rome which began in AD 66. A rebel government was established in Jerusalem and Josephus, in common with the Pharisees, counselled compromise, but was drawn reluctantly into the rebellion. Josephus, in spite of his conciliatory stance, was appointed military commander of Galilee. He fortified the towns of the north in anticipation of the Roman counter-offensive.

The Romans, under the command of the future emperor Vespasian, entered Galilee in AD 67 and speedily defeated the Northern Jewish resistance. Josephus held the fortress at Jotapata for 47 days, but after the fall of the city he fled and, after spending a short period ‘on the run’, surrendered to the Romans. Led in chains before Vespasian, Josephus foretold that Vespasian would soon become emperor. This favourable prediction saved his life and for two years he remained a prisoner of the Roman army. In AD 69 Vespasian indeed became emperor and Josephus was given his freedom.

Josephus then became loyal to Rome, adopting the name Flavius (Vespasian’s family name) and accompanying Vespasian’s son (the future emperor Titus) to the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. Josephus attempted to act as a mediator between Rome and the

rebels, but, hated by the Jews for his treasonable switch in loyalties and considered untrustworthy to Rome as a Jew, he accomplished little. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, Josephus went to live in Rome, where he devoted the remainder of his life to being a sort of ambassador of Judaism under imperial patronage. This was partly (it seems) to redeem his reputation before the Jews as an unforgiven traitor, and partly because he wanted to represent the puzzling Jews to their Roman overlord—helping them as they continued to govern Galilee and Judea.

Josephus' works provide independent corroborative evidence of the early church. We gain most of our detailed knowledge of the life of Herod "the Great" from *The Antiquities of the Jews* (commonly shortened to 'Antiquities'), a work completed in AD 93, which traces the history of the Hebrews from the Creation to the period immediately preceding the Jewish revolt. Because of his intimate first-hand knowledge of the Jewish rebellion he was able to give a detailed account of that troubled time in *History of The Jewish War*, which was an official Roman history completed in AD 79, towards the end of Vespasian's reign.

From the viewpoint of the biblical account of Christ's birth, the immediate interest in Josephus' works are in *Antiquities* "Books" 15 and 16 which contain a long account of the awful reign of Herod, and Book 17 where we learn that Archelaus was as bad as his father and was later banished to Vienna on account of his crimes by Rome. There is a fascinating summary of father and son in *Antiquities* 17.11.2—which underscores the detail given by the Gospel according to Matthew in Chapter 2 where we read of the treachery of Herod with the Magi and Joseph's concern on hearing that Archelaus had succeeded his father (Matt 2:22).

Other points of interest in Josephus, which corroborate the detail in the New Testament, are the mention of the Lord Jesus (18.3.3), of John the Baptist (18.5.2), and of James the brother of Jesus (20.9.1). The mention of Jesus is the most interesting in many respects and (of course) has led to controversy: it has been claimed that this reference may have been a later addition, or that it was edited by a later Christian copyist. The reference to Christ

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in somewhat glowing terms may however be some form of scorn or sarcasm, or even had some political undertone we cannot now recognise —Josephus was, after all, a very complex character. And it is just possible that, as a Jewish apostate, Josephus indeed recognised Jesus as the Messiah, even if he failed to understand the importance of that recognition.