

THE PROGRESSIVE WORLD STRUGGLE OF THE JEWS FOR CIVIL EQUALITY

*An address delivered by the ex-President, William Howard Taft, before the National Geographic Society at Washington, D. C.

By William Howard Taft.

Within the limits of this article one can hope to give only the merest sketch of the history which the subject of the Jews involves.

I need not pause to emphasize the remarkable character of the Jewish people. They are unique in that for eighteen hundred years they have had no country, have been dispersed to the four quarters of the globe, and yet have retained their religion, their cohesion, their intellectual capacity, their loyalty to their race, and have, whenever there was any pretense of equality of opportunity for them, forged their way ahead into positions of prominence, influence, and power in business, professions, in philosophy, in art, in literature, and in government.

They have at the same time made loyal subjects or citizens of the countries in which they have lived whenever they have been accorded any reasonable protection of civil rights. No other people has ever been subjected to such continuous persecution in denial of opportunity to make a living and pursuit of happiness, in humiliating restriction upon their liberty, in exclusion from education, and indeed in actual physical cruelty and massacre.

The Dispersion of the Jews Begins.

During the three hundred years before Christ, the Jews were under Greek control and influence. Jerusalem was attacked many times and sacked, with the consequent dispersion into other countries of many of its people. They migrated into Syria, into Arabia, into Egypt, and became numerous and prominent in Alexandria. Indeed, there were, it is said, as many as a million Jews in Egypt before the Christian era.

When the Roman and the Parthian empires constituted the world, Jews were to be found in every commercial center, and in each there was a Jewish community and synagogue and a relationship maintained with Jerusalem.

The Jews flocked to Rome, Tiberius issued an order excluding them, but it was only enforced for a short time and they returned in great numbers. Although the Emperor Claudius announced his intention of banishing them again, they were so many that he gave it up.

In the first and second centuries after Christ, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Trajan, and Hadrian found the Jews of Palestine unruly and undisposed to yield to their authority and campaigns were waged against them. Jerusalem was taken in the year 70 by Titus and the Temple destroyed. In the year 135 it was taken again by Hadrian's generals and the city destroyed.

Thousands Sent In Bondage to Spain.

Hadrian rebuilt the city and substituted a temple to Jupiter in the place of the temple to Jehovah. The Jews were expelled from the city and forbidden to come within sight of its walls. This brought about the great "diaspora," or second dispersion, which sent the people of Israel to the uttermost parts of the earth,

some going voluntarily and others taken as prisoners. It is said that 80,000 prisoners were sent to Spain, where they found the Jewish communities which had moved on from Rome.

After the expulsion from Jerusalem, the scribes and Pharisees established a school and Sanhedrin at Jamnia, in Palestine, and somewhat later the center of church authority became Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, and for two hundred years an autonomous patriarchate under the Roman Empire flourished there. Here were institutions of learning in which the rabbis codified the traditions called the Oral Law into the Palestinian Talmud.

The seat of Jewish ecclesiastical authority then passed from Tiberias, in Palestine, to Babylonia, where great schools were established at Nehardea and Sura. In Babylonia three institutions of learning were conducted by the rabbis, who in the course of two hundred years framed the Babylonian Talmud.

The written law was the law of Moses, contained in the Pentateuch and known as the "Torah." The remainder of the Old Testament was divided into the "Prophets" and the "Writings," so called.

Without Home or Country.

In the laws of Moses and the Talmud was to be found a collection of rules of conduct—physical, social, political, religious, moral, and philosophical—a strict and literal compliance with which became the life of the Jew. They offered a field for his study and mental occupation and discussion with his brethren which never ended. His duties thus prescribed were to be performed in the home and in the synagogue and in the academy, and these centers supplied to him what the fatherland was to others more fortunately situated.

The Torah and the Talmud established a direct relation to God on the part of each individual and an accountability for every minute of his waking hours that absorbed his attention and his interest. With no home, no country, no kindly sympathy from any one but his own kind, he found his happiness within his own circle and in the refuge from sorrow which his life within the law gave him.

Their great historian says of the Jews:

"In the vicissitudes of their fate for a great many centuries they were saved by their own inner life, pure home life, idealism of the synagogue, and belief in ultimate Messianic redemption from utter demoralization and despair."

Jews Granted Full Freedom by Saracens.

From Pumbeditha and Sura, in Babylonia, in the eleventh century, the seat of Jewish ecclesiastical authority seems to have passed to Spain, where, under the Saracens in Cordova and Hledo and Grandada, the Jews were given full freedom and scope for their activities and for the practice of their religion, and for the further discussion of the Jewish faith and philosophy.

Philo of Alexandria, Maimonides of Spain, and Moses Mendelssohn were

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