

Chapter Eleven

THE DESCRIPTION OF CHRIST

A document known as "The Description of Christ" has of late reappeared in religious papers and books in various parts of the United States. In recent years I have received copies of it from all parts of the country. In a well-known berry ranch near Los Angeles the document is on display, together with a portrait of Christ.

Because it is presented as an ancient and presumably authentic document, it is worth while to state the facts about it.

The "Description" probably originated in Italy in the thirteenth century. In its earliest form it appeared as a simple statement beginning: "It is read in the annals books of the Romans that our Lord Jesus Christ, who was called by the Gentiles the prophet of truth, was of stature middling tall, and comely . . ." It was probably based on the books of instructions of the Greek miniature painters who illustrated medieval manuscripts. These instructions, which still exist, contain descriptions of the personal appearance of all the leading figures in the New Testament, as well as the heroes of Troy.

In a number of medieval manuscripts, the description ap-

pears in the longer form of a letter from Publius Lentulus, Governor of Judea, to the Roman Senate.¹

This is the version given by Montague R. James in his *Apocryphal New Testament* (1924), but somewhat modernized:

A certain Lentulus, a Roman, being an official for the Romans in the province of Judea in the time of Tiberius Caesar, upon seeing Christ, and noting his wonderful works, his preaching, his endless miracles, and other amazing things about him, wrote thus to the Roman Senate:

There has appeared in these times, and still is, a man of great power named Jesus Christ, who is called by the Gentiles the prophet of truth, whom his disciples call the Son of God: raising the dead and healing diseases, a man in stature middling tall, and comely, having a reverend countenance, which they that look upon may love and fear; having hair of the hue of an unripe hazel-nut and smooth almost down to his ears, but from the ears in curling locks somewhat darker and more shining, waving over his shoulders; having a parting at the middle of the head according to the fashion of the Nazareans; a brow smooth and very calm, with a face without wrinkle or any blemish, which a moderate color makes beautiful; with the nose and mouth no fault at all can be found; having a full beard of the color of his hair, not long, but a little forked at the chin; having an expression simple and mature, the eyes grey, glancing, and clear; in rebuke terrible, in admonition kind and lovable, cheerful yet keeping gravity; sometimes he has wept, but never laughed; in stature of body tall and straight, with hands and arms fair to look upon; in talk grave, reserved and modest (so that he was rightly called by the prophet) fairer than the children of men.

In the modern forms of the text circulating in America, the "Letter of Lentulus" is variously introduced. One, published in Boston in 1905 (*Heart Throbs*, 469), begins:

Description of Christ. The following epistle is said to have been taken by Napoleon from the records of Rome when he deprived that

¹ Von Dobschütz in his *Christusbilder* (p. 308**) gives a list of these manuscripts, to which we may add Latin MS 22 in the library of the University of Chicago, written in 1466-1469.

city of so many valuable manuscripts. It was written at the time and on the spot where Jesus commenced his ministry, by Publius Lentulus, Governor of Judea, to the Senate of Rome, Caesar, emperor. It was the custom in those days for the governor to write home any event that transpired while he held his office. "Conscript Fathers: In these our days appeared a man named Jesus Christ who is yet living among us . . ."

Even more picturesque is the preface in a copy sent me from Utah, published in 1936:

Now this letter which follows [was] taken from a carving of Smaragd given by command of Emperor Tiberius from the government vaults of Constantinople through the Emperor of Turkey to Pope Innocent VIII to redeem him (Emperor Tiberius) who at that time was a prisoner of the Christian. The following extract has been translated by historians from the Latin script of the period.

"Publius Lentulus, President of Judea, wrote the following epistle to the Roman Senate concerning the Savior: 'Conscript Fathers. There has appeared in these our days a man of great virtue . . .'"

Smaragd is a precious green stone; the Greek word usually means emerald. Innocent VIII, pope from 1484 to 1492, was said to have received, from the Sultan Bayezid II, the Holy Lance and a large annual payment for keeping Bayezid's brother Jem, a rival for the throne, a close prisoner in the Vatican.

The "Description" was also published in a much altered form, together with the spurious "Death Warrant of Jesus" (to be discussed in the next chapter) as part of *The Crucifixion of Jesus, by an Eye-Witness* (Chicago: Indo-American Book Company, 6th edition, 1915).

In Latin manuscripts the text begins, "Lentulus habens officium in partibus Iudeae herodis ad senatores romanos hanc epistolam deferre iussit."

Of course no such governor of Palestine as Publius Lentu-

lus is known to history. The list of Roman governors of Palestine is well established:

Coponius (A.D. 6-9?)	Cuspius Fadus (44-?)
Marcus Ambivius (9-12?)	Tiberius Alexander (?-48)
Annius Rufus (12-15?)	Ventidius Cumanus (48-52)
Valerius Gratus (15-26)	Antonius Felix (52-58)
Pontius Pilate (26-36)	Porcius Festus (58-62)
Marcellus (36-37)	Albinus (62-64)
Marullus (37-41)	Florus (64-66)
(Herod Agrippa I, king, 41-44)	(The Jewish War, A.D. 66-70)

The governor in the time of Jesus' ministry was of course Pontius Pilate.

A Publius Cornelius Lentulus, father and son, were known to Cicero, in the middle of the first century before Christ, and at least one Lucius Lentulus once held the office of consul in Rome.

The "Letter of Lentulus" is evidently a fiction, designed to give currency to the description contained in the painters' manuals about the personal appearance of Jesus. The varying accounts of its provenance are simply devices to explain its survival from antiquity until today. It is probably as old as the thirteenth century; but it was unknown to Christian antiquity, and has no claims to serious attention as throwing any light upon the personal appearance of Jesus.

