

THE SHAMES OF CHRISTENDOM

by

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CHAPTER SIX

ENGLAND

The arrival of the Jews in England is hidden in the mists of antiquity. It is fairly certain that they were here in Roman times, though no record exists except that to be derived from some antiquarian relics. The evidence of their presence as early as the eighth century is ample and indubitable.

A lecture by Mr. Ernest Atkinson of the Public Record Office gives some very interesting historical references to the Jews about this time (Published privately 1912 by the Jewish Mission of the Presbyterian Church of England).

Numbers of Jews “came over with William the Conqueror” and supplied the King with the sinews of war and government in return for his patronage and protection. Succeeding Kings used them in the same way, and granted them similar privileges in return, so that under the early monarchs of England they enjoyed considerable favor and immunity from persecution.

Towards the end of the twelfth century, as they increased in power and prosperity and seemed in the minds of their fellow-citizens to menace the general well-being, their privileges were diminished. They were denied the right to carry arms, and were compelled to wear a distinctive badge. Envy of their opulence and magnificence imposed upon them unpleasant restrictions.

The law of the pack and the herd that dislikes anything abnormal in the individual operates in communities in inverse ratio to the degree of culture and civilization. The diseased, enfeebled or abnormal animal is set upon by the pack or the herd, and driven into isolation or destroyed. The Jew as an alien—alien psychologically, spiritually, socially and physically—has always been an abomination to the Egyptians. His ways are not our ways, so we dislike him.

Moreover, the Jew himself is by habit and nature exclusive. He feels a superiority to the rest of mankind, a superiority which, while it is fully justified in many respects, is by no means obvious to the world.

In these early days, then, the Jew was driven into an isolation which he himself to a large extent fostered. He was confined to certain areas. All over the world these have become known as “Ghettos.” from the term first used amongst the Italians. So the ancient prophecy was and is being fulfilled, “**This people shall dwell alone**” (Numbers 23:9).

The physical walls of the Ghetto have fallen, but there remain walls as real and effectual in the psychological barriers which exist as the vestigial relics of those earlier communities in which the Jews were herded together under the most appalling conditions. They have left their scars, intellectual, moral and temperamental, and generations of assimilation can alone efface them.

The immediate result was to make and keep the Jew a marked man easily accessible for purposes of robbery or outrage. England possesses one unenviable distinction in Jewish persecution.

The blood ritual accusation to which reference has already been made originated in England, and produced the most abominable atrocities. The first instance occurred at Norwich.

The story is that a child named William, while on his way to enter service in the household of the Archdeacon, was kidnapped by the Jews. He was missing for six days, then his body was found by his relatives in a wood. It was hanging from a tree and, it was alleged, bore the “stigmata”—the five wounds of Christ—the head, too, was shaven. The child was not quite dead, but he appeared to be in such a hopeless condition that the inhuman relatives interred him. The responsibility was never brought home to the Jews.

As the boy was missing from March 21st to 26th, and Good Friday occurred on the 25th, it was declared that he had been put to death by the Jews on that day. This was in the year 1144. In this, as in all other cases of a similar accusation, the evidence was so conflicting and uncertain that nothing came of it—nothing, at least, judicially and legally. The passions and prejudices of the mob were inflamed, and bore fruit in terrible suffering for the Jews. The child was canonized as St. William of Norwich, and his fame spread abroad, and the pilgrimages which followed proved a considerable source of revenue to the Cathedral.

The Coronation of Richard I in September 1189 is associated with one of the most shameful massacres of Jews that have disgraced Christianity.

The Crusading enthusiasm was at its height., Richard himself was about to start on the Third Crusade. Christian zeal was in a highly inflammable condition, and the sight of the Jews crowding round the Abbey to witness the coronation was the match that caused the conflagration.

The senseless cry was raised that these harmless people, whose loyalty had led them to the scene, were there to assassinate the King. A wild scene of riot and tumult followed. The unfortunate Jews on the spot were massacred; the flames of outrage spread throughout London and thence to all parts of the country. The slaughter of the Jews and the plunder of their homes and property became general throughout the kingdom.

The most terrible and tragic events of the time took place at York. Here the rabble, led by a Premonstratensian Canon, laid siege to the Citadel, where a number of the Jews had taken refuge. Those outside had already been butchered without respect to age or sex. Morning by morning the furious Canon came, in the robes in which he had just celebrated Holy Communion, and stood outside the castle crying, “Destroy the enemies of Christ!”

He fell at last a victim to his own fanaticism, a huge stone hurled from the walls crushing him to death. The Jews assailed by hunger and realizing the hopelessness of their position, resolved upon a heroic death. The men first set fire to the castle, slew their wives and children, and then cast lots for the slaughter of each other. A few, less resolute than the others, withdrew from the bond, but the rest perished, the last to fall being the Rabbi, who slew himself.

Those who remained were promised life if they opened the gates of the Citadel, but the Christian mob did not think it necessary to keep faith with these unbelievers, and, rushing in, slaughtered the miserable wretches who remained.

Similar deeds were enacted at Colchester, Stamford, Lynn Regis, Norwich, Lincoln and other towns with Jewish populations.

