

Israel in Bondage

By FRANCIS NEILSON

It is only in recent years that the economic conditions which prevailed in Galilee at the time of Jesus have received adequate attention. Now, however, several works have been published which not only cover the researches of scholars of a generation ago, but compare and sift their findings in the light of modern discoveries. Three of these are especially important: Dr. Joseph Klausner's "Jesus of Nazareth," Dr. Eisler's "The Messiah Jesus," and a particularly interesting short survey of the subject by Dr. Grant, "The Economic Background of the Gospels."

Renan seems to be the one writer of the nineteenth century who appreciated the question of tribute and tax as it affected the Hebrews. He says: "God being the sole master whom man ought to recognize, to pay tithe to a secular sovereign was, in a manner, to put him in place of God. Completely ignorant of the idea of the State, the Jewish theocracy only acted up to its logical intuition—the negation of civil authority and of all government. The money of the public treasury was accounted stolen money." The Talmud is explicit upon this point: the strict Jews regarded tribute as unlawful.

It would be useful if the significant evidence contained in the books of the prophets, revealing the crushing poverty, the double taxation, the spoliation which seemed to be carried on regularly, were gathered together in handy form. The cost of Herod's great building schemes must have been a frightful burden to a people who, so far as basic industry was concerned, had little chance to produce sufficient for its families. Famine was always a danger. There must have been frequent clamor against these exactions, for they covered pretty nearly everything: customs, octroi, tariff duties, temple toll, tribute, and tax, there was little that escaped; and to add to all these burdens there was the perni-

cious system of farming out the collection of taxes. One tax-farmer paid sixteen thousand talents a year for the privilege and retired enormously wealthy after about twenty years of collecting.

Conditions towards the end of the reign of Herod are described by the historian, Josephus: "When he (Herod) took the kingdom, it was in an extraordinarily flourishing condition, (but) he filled the nation with the utmost degree of poverty. There was no way of obtaining freedom from unjust violence without giving either gold or silver for it."

Three or four years before the birth of Jesus, the great revolt under Judas* began. For over sixty years riots and revolts were almost incessant. Spies were everywhere, and the people who could not flock to the standards of Judas were downtrodden and overcome by fear. The Zealots strictly upheld the old law concerning tribute, and by becoming outlaws escaped the ignominy of having to pay taxes. This is an important point and crucial in connection with many of the sayings of Jesus.

The Hebrews had known a system practically free of tax; there was the tenth to the tribe of Levy, because it had no inheritance. It is true, under priestly rule not only was the tenth increased, but many ways were devised to filch from the people more and more of their produce. Probably it is no exaggeration to say that agriculture was tithed to death. Many stories in

Hebrew literature reveal the rapacity of the priests, and every prophet of consequence protested against their ruinous exactions.

But what was oppressive from the priests became intolerable when the conqueror laid his heavy hand upon the Hebrews. Every class was roused to indignation by the Roman extortions. There was a poll tax on each individual, and for the first time women and slaves were included. There was an income tax; a tax on herds, a tax against the harvests. There was a salt tax, a "crown tax" (crowns of a bride and groom), and a tax on fruit trees. There were sales taxes, water taxes, city taxes, road taxes, and house taxes. Pliny says that "at every stopping place by land or sea some tax was levied." Small wonder that the poor became poorer and the destitute and unemployed increased.

Some Jews, it is said, were able to amass riches. Klausner says that the great landlords and rich bankers did very well under Roman administration. But the great masses of the people were crushed and helpless under the awful burden of taxes; beggary increased, and brigandage, highway robbery, and revolt were of daily occurrence. The robust of the outcasts sought refuge in "the caves and the desert places, and the rocks and crevices of the mountains." There their subsistence was reduced to the merest vegetarian diet, but they escaped the tax gatherers.

Klausner says that the Jews at the time of Jesus were essentially an agricultural people, but this does not mean that agriculture was their one pursuit. Large numbers had drifted into other trades, and the changes in ownership of the soil had brought new labor conditions and new avenues of employment. Most of Galilee was under cultivation, like a great garden; the wheat was famous, the crops of other cereals abundant. The country was rich in vegetables and there was an ab-

* Not, of course, Iscariot, but Judas of Galilee, mentioned in Acts 5:36. His party were called Zealots.



undance of fruits of many kinds, and nuts; oil was plentiful, the olive in some districts highly prized; the date palm gave oil and honey, and, according to Pliny, was a great source of wealth. The fishing industry about Lake Galilee was famous. Thus was justified the promise of Moses when he took the Hebrews out of Egypt.

