

Jewish Civilization

From "The Life and Epistles of St. Paul" by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, Eerdmans

Not only was a holy religion the characteristic of the civilization of the Jews, but their religious feelings were directed to something in the future, and all the circumstances of their national life tended to fix their thoughts on One that was to come. By types and by promises, their eyes were continually turned towards a Messiah.

Their history was a continued prophecy. All the great stages of their national existence were accompanied by effusions of prophetic light. Abraham was called from his father's house, and it was revealed that in him 'all families of the earth should be blessed.' Moses formed Abraham's descendants into a people by giving them a law and national institutions; but while so doing he spoke before of Him who was hereafter to be raised up a 'Prophet like unto himself.' David reigned, and during that reign, which made so deep and lasting an impression on the Jewish mind, psalms were written which spoke of the future King. And with the approach of that captivity, the pathetic recollection of which became perpetual, the prophecies too a bolder range and embraced within their widening circle the redemption both of Jews and Gentiles.

Thus the pious Hebrew was always, as it were, in the attitude of expectation, and it has been well remarked that, while the golden age of the Greeks and Romans was the past, that of the Jews was the future. While other nations were growing weary of their gods, without anything in their mythology or philosophy to satisfy the deep cravings of their nature, which religion operating rather as a barrier than a link between the educated and the ignorant with morality divorced from theology the whole Jewish people were united in a feeling of attachment to their sacred institutions, and found in the facts of their past history a pledge of the fulfillment of their national hopes.

It is true that the Jewish nation, again and again, during several centuries, fell into idolatry. It is true that their superiority to other nations consisted in

the light which they possessed, and not in the use which they made of it, and that a carnal life continually dragged them down from the spiritual eminence on which they might have stood. But the Divine purposes were not frustrated. The chosen people were subject to the chastisement and discipline of severe sufferings, and they were fitted by a long training for the accomplishment of that work, to the conscious performance of which they did not willingly rise.

They were hard pressed in their own country by the incursions of their idolatrous neighbors, and in the end they were carried into a distant captivity. From the time of their return from Babylon they were no long idolaters. They presented to the world the example of a pure monotheism. And in the active times which preceded and followed the birth of Christ, those Greeks or Romans who visited the Jews in their own land where they still lingered at the portals of the East, and those vast numbers of proselytes whom the dispersed Jews had gathered round them in various countries, were made familiar with the worship of one God and Father of all.

The influence of the Jews upon the Heathen world was exercised mainly through their dispersion, but this subject must be deferred for a few pages, till we have examined some of the developments of the Greek and Roman nationalities. A few words, however may be allowed in passing, upon the consequences of the geographical position of Judea.

The situation of this little but eventful country is such that its inhabitants were brought into contact successively with all the civilized nations of antiquity. Not to dwell upon its proximity to Egypt on the one hand, and to Assyria on the other, and the influences which those ancient kingdoms may thereby have exercised or received, Palestine lay in the road of Alexander's Eastern expedition. The Greek conqueror was there before he founded his mercantile metropolis in Egypt, and thence went to India, to return and die at Babylon. And again, when his empire was divided, and Greek kingdoms were erected in Europe, Asia, and Africa, Palestine

lay between the rival monarchies of the Ptolemies at Alexandria and the Seleucids at Antioch, too near to both to be safe from the invasion of their arms or the influence of their customs and their language.

And finally, when the time came for the Romans to embrace the whole of the Mediterranean within the circle of their power, the coast-line of Judea was the last remote portion which was needed to complete the fated circumference.

The full effect of this geographical position of Judea can only be seen by following the course of Greek and Roman life, till they were brought so remarkably into contact with each other and with that of the Jews; and we turn to those other two nations of antiquity, the steps of whose progress were successive stages in what is called in the Epistle to the Ephesians (1:10) 'the dispensation of the fullness of time.