THE JEW AS A CRAFTSMAN

BY

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ISRAEL was not destined to be a cunning workman among the families of earth. Neither in this industrial age, nor in any other period, has he been a craftsman. His purpose on earth was totally different. If it be true that nations are assigned specific duties, and each contributes an ideal to the commonwealth of humanity, the mission of the Jew, determined by history and his philosophy, has been to fashion the heart of man rather than to guide his hand.

“Lord, who may sojourn in thy tent?
Who may dwell on thy holy mount?
He that walketh uprightly and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.”

In this strain sang the psalmists, and they voiced the genius of the Jew, as poets ever give expression to the spirit of their countrymen. Israel is neither a builder nor an artist. He is a teacher, and the Jew has ever concerned himself with man’s treatment of his fellow men; conduct, which Matthew Arnold said was “three-fourths of life,” has been the chief subject of the teaching of Judaism.

Consequently, to discuss the Jew as a craftsman is to examine a subordinate phase of his life. He has sometimes fulfilled the office of craftsman, but it cannot be said that his aspirations lay in that direction. The inventors of mechanical devices are never found among the great men of Israel. Its leaders, or the “great luminaries,” as they are called, were men who phrased a moral truth. To give expression to such a truth was the means by which the rabbis sought fame. The monumental names among the Jews are teachers of morality; the prophets, the rabbis of the Talmud, the scholars and philosophers of the Middle Ages were moralists and preachers—not architects, engineers, or craftsmen. The Jew has no Sir Christopher Wren, no Michael Angelo, no Edison. Israel was not delegated to tunnel mountains, or to organize industry, or to fashion articles
of use. He has been the moralist, not the artist. He pleads for mercy, for justice;—“let righteousness flow as a mountain stream, and justice as a freshet in spring tide,” is the eternal cry of the Jew. He has not urged man to turn his hand to works of art or industry, to model or adorn nature’s materials; he has told man what is true, and just, and right.

This fact is well established; but it has been both perverted and misunderstood. Without taking this fact and its causes into consideration, the Jew has been indicted because of his absence from the crafts. He is stigmatized as a parasite upon the industrial body of humanity, but the charge is without foundation. This shaft of ridicule or hatred is usually sped by ignorance and bigotry. Causes over which he had no control drove him from the shop. He was usually a victim, seldom his own master. Had it been otherwise, had he not been hounded from one end of Europe to another, he might have been a craftsman and an artist of renown. But his purpose in the drama of life is to teach, not to make, and in that teaching he has filled a post which no other community of people has assumed. When men made things, his was the propelling thought which inspired them to work. He has taught men the duty, the love, the nobility of work. In the mythology of the earlier Biblical books even God works. God is the Creator, since he made the earth and stretched out the heavens like a canopy. While Israel has not contributed any monumental structures, a Doge’s Palace, or a Parthenon, to humanity; or brooded over rough hewn blocks of marble, and breathed into them a deathless form; he has, none the less, implanted in man the consciousness of the dignity of labor. “Great is labor, for it honors its practicers,” says a rabbi of the Talmud. Carlyle is more in accord with the Hebraic than the Hellenic spirit when he says, “labor is life;” and the old monks were unconsciously voicing a rabbinical sentiment when they said, “to labor is to worship.” To labor is
man's first obligation, and when driven from Eden, man was blessed and not cursed. To earn his bread in the sweat of his brow is an ennobling necessity. It gives man dignity, and endows him with creative assertiveness. It was a result of this spirit that no rabbi of the Talmud dared to accept a fee for teaching the law, for that vocation was a distinguishing honor. Every rabbi earned his livelihood by some manual labor, often arduous, as farmer, cobbler, vine-dresser or weaver. Work was a religious duty, sacred above all others.

One might naturally presume that among a people who continually extolled labor, which said in its prayers, "man goeth to his work, to his labor to the end of the day," the atmosphere would be charged with the spirit of industry. The disposition of the people was amenable to creative efforts. Judaism admits of self-expression. Repression, which is death, is not tolerated. Every factor was at hand to encourage craftsmanship, and had the Jew been his own master, his race would have produced craftsmen. But the Jew was never his own master; he was ever a victim, and never more so than in the Middle Ages, when craftsmanship reached a high development, when guilds abounded, and the worker was everywhere busy at his craft. In that period the Jew was banished from the guilds, and in Austria in the fifteenth century he was not even permitted to make his own clothing. The Jews' industrial capabilities have never been tested. With his cunning mind, his observant eye, and keen wit, he could have trained his hand for more crafts than were ever open to him. In a few branches of industry he was alone, in the handling of gold and old iron; but banished from all the guilds, he gradually drifted from hand work to brain work, so that only in our liberal age, emancipated from all bondage, he has entered the sphere of industry, his hand aided by an active will and a trained mind. Manual training nowhere received a readier reception than it did at the hands of the
Jews. And in New York and Chicago it was at once introduced into Jewish educational institutions. The modern Jew tends to become a craftsman, and to-day Jews are known no less for their manual skill than for their encouragement of what is styled the arts and crafts movement.