But "there were hundreds of villages in Galilee round which smallholders held the land and made merely a living." Any economic accident might "reduce him (the small-holder) to the status of a hireling or laborer, or even cause him to be sold into slavery." The scholars have not yet decided the question of the great differences met with in the authorities; they all agree that Galilee had a fruitful soil, but, according to some, a large part of the population was reduced to penury, if not slavery, and according to others there were beautiful, busy cities, indicating generally a thriving people.

Few seem to understand that the luxurious city is nearly always a corollary of an impoverished people. Klausner speaks of the wealthy proprietors and says they were few; it would not require many, if the land were monopolized to any great extent. If there were large estates in Galilee, and there seems to be much evidence of this, their existence would account for the extremely hard condition of the small-holder, who probably was left with the poorest land, and explain the richness of yield of the big estates which could be tilled with slave labor. Share croppers, who sometimes got as little as a quarter of their produce for themselves, existed in Palestine, but to what extent is uncertain. Many sayings of Jesus indicate that cultivation must have been carried on under extreme hardship by the vast majority.

The conditions of labor show all the inequalities which appear under any system of land monopoly, no matter when or where. There were slaves in Palestine; but there was another large class who could be sometimes free and sometimes slaves for six years. Their lot was, on the

whole, perhaps worse than that of the out-and-out slave. The old regulations of the time of the settlement were long forgotten, and the bond servant in the house was, by the time of Jesus, very like a chattel and not as well cared for as a horse. There were endless disputations about diet and the Sabbath, but the ancient rules laid down in Deuteronomy to govern the status of the Hebrew servant, the conditions of his period of servitude, and the rewards he received at the end of his term—these gathered the dust of neglect. And one may be sure that many Hebrews who were forced into slavery felt the full Roman severity.

The conqueror usually taxed everything the people used. Whether the tariffs were scientific or not, the people suffered from them just as severely as though a commission of fiscal scientists had chosen the commodity and fixed the amount of the duty. The tariff decree of Palmyra, A. D. 137, given by Dr. Grant in his work, "The Economic Background of the Gospels," is almost as comprehensive as the Smoot-Hawley act, and there were probably many others like it.

How the priests fared in Galilee under Roman double taxation can only be imagined. Whether the milking process of the imperial power left anything for them cannot be determined, for there seems to be no reliable evidence of the amount collected in tithe after the Census. But Dr. Grant estimates that at the time of Jesus the total taxation of the Hebrews, civil and religious, took between thirty and forty per cent of all they produced.

From the evidence of the extortion and rapacity of the Romans and the priests, it is readily conceived why the mission of John the Baptist took hold of the poor. At the time of Jesus, there must have been a large body of the people always on the borderline between the freedom of the small-holder and the slavery of the landless man—a circumstance which explains both the frequency of the revolts of the Zealots and the source from which they drew their support. Klausner reminds us that

"the name 'publican' became synonymous with robber, brigand, ruffian, murderer, and reprobate; one whose evidence was invalid, whose money could not be accepted as alms for the poor, nor used in exchange, since it was suspected of having been acquired by robbery." Imperial power transformed the fertile valleys of Galilee into places of desolation.

The land was inalienable under the law of Moses, but the rulers did not hesitate to confiscate the estates of families who opposed their will, and the old system of not parting with the land outright had been long disregarded. Government had degenerated into what More described centuries later. He says in "Utopia": "The rich men not only . . . snatch away from the poor . . . (but) . . . have to this their wrong . . . given the name of justice, yea, and that by force of a law . . . When I consider . . . these commonwealths which nowadays anywhere do flourish . . . I can perceive nothing but a certain conspiracy of rich men . . ."

All states suffer in the same way, once the landmarks are removed, and the history of the removal of landmarks in Palestine or in England can be read in the economic consequences, first to the disinherited masses, eventually to the whole nation. In the final reckoning, no class has ever escaped. The enrichment of the landlords at the expense of the common men marks always the beginning of the decline of a civilization.

More Taxes Wanted

There are still a few things some of us would like to see higher taxes on. For instance, how about increased taxes on cigarettes sold to ladies, dime novels, also poison gas and bombs, submarines, battleships and books on economics? And then it might be a good idea to place a little tax on the speeches of Congressmen, with a surtax on those who won't vote for single tax?—Gilbert Cope.

—From "The Porcupine"
—Publication of the Manchester
(England) Land Values League.