

THE INFLUENCE OF THE JEWS UPON CIVILIZATION

by

Jacob Gartenhaus

Copyright @ 1943

CHAPTER TWO

Many volumes have been written on the Jewish contribution to civilization. Within the limited space of this little book, I can do no more than survey briefly the influence of the Jews upon the world, and especially their contribution to American life.

Long before Herodotus wrote history and before Socrates taught philosophy, Israel was an organized civilization. The Jews had literature before most nations had letters and arts. No nation can boast a prouder or more consistent pedigree than the Jews.

During a dinner party at which Disraeli was a guest, there was a discussion of the antiquity of the families of the persons present. Disraeli turned to a friend, and remarked, "Think of these fellows talking about the antiquity of their families to me – to me whose ancestor was the accepted lover of the Queen of Sheba!"

This incident recalls another gathering, when a man said to a prominent Jew, "One of my ancestors signed the Declaration of Independence." The Jew replied, "And one of mine signed the Ten Commandments."

It is obvious, of course, that there are all kinds of Jews. Some of them resemble, without exaggeration, the caricaturist's sketch. Some of them have hooked noses, some cannot speak without gesticulating, some enjoy being conspicuous, some lack good manners and some are a nuisance in refined society. However, there are many Gentiles who possess the same characteristics and bad habits.

Although the Jew is not without his faults, he does have many virtues of the highest quality which are no less typical of his kind than his more unbecoming features. Perhaps no people on earth have controlled their passions, restrained their emotions, suppressed their vehement desires and violent feelings as have the Jews. Through ages, innumerable laws, which have become ingrained in their blood, have developed in them the mastery of self and a reverence for temperance. The Jew's moderation in food and drink is proverbial. It is seldom that one finds a narcotic addict among the Jews. The "kosher" laws deprive him of the choicest food which every Gentile relishes.

The heroes of the Jewish tales and legends are almost exclusively sages and saints who dedicated their lives to the glory of God and to the salvation of man. The young Jew's conception of a hero, therefore, is one who renounced voluntarily the pleasures of the flesh in order to devote himself wholly to spiritual values, and who suffered death rather than lower his standard of right and wrong. King David is known to every Jewish child, not as the hero of many battles and the founder of the great Jewish kingdom, but as the great lyric poet and the progenitor of the Messiah. Heroes like the Maccabees whom any nation would have venerated as demigods because of their marvelous victory over a mighty foe, are known to Jewish children as holy men who, with the aid of God, cleansed the temple of Greek idolatry and pollution.

What is a hero? He who conquers his passions.” So taught the ancient Jewish sages. So think the Jewish people.

“Cleanliness is next to godliness” is not a Jewish proverb, although cleanliness and godliness always go hand in hand. Thousands of years ago, the Jews followed a code of laws which dealt with personal and communal hygiene and sanitation. Every Jewish community, from earliest times, had its *mikveh*, or water reservoir, for the cleansing and purifying of the body. At least once a week, before the Sabbath, the Jew had to wash himself clean by immersing in the *mikveh*. The more pious Jews immersed themselves every morning, often in icy water. Every woman had to purify herself in the *mikveh*.

Upon awakening in the morning, the observant Jew washes his hands, and also before and after meals. Whenever he touches anything unclean or defiled he must wash his hands before he touches anything else.

It is no wonder that during the Middle ages, when many a city was ravaged by deadly plagues, the Jew remained untouched, although he was forced to live in the congested areas of the abominable ghettos. Although the Jew, as a class, escaped the epidemics, he did not escape the fury of the Gentile mob who accused him of spreading the disease, or, at least, of being in league with the devil.

The Jew has been called vindictive, demanding “**an eye for an eye.**” There is nothing further from the truth. This *lex talionis* had its beginning in the infancy of mankind, probably in the Stone Age, when only stringent laws regulated the relationships among men. Later these ancient laws were modified, and instead of inflicting corporal punishment a fine was imposed on the evildoer.

The Jews regarded the sinner and the criminal as persons of unsound mind, who should be pitied rather than punished. Capital punishment was rare. The Sanhedrin which only once in seven years sentenced a man to death, was called a “murderous Sanhedrin.” Even then, execution was made as easy as possible for the convict, “**because it is written, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.**”

From ancient times, the Jew has not only been humane to his fellow-men but has observed laws for the prevention of cruelty and pain to animals. Even the trees and plants were protected by law.

The anti-Semite will concede that the Jewish love of learning is proverbial. Not only in their ancient homeland did the Jews have elementary schools and universities to which all classes of Jewish society had access but later, in the Middle Ages, the Jews had schools for their children and adults. While illiterate Europe of the Dark Ages pursued entertainment and sport, the Jew in their miserable ghettos crowded their schools to pore over bulky volumes in the pursuit of knowledge. And it is just as true today that the Jew prefers the pleasures of the concert hall, the theater and the lecture room to all other forms of diversion.

The writer has been accused of not knowing the Jews, or of exaggerating their qualities. Otherwise, how could he eulogize and extol a people whom half the world reviles and abuses? It is only fair to the author, therefore, for him to say that he knows the Jews well; in fact, he knows the Jews much better than an anti-Semite knows them. He is conscious of their shortcomings, and more than once he has been mistreated by the Jews because he has told them of their faults. And their faults are numerous.

The anti-Semites do not have to search in vain for Jewish gangsters, saloonkeepers, drug vendors, white slavers. Vain would be the effort, however, were the anti-Semites to try to prove that the criminal record of the Jews is larger, proportionately, than that of other peoples. On the contrary, it is much smaller.

One of the favorite slurs is that the Jews are wholly materialistic, that they worship only the god of gold.

This accusation is a false one; but even if it were true there is a just basis for forgiving it. No matter where the Jew has lived, his environment has forced him to consider the ground under his feet as only temporary. It has been many generations since he has known the sensations of “**this is my own, my native land.**” Since most of the time the Jew has been forced to depart quickly without thought of his house, his shop, his acreage, he has adopted of necessity the measure of having available for such an emergency the only medium of international exchange, gold.

One has to consider only briefly the great sacrifices that the Jewish religion exacts from its adherents to realize that the Jew is not – or rather that the Jew cannot be – materialistic. No people ever had so many holidays and fast days, on which all business was suspended. This, of itself, involves a great loss of money. The dietary laws require heavy expenditures. The Jews have to buy special dishes for meat foods, others for milk foods, still others for neutral foods, and again others for the Passover. “Kosher” food is much more expensive than Gentile food, although it is not always superior.

Regardless of the Jews’ shortcomings, the criticisms to which they have been and are being subjected – most of them undeserved – and in spite of the opportunities of which they have been deprived, and the restricted conditions under which they have been forced to live in virtually every land, all the world owes an everlasting debt of gratitude to this people for the Hebraic heritage.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