We must now cease to speak in generalities and enter upon details. At all ages the Jew has been under the necessity of earning his livelihood. Contrary to the notion of childhood, the Jews had to support themselves in Biblical times notwithstanding the mannah with which, according to Levitical law, kind providence at one time supplied them. Palestine was not a land of milk and honey. To earn a pittance demanded excessive, irksome toil, and in Biblical times the problem of gaining a livelihood was a hard one to solve. We have no satisfactory data upon which to base a description of craftsmanship in Biblical times. Agriculture was the prevailing industry. Cloth and sandals were manufactured, ores smelted and iron forged, but we have few remnants of this work, and are unable to judge of its value, or to determine whether or not it was artistic. Of this, however, we are certain; at no period, and under no condition, were the Jews of Biblical times capable of producing handiwork which possessed the artistic or decorative attributes of the products of Greek workmanship. While the children of Hellas were forming those magnificent vases, the children of Israel were framing the Biblical laws which have established order in society.

The impression obtained during centuries of Bible reading has been that Solomon's temple was a monument of magnificence, but we have no evidences to prove the fact. On the contrary, we may presume that it was a crude, ugly, oriental building, abounding with all the bizarre whimsicalities of oriental decoration, devoid of the simplicity, purity and symmetry which are the attributes of Greek art. Search as we
may the sources of information for that age, we can find no indication that the Jew of the Bible was a craftsman. It is in the Middle Ages that the Jew approaches to the type of craftsman in which the people of the present have interest. We learn that so late as the twelfth century the Jews of the Levant, and the east generally, were engaged in many of the prevailing occupations and crafts. We find that large numbers of Jews were millers, builders, makers of clothing, of water-clocks, that they were booksellers and were engaged in agricultural activities of many kinds, such as the making of wine and olive oil, and even served as soldiers. The Middle Ages found the Jews of Germany and Northern France acting as box-makers, armorers, coiners and bookbinders. During the last years of the fourteenth century, the occupations of the Jews of Southern France, Spain and Italy included silver-, lock- and blacksmithing, silk-weaving and basket-making. In fact, the Jews were represented in all existing vocations. Spain was Israel’s haven up to the fifteenth century. For a short while, for a few centuries, the Jew is the typical craftsman of the age. It was not an inspiring period for him, for it was the Middle Ages, and the labor to which he turned his hand was taken up solely as a means of maintaining himself. No further motive, no artistic impulse, no guild responsibility inspired him to fashion beautiful things. His labor was mere drudgery—it was not craftsmanship.

The fifteenth century is the turning point in Israel’s career in the Middle Ages. Prior to that time he had possessed a scanty measure of freedom, and was allowed to earn his livelihood in some reasonable manner. After the fifteenth century, fanaticism ruled the nations of the West, and the night of misery set in for all the Children of Israel.

This is the period of the ghetto. The Jews were always crowded into narrow quarters, but in this age they are policed. The right to practice all
trades and industries is taken from them. In England they are permitted to engage in but two occupations, the handling of new gold and old iron. It is the period when bigotry was rampant, when mob lunacy and mob violence, epidemics and psychic contagions took possession of nations, when men turned mad and sheeted quacks gibbered in the market places. Day had turned to night and men had lost their reason, a sad time indeed for humanity and the Jew, who has not in our own age of tolerance recovered from this terrible blight. What was the Jew to do? How was he to keep starvation from the door? He answered this puzzling question in his own way. "Instead of making things, I will be the means of making them, I will deal in moneys," said the Jew, and became the financier. That money-lending had an attraction for the Jew is certain, but how far he would have yielded to it, had he been undisturbed by persecution, cannot be determined. The whole policy of the church in the Middle Ages forced the Jews to become money-lenders. Shut out from the handicrafts, prohibited from selling bread, wine, or oil; denied the privilege of being a smith, tailor, shoemaker or currier, the Jew, in self-protection, turned to money-lending, with its fascinations of great riches and the uncertainties of speculation. Deprived by fanaticism of a place in the guilds, the Jews as money-lenders rendered conspicuous service to Europe by making commerce possible, by creating credit and carrying on exchange, without all of which the existence of a state is impossible.