The King took measures to put an end to this holocaust, more probably from motives of profit than compassion. The Jews were always a source of revenue, which the King wished to retain for himself. A legal assignment of the Jew as the property of the Crown was made. A register of themselves and their property was compiled for this purpose, and so they enjoyed royal protection.

John, the meanest Monarch who ever sat upon the English throne, took full advantage of this, and the sufferings of individual Jews who tried to withstand or evade his rapacity were terrible. They were subjected to the most atrocious tortures to make them disgorge their wealth. Ten teeth were dragged one by one from the jaws of an unhappy merchant in Bristol, until at last he consented to part with sixty thousand marks. On the other hand, the Jews as a whole were protected by the King for the same reason that the farmer looks after his cows.

King after King plundered the miserable people; the nobles followed suit wherever they could with impunity. Even great and enlightened Churchmen like Stephen Langton, and statesmen like Simon de Montfort, displayed towards the Jews the most fanatical and ignorant bigotry by the imposition of degrading restrictions and prohibitions and the denial to them of the common rights of humanity.

The whole story of Jewish life in England at the time is one melancholy and monotonous tale of extortion after extortion, cruelty, outrage and insult.

Chaucer's Prioress's Tale immortalizes one sad incident of this awful period. Here we read of the alleged crucifixion of a little boy, eight years of age, Hugh of Lincoln. It was said that the Jews kept the child for ten days and prepared him for sacrifice. He was then made the victim for the reenactment of all the circumstances of the Passion of Christ. The mutilated body was afterwards flung into a well, where it was found by the mother. The facts, of course, were never proved.

The story of the finding of the body was apparently true. No doubt the poor little fellow had wandered away and fallen into the well. As this happened in the summer of 1255, it could not be associated, like the death of William of Norwich, with the Passover, but it was sufficient to furnish material for the outburst of bigotry and hatred.

Terrible vengeance was taken upon the wretched people who were regarded as responsible. Eighteen of the wealthiest and most prominent Jews of Lincoln were hanged, and numbers of others were tortured and flung into dungeons. Meanwhile, as at Norwich, the Cathedral of Lincoln grew fat on the pious pilgrims thronging from all parts of England and the Continent to view the scene and listen to the stories of all kinds of miraculous happenings in connection with the little Saint.

Henry III, in his pecuniary embarrassment, sold the Jews of England to his brother Richard of Cornwall for five thousand marks. This meant that Richard had the right to extort from them, by whatever means he deemed best, as much money as he could.

The nature of the means employed may be judged from the case of the Bristol merchant, already mentioned. The full tale of Jewish wrong in England can never be told, but the culmination of their anguish was reached with the edict of expulsion which took place under Edward I. While the King himself was opposed to this, a Bull of Honorius IV, enumerating charges of all kinds of abominations, heresies and evil deeds against this "accursed and perfidious" race, had resulted in increased rancor amongst Churchmen, and finally pressure for their banishment, which the King deemed it unwise to resist.

Accordingly the edict went forth on July 18th, 1290, that all Jews must leave England before All Saints Day on pain of death.

The King did what he could to make their departure as easy and safe as possible. He took measures to save them from violence and robbery, but they were rendered useless in many cases by the rapacity and hatred of the very people appointed to carry them out.

Around the bare historical record, imagination may easily frame a picture of the inevitable suffering of sixteen thousand people, men, women and children, called upon to leave a country which had been the home of their fathers for some two hundred years. It would be a pitiable spectacle with all the numerous means of transport available to-day; but in those days, when roads could hardly be said to exist, and conveyances were of the most primitive description, the suffering was indescribable. Weary women plodded along the muddy roads with little ones carried in their arms and toddling by their sides, the men bearing whatever they could of their household treasures and personal possessions. Many perished miserably on the way, the scorn and contempt of Christian England.

Their sufferings did not end at the coast. The seas in the late autumn were stormy, and many of the vessels in which they shipped were wrecked in the Channel. Some escaped naked and destitute to France, only to find that an edict of banishment, at the instigation of the Pope, denied them entrance there. So their wanderings and sufferings began anew.

The fate of one party which embarked on a ship at Queensborough gives a picture of the unspeakable barbarity of the age. The shipmaster, shortly after setting sail, cast anchor in the shoal waters of the estuary of the Thames and invited the Jews as the tide went down to take exercise on the drying sands.

When they sought to regain the ship with the rising tide they were beaten off, and in their piteous appeals for mercy were reminded of Moses, who had crossed the Red Sea, and left to their fate. The captain and crew helped themselves to the possessions of the passengers they had murdered. It is not without some satisfaction that one reads that the criminals in this particular case were convicted and hanged.

From that time no Jew was legally allowed entry into England.

Oliver Cromwell endeavored to repeal the edict of banishment, but was unsuccessful. The Conference which he summoned in 1655 for that purpose was opposed to it, and Cromwell, realizing that a negative vote would result if the proposition were put, dismissed the assembly and himself gave permission to Jews to settle in this country.

It is not too much to say that to this wise and strong action may be attributed the growth of England's commercial ascendancy. Since that date the Jew, although never a persona grata, has not been persecuted in England.

With regard to other parts of the British Isles, the Jews enjoyed immunity from persecution in Ireland in the intolerant ages for the same reason that snakes escaped. There were none there. Neither has the Jew evinced a strong desire to live in Scotland.

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