THE SHAMES OF CHRISTENDOM

by

W. N. Carter, M.A.

CHAPTER NINE

FRANCE

Up to the middle of the sixth century the life of the Jew in France was tolerable.

He lived, on the whole, on terms of amity with his neighbours. Towards the end of that century the ruling powers of the Church felt this amity had gone too far, when Gentile manners became on occasion tinctured with a Jewish flavor. Christian clergy had even been known to sit at the same table with Jews! Eastertide was always considered a dangerous season. The noxious vapors of Judaism were then more prevalent than at other times. Accordingly, the Council of Macon, 581, forbade Jews to infect any Christian assembly with their presence for four days after Good Friday. Thence onward we find repressive measures increasing in weight and frequency.

The Jews nevertheless continued to thrive.

There were periods when Christian vigilance was relaxed and zeal for the Christian faith abated. During such seasons the Jew breathed with considerable freedom, and grew healthy and wealthy, if not always wise. He has always been too prone at such times to forget that the less conspicuous he makes himself the better, and the moment pressure is relaxed, his superiority-complex is resurgent with unfortunate consequences for himself.

Charlemagne in the ninth century was well disposed to the Jews. It is said that when he was unhorsed at the siege of Narbonne a Jew saved him at the cost of his own life, and that the favor this great King undoubtedly showed them is to be attributed to his gratitude. It may have been, on the other hand, that this clearheaded ruler was astute enough to realize the great value of the general ability of the Jews to the country, and was too wise to crush their enterprise. At least he employed them about his own person. Accordingly, the Jews grew in numbers and influence during his reign. His son, Louis le Debonnaire, continued his father's policy. Indeed, that Jew-hater, Agobard, Bishop of Lyons, accused the King of loving these "defiled and repudiated" people more than his Christian subjects.

From the tenth century onwards the clouds darken round the Jews of France. We read of frequent cases of murderous assault; of Jews, too, committing suicide rather than abjure their faith. Robert of Normandy is stated to have urged his subjects to kill all unbaptized Jews. The pious chivalry of the Crusaders poured a copious libation of Jewish blood into the waters of the Seine at Rouen. Here, as elsewhere, stories of ritual murder of Christian children by Jews arose probably as a pretext for Jew-baiting and massacre.

The young Philip Augustus, 1181, ordered the confiscation of all their possessions, and next year issued an edict of expulsion. Seventeen years later this edict was rescinded by the same King. He probably realized that it was better that the goose that laid the golden eggs should lay them in his farmyard rather than elsewhere. He reinstated them in commerce, banking and pawn-broking. The Jews became in effect the chattels of the King, and a great source of royal revenue.

This policy was continued by his son, Louis VIII.

Louis IX, who was so much more a monk than a King that he has become known to history as "Saint" Louis, reversed this policy to a large extent. His fanatical piety decreed that the Jews must be expelled, 1249. He forbade disputations with Jews except by scholars. This saintly King asserted that the only way in which the unlearned should maintain their faith against Jewish belief was to "defend it with the sword, of which he shall force as much into his body as he can make enter." Needless to say, the swordless Jew had no wish to argue on such terms with the Christian in shining armour, and the case for Judaism went by default.

In 1242 twenty-four cartloads of Jewish books were burnt in Paris.

Formal debates between Jewish and Christian scholars were arranged from time to time, much upon the plan, "Heads I win, tails you lose." The argument had no effect, beyond revealing the obstinacy with which the Jew preferred his own reasons to the Christian's.

They had, it is true, serious results which had no relation to the weight of evidence evoked on one side or the other. A debate in the reign of Philip the Bold produced an outburst in which about one thousand Jews lost their lives, if the accounts of Jewish chroniclers are to be relied upon.

The reign of his successor, Philip the Fair, was altogether an evil time for the Jews. The old tales of ritual murder were renewed, and involved much suffering for them. This monarch was rather capricious in his attitude to them, but his caprice was by no means unintelligible.

In 1306 he confiscated all their possessions and credits, and expelled them from the country. This edict was revoked nine years later by Louis X. This was not done without a certain financial consideration. The King's coffers benefited to the extent of over one hundred and twenty thousand livres. The conditions under which they lived were relatively favorable and easy.

Unfortunately this happy state of things suffered a rude upheaval when, in 1320, the "*Pastoreaux*" burst upon the scene.

These were robber hordes of peasants of Languedoc and Southern France, who overran the country with pillage and massacre. They made the Jews the principal victims of their assaults. The robbers were reinforced by the rabble of the towns in their attacks on Jews, many of whom were ruthlessly murdered in various places. As usual, these butchers fortified themselves by motives of piety and religious zeal. They were murderers for the love of Christ.

Another expulsion of Jews took place in 1322 under Charles IV, and another recall some fourteen years later under John the Good.

It was hoped that the riches of the Jews would help to pay for the ransom of the King. The Jews of this reign would find it rather hard to discover any reason for John's sobriquet. Charles V was kinder, but in his successor's days they suffered plunder, torture,, death and finally, in 1394, expulsion.

This closed the unhappy period of Jewish domicile in France in the Middle Ages.

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