In devoting themselves to commerce and money-lending, the Jew was not following a natural taste, or obeying an instinct. For him, the ideal stage of civilization is the agricultural, where each man, sitting under his own vine and fig tree, is at peace with himself and the world. By force of circumstances, by persecution, and by the express desire of kings and peoples, the Jews were compelled to adopt these modes of obtaining a
livelihood. The trade in money rarely profited the Jew, strange as it seems; and contrary to prevailing notions, the Jew remained poor, or possessed little wealth. The real gainers by his profession were kings and the aristocracy.

It is very much in the nature of a twice told tale to repeat all this. Since the Jew was unable to join a guild, it was absolutely impossible for him to participate in any great commercial undertaking, and the persistent opposition of the guilds compelled him to abandon the crafts and turn to trade; and in commercial occupations he has continued to our own century. We have noted that until the fifteenth century, the Jew practiced the handicrafts along with the rest of mankind, and naturally had his favorite arts. A Jewish commercial traveller of Spanish descent records the existence in some Asiatic cities of Jewish dyers and Jewish makers of the renowned Tyrian glass.

In Sicily the production of silk was largely in the hands of Jews, and they paid heavily for the privilege, but were never left in the quiet enjoyment of the industry which they had created.

Soon after the introduction of playing cards, the Jews of the Rhinelands were engaged in the painting of cards used in that spirited past-time of mediaeval and modern Europe. In artistic book binding and the illumination of manuscripts the Jews attained some proficiency, but these arts they probably learned from the monks. And it was only a few of the non-synagogal works which were in any way illuminated. The manuscripts illuminated by the Jews are very gaudy, but, characteristically enough, the skill of the Jewish artists is displayed less in figure work than in grotesque initial and marginal decorations. None of these illuminated manuscripts date from a period earlier than the fourteenth century. Earlier manuscripts were not decorated, unless ornamenting a few adaptable letters of
the Hebrew alphabet with tiny crowns and projections may be styled illumination. A book which was read on the eve of the Passover has a few crude figures of men in amusing postures, but marginal decorations, such as the old monks used in the adornment of their books, are seldom found in Hebrew manuscripts.

It may be pointed out here that, in the fifteenth century, the Jews found another occupation in which co-operation of mind and hand was necessary. The invention of printing found an enthusiastic welcome among them. The Jewish printer was not a mere artisan, but the performer of a holy work. The only restraint on the spread of printing among the Jews was the injunction that the scrolls of the law and certain legal documents, such as divorces, be written by hand; but Jewish religious books, including the Bible, could be printed. These books were printed on stout yellow paper, in folio and quarto sizes; an edition de luxe, on blue or red paper. And so proficient were these Jewish printers, that some specimens of their work from the Netherlands and Italy have not been excelled even in modern times. It is not probable that any but Spanish Jews participated in the manufacture of cloth, for either they were prohibited from entering that industry, or voluntarily abandoned it, because it brought men and women to the same workshop. Most Jewish women were constantly engaged in spinning in their homes.

The Jews engaged in mining, and in Sicily carried on the manufacture of metal extensively. So important a factor were they in the industrial life of the fifteenth century that when Ferdinand of Spain was about to issue his edict of expulsion, his counsellors warned him against such a course, for they saw that ruinous results would follow, as nearly all of the artisans in the Spanish possessions were Jews.

It is obvious from this and other indications, that the old Jewish love for the handi-
crafts survived to the Middle Ages, and although the Jew labored under extreme disadvantages, he never failed to eulogize the crafts, or to practice them when permitted. He created no immortal work, but some beautifully executed utensils, used in the service of the synagogue, indicate what he might have done had he been left free. But in doing work of this nature he was only following the beaten path of his fellow-man—we cannot say fellow-citizen. The Jew had no fellow-citizen until modern days.

To enter the academy of scholars, to sit among the wise, was always the ambition of the Jew. The attainment of knowledge was more essential to him than expertness in tools; to use a Biblical text, more praiseworthy than to use the instruments of industry. He was skilled as a maker of scientific instruments, he invented a water clock, but esteemed no honor so great as to be called a “wise man,” learned in the Lord.

No one can foretell what place the Jew will have in the industrial order of society now evolving. But this much is certain; he will not be excluded from the ranks of craftsmen if he wishes to enter them.