

# THE SHAMES OF CHRISTENDOM

by

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### GERMANY

In the early days of the German Empire, under rulers like Charlemagne, the lot of the Jews was by no means unendurable. They even enjoyed certain privileges denied to their Christian neighbors, such as exemption from military service. It followed that while Gentiles were engaged on military campaigns, the Jews, like the war profiteers of the Great War in England, had abundant opportunity to improve their fortunes and “dig themselves in” in commerce. They became especially prosperous as money-lenders. The wealth they acquired was by no means an unadulterated blessing. It aroused the cupidity of their neighbours, and when the Bishops, at this period their uncompromising enemies, sought to curtail their rights and impose restrictions, they found it an easy matter to inflame the population against them.

The superstition, ignorance and credulity of the age offered an open channel for the waters of hatred. No story of Jewish evil-doing and devilry was too great for the consumption of credulity. In Germany, as elsewhere, the stories of the blood-ritual during Holy Week when Jews were supposed to offer Christian children in sacrifice gained credence, and carried their toll of bloody violence, robbery and destruction into the Jewish quarters.

The periods of the Crusades were especially fruitful in suffering for the Jews of Germany, when the cry of Hep! Hep! rang through the Rhineland towns, bearing mutilation and massacre. But this is narrated elsewhere in the story of the Crusades.

There can be little doubt that the stories of well-poisoning, ritual sacrifice, and even the creation of plague, pestilence and earthquake weighed against the Jews. These tales were often rather the consequence than the cause of deeds of violence wrought against them. The perpetration of the foul and devilish outrages against this unhappy people was animated by sudden, violent and unreasoning outbursts of mob fury, and in their moments of reflection, realizing the appalling horrors of which they had been guilty, the murderers sought solace for their accusing consciences by persuading themselves that they were the instruments of Divine justice upon an evil race. The Devil is always ready to supply excuses to his agents. Many even of the Inquisitors were doubtless sincere and kindly men apart from what they conceived to be the divinely appointed duties of their office.

In the middle of the fourteenth century, again, the Black Death produced an attack against the Jews. The flames of red havoc and cruelty spread through German Jewry.

There is no doubt that, in spite of the appalling conditions under which the Jews lived, they enjoyed comparative immunity from this terrible scourge. It may be that by nature they were not susceptible, or that their peculiar methods of slaughter, preparation and choice of food fortified them against it. The fact remains that they did not suffer as much as their Gentile neighbours, and so were accused of being the originators of it by some Devil magic.

One great name in Germany, that of the humanist Johann Reuchlin, rises above the mire of bigotry and fanaticism in the sixteenth century. When called upon in 1510 to decide whether the Talmud should be burned, he gave it as his opinion that it should be preserved, though he condemned other Jewish books which contained blasphemies against Christ. His name recalls that of John Pfefferkorn, a baptized Jew held in odium by the Jews for his fierce opposition to Reuchlin, and the hatred with which he sought their persecution.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century also produced its burden of suffering. Christian zeal was always fatal to the Jews. Roman Christianity wreaked a terrible vengeance upon them. Protestant zeal was no less bitter, though perhaps less methodical and resolute in its persecution.

So long as Protestantism was itself repressed and persecuted, it made, to some extent, common cause with the Jews, but when it was in the ascendant it turned upon its old fellow-sufferers. Protestant and Jew suffered in common during the Hussite persecutions. It may have been that Protestants expected that the fact of the community of suffering would have made the Jews amenable to conversion, and that their disappointment in this direction enraged them.

It may have been, on the other hand, that no real sympathy ever existed. Below the surface soil of fellow-suffering there was the bedrock of that worst of all enmities, religious passion. As religion is the most deeply rooted instinct of humanity, so the emotions that spring from it are the most violent, passionate and persistent. The general attitude is well illustrated in Martin Luther. It is hardly conceivable that the utterances of his earlier years, in 1523, concerning the Jews proceeded from the same man as those of his later life. It almost looks as if some enemy desirous of vilifying his memory had done this.

“Those fools, the Papists, Bishops, sophist monks, have formerly so dealt with the Jews that every good Christian would rather have been a Jew. And if I had been a Jew and seen such stupidity and such blockheads reign in the Christian Church, I would rather be a pig than a Christian. They have treated the Jews as if they were dogs, not men, and as if they were fit for nothing but to be reviled; whereas they are the blood relations of our Lord; therefore if we respect flesh and blood, the Jews belong to Christ more than we do” (*The Jew and Christianity*, p. 52, H. Danby, D.D., Sheldon Press).

Again he says:

“If we would help them, then we must exercise, not the law of the Pope, but that of Christian love. We must receive them kindly and allow them to compete with us in earning a livelihood, so that they may have an opportunity to witness Christian life and doctrine; and if some remain obstinate, what of it? Not every one of us is a good Christian.”

Compare them with the terrific and unchristian onslaught eighteen years later.

“Burn their synagogues and schools; what will not burn, bury with earth, that neither stone nor rubbish remain. In like manner break into and destroy their homes. Take away their prayer-books and Talmuds, in which is nothing but godlessness, lies, cursing and swearing. Forbid their Rabbis to teach on pain of life and limb.”

And further: “If I had power over them I would assemble their most prominent men and demand that they prove that we Christians do not worship God, under penalty of having their tongues torn out through the back of their necks” (ibid).

This pitiable spectacle of a great man who had suffered so grievously himself for religious freedom giving way to such rancorous hatred and vindictiveness is hard to explain. It is better to leave the explanation unattempted, and to take heed lest we ourselves, by forgetting that “**God is love,**” allow any room in our hearts for bitterness against those who differ from us, even to the length of offering us violence in word or deed. The prayer of Christ must often be on our lips for those who wound us. “**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**” and not on our lips only, but in hearts so full of Christ that there is no room for resentment. The same disservice that Jerome had done to Roman Catholic Christianity by his vindictiveness towards the Jews, Luther did to the Reformed Church.

The history of the Jewish people in Germany throughout the seventeenth century is one of vicissitudes. They were alternately expelled from and tolerated in various states, but their condition as a whole was that of continued repression and suffering. Denied participation in the civil and political life around them, they were driven in more and more upon themselves. In Germany was born Yiddish. Hebrew words and forms of speech mingled themselves more frequently with German, and there grew up this hybrid jargon which has become the almost universal medium of the Ashkenazim Jew.

To-day Germany, learning nothing from history, has repeated the worst crimes of the dark ages. The Nazi German has been indiscriminating and stupid in his attitude towards the Jews. Europe as a whole would probably have sympathized in strong and reasonable action against Jews of a revolutionary and vicious type—not because they were Jews, but because they were revolutionaries and degenerates, but the branding of the whole race with the crimes of a few and the absurdity of racial distinctions based upon theories unsupported by any anthropological facts, have alienated the sympathy of all thoughtful and humane people from Gentile Germany. Happily there is abundant evidence that this attitude does not represent the true spirit of Germany. The noble quality of the German people, crushed for the moment by revolutionary forces, at times asserts itself as in the voice of the heroic Confessional Churches.

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