

THE SHAMES OF CHRISTENDOM

by

W. N. Carter, M.A.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

ITALY

The writer lived once in close proximity to a large steel works. There was one enormous chimney, amongst many, which soared up three hundred and fifty feet into the skies, and thence poured out noxious yellow fumes, which were borne away upon the winds, to settle down upon people who lived further away.

So in Italy, where is situated the headquarters of the Church from which so much of the suffering of the Jews in other lands originated, the Jews lived in comparative prosperity until the fifteenth century. The Pontifical vapors of Papal Bulls passed over their heads and left them unscathed, except for one unhappy incident in the eleventh century, when some wretched Jews were murdered for causing an earthquake in Rome, and another in the middle of the thirteenth, when a fierce persecution took place at Naples.

Throughout the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and well on into the fifteenth, they enjoyed immunity from the horrors through which their brethren elsewhere were passing. Jewish scholars were held in high honour. Foremost amongst them was the famous Immanuel Ben Solomon, the friend of Dante.

It must not be assumed from this that their state was altogether happy.

They suffered numerous petty irritations and persecutions. Still, compared with their brethren in other lands, their lot was an enviable one, until the close of the fifteenth century brought the fierce enmity of Bernardino of Filtre and the savage assaults that resulted from his tirades. It may have been that the influx of poverty-stricken Jewish exiles from Spain and elsewhere had its effect in calling attention to them, but certainly from this period onwards they suffered more in Italy than they had previously.

Reference has already been made to the fate of the wretched Spanish fugitives who landed upon the mole at Genoa, and their reception by the inhuman monks! but this was merely an incident. The clouds had been gathering for some time, but the storm only burst when the Inquisition made its appearance in Italy in the sixteenth century.

It was at this time, too, that the word "Ghetto" originated. The Jews, as an alien people, had always a tendency to dwell together. This tendency was more or less weak, according to the kindliness or hostility of the people amongst whom they dwelt.

The spiritual and civil rulers in various places had found it wise to assign to them certain quarters where they might defend themselves against attack. In some places residence in these areas was made compulsory. We read of the “*Juderias*” of Spain and the “*Judenstadt*” in Germany, and now of the “Ghetto” in Italy. This latter term was destined to become the permanent designation of these Jewish centers.

It must be borne in mind that at the time Italy was not a national entity, but a conglomeration of independent states and cities, often at variance and mutually hostile, so that the attitude of Italy to the Jews was not uniform.

At different times they were expelled from various states. In 1523 Naples expelled them. A short time after they were driven out of Genoa. An edict of expulsion was issued in Venice in 1571, but rescinded two years later. Under Pope Paul IV the Jews of Rome were limited to trading in old clothes, their synagogues were burnt, and finally they were ordered to leave Rome. This order was never strongly enforced, but numbers of Jews, finding their lot unbearable, left the city. They were obliged to wear yellow badges, which marked them out for assault and insult, so that the Jew never left his “Ghetto” if he could avoid it. Urbino banished the Jews in 1558.

At Ancona they were imprisoned by the Inquisition, their possessions were confiscated and themselves racked or burnt.

The condition of the Jews under Pope Pius IV, who succeeded Paul IV, was somewhat alleviated. If Pius had followed his own inclinations it would have been better still, but he was greatly under the influence of the fanatical Jesuits. This short respite was ended with the succession of Pius V, who reinforced the old anti-Semitic Bulls which had fallen into desuetude. The Jews of Bologna, because of their wealth, were made the special mark of this despot’s rapacity and cruelty. He finally banished all Jews from the Papal States.

Under Gregory XIII their pitiable condition was even aggravated. They were hounded down, and every Gentile suspected of friendship with them was severely punished. The Jews were brought before the Inquisition, condemned to the death of torture or the stake, or to the living death of slavery in the galleys. Their property as a matter of course was confiscated. The Talmud and other Hebrew books were burnt in large numbers.

Pope Sixtus V, an astute and far-seeing ruler, was more generous. He protected the Jews from the cruelty of their enemies, granted them liberty of worship and allowed the printing of their sacred books. This alleviation was short-lived. The advent of Clement VII brought back many of the evil enactments of the previous Popes. He expelled them from most of the Papal States. They still remained in Rome, Ancona and Ferrara.

The seventeenth century was an evil time for the Jews of Italy. Pictures of the “Ghetto” at this period reveal a terrible squalor, in the midst of which the Jews fought a losing battle with sickness and death and misery. Poverty, filth, disease and hyper-fecundity produced a stunted and sickly population.

The conditions of the “Ghetto” precluded common decency or cleanliness, and at seasons when the Tiber overflowed its banks, the misery of the cellar dwellings of thousands of these wretched beings may be left to the imagination. Even as late as the reign of Pius VII at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Inquisition was reinstated against the Jews in his territory.

No wonder that behind the barriers of such dismal places the Jew grew up alien in mind and body from the people amongst whom he lived. His dress, his habits, his pursuits in life were altogether different.

The stream of the world outside moved on, and left him in a stagnant backwater. He never moved outside these barriers except under compulsion. The Jewish child only knew of such a world from the stories of his parents. To him it was an unknown land where cruelty, malice and greed lay in wait for the unwary.

Indeed, he had painful evidence of the truth of these stories, as ever and again he saw the unhappy victims of brutal outrage and insult stagger through the gateway of the “Ghetto,” bloody and fainting. Some, he knew, never returned at all. They had fallen into the hands of the Christians. So he learnt the meaning of Christ as He is understood by the majority of the Jewish race to this day. Yet there are Christians who say of Jewish missions, “The Jew has had his chance, leave him alone.”

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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