

## Chapter XV

THE slight references to be found, in Renan's *Life of Jesus*, to the conditions which prevailed in Galilee were either passed over quickly as something of no great interest, or ignored by those who were better informed and probably thought it unwise to draw particular attention to them. It seems strange that Renan should be the first, only about seventy years ago, to give consideration to the movement of the Zealots.

Since the turn of the century a vast literature has appeared, in which the economic conditions of Palestine are given the importance they deserve. Take such a work as *The Decline and Fall of the Hebrew Kingdoms*, by Dr. Robinson, published in the Clarendon Bible Series, Oxford; compare it with even the best of the work done by scholars of the last century, and it seems to be ancient history from an altogether new standpoint. It gains tremendously in distinction because of the way in which it treats the economic problems which were the deep concern of the prophets.

When Robinson treats the story of Naboth and Ahab, in the middle of the ninth century, in a few sentences he makes clear the economic point that not only Naboth knew the law in connexion with the land he tilled, but that the king who wanted to purchase it or exchange some other land for it knew the law as well as Naboth did. This is very important. Indeed, this is the first reference to the land law since the days of Joshua. And now that the archæologists are deciding the date of the fall of Jericho and the year of the Exodus, the student

can make a guess as to the duration of the period of the old land law.

It seems that the condition prevailing for a long time, possibly for three or four centuries after the settlement, was that of peasant communities; the small farmer, with his family, tilling the plot and providing for the house. There is no evidence at all of communism or socialism; evidently, the farmer enjoyed the work of his own hands. Under this system of economic individualism a sturdy race grew up, but at some time the weaker brethren, who, because of lack of skill, illness, or thriftlessness, were forced to borrow from their neighbours, found themselves in debt and gradually sank to the position of landless labourers—slaves. In this way, field was laid to field on some small holdings, and the sturdy class who had seed and fodder and other provisions to lend quietly amassed large and lucrative estates. The same economic troubles that afflicted every village community of which there is record afflicted the children of Israel. That is the only way the change could have been brought about. At the time of Naboth, there was still a sense of the value of the old law; not even to the king would he part with his inheritance, and the king knew that Naboth was right and upheld the law. One hundred years later a great change had taken place. Dr. Robinson says:

There had grown up in Samaria and elsewhere a class of wealthy persons who were engaged in commerce or money-lending. Among them, luxury had taken the place of comfort, and the best products of the known world were at their command. . . . The inequality in the distribution of wealth increased, and the lower classes grew more and more wretched and miserable. The whole character of the social order underwent a change. The peasant farmers, perhaps tempted to extravagance by the increasing luxury of the great cities, or perhaps suffering heavy losses through the depredations of the Syrian marauding bands, would from time

to time be compelled to borrow money. Oriental interest always appears to be enormous to the Western mind, and in addition there was, we may be sure, some kind of mortgage—usually on a man's land. Eventually this would fall into the hands of the city capitalist, who might retain the farmer, but as an employee, not as an independent worker. Amos complains bitterly of the rents that were demanded in such cases. Further financial distress would compel the man to mortgage his person and his family, and, this time, failure to meet his debts would result in slavery. Ownership of the soil was thus concentrated into the hands of a small group of men, and Isaiah fiercely denounces those who build up large properties for themselves. By 750 B.C. it would seem that from a system of small peasant proprietors the social organization had changed to one of large estates worked largely by serf labour.

Some time, probably before the days of Josiah, when the priests had assumed great power and added enormously to the regulations and by-laws of the daily comings and goings of the people, when rites and observances occupied so much time and thought, when the old compact made with the tribe of Levi—that it was to receive a tenth, because that tribe had no inheritance—when that was forgotten and the tithes increased and covered a multitude of small duties and manners which one could scarcely escape in the round of the day's work, then the days of the old system were numbered. It was not only the weaker brother who could not get enough out of his land, who borrowed here and there and loaded himself with debt, who was solely responsible for the change that came to the old system. The prophets make much of his plight, and so do the historians who interpret the prophets. There were other reasons for the break-up of the system of family proprietors. It is certain that no tenth of the produce at any time, under the system of small farmers, could have enabled the priests to build up and maintain a luxurious system of temples and palaces. To

what extent the priests of that early time ground the supplies out of the producers may never be known, but it might be fairly assumed that the exactions were spread widely, and as the priestly requirements of buildings, vessels, furnishings, vestments, breastplates, and so on increased, the exactions grew heavier. Why should it be different with the priesthood of Israel? When was there an ancient priesthood that did not want as many of the good things as it could get? How great the difference was from that early covenant can be imagined by reading any of the grievances of the early prophets. The old, simple, economic covenant which bound the individual to God was forgotten; a totally new system was substituted. Probably the new system had been growing up for years, and, as it grew, the old condition of working the land disappeared. Jahveh might have been regarded by small farmers as an agricultural God, but not a God of insatiable sacrifice. There must have been a limit to the worship he required from his people. It is not easy to imagine that communities of small farmers would make life harder for themselves by inventing all kinds of costly sacrifices, costly establishments of worship, costly vestments for the priests, and so on. Anyway, the prophets seem to be of no two minds as to the priestly share in reducing the tribes to poverty and despair.

It is of great importance, this question of when the old system broke up and the new system, which reduced the many to poverty, began. Unfortunately, there is no chronology which would help to determine before Josiah the date when priestly power or the coming of the kings, or both, inaugurated the new covenant and abrogated the economic conditions of the old one. It seems a very long period from Moses, about the beginning of the fourteenth century, down to Josiah, the middle of the seventh century, something like seven hundred

years, in which conditions were brought about that caused the plight of the people referred to by Isaiah, the son of Amoz. Whether the priests or the kings were responsible for it or not, the scholars agree that in the seventh century Judah, as well as the rest of the country, suffered from the same social poisons undermining their systems and leaving them a prey to the invader. The law book discovered in the days of Josiah, on which he based his reforms, must have contained very different laws from those found in the priestly code, but whether it was the old law book of Moses and Joshua is not known. Perhaps it was the old law book but, as Dr. Robinson suggests, it contained many editions. He says:

To Israel Jahveh was now an agricultural God and must be worshipped as such. The result was an enormous expansion of ritual, much of which may have had its origin in sympathetic magic, being designed to help the god to do his work. Every township had its shrine where the services proper to the old Baal of the place were now rendered to Jahveh. There were greater sanctuaries of national importance whither the devout might go on pilgrimage. A system of animal and other sacrifice sprang up, and in extreme cases of danger or distress even human sacrifices might be offered. At the critical seasons of the agricultural year, the beginning of the ploughing, the beginning and the end of the corn harvest, special festivals were held. With the shrines were associated other practices, such as the giving of tithes and sacramental immoralities, which were probably supposed to play their part in assuring the fertility of the soil. Apart from iniquities which thus actually sprang up in connexion with the ritual, the new religious order tended to stress ceremonial and to obscure the moral elements in the old desert faith. It was not that these were wholly forgotten; nothing was taken away from the old religion in practice, but there was little or no attempt to adapt the principles underlying the earlier morality to the new conditions. Jahveh was still concerned where he had been concerned before, but men failed to extend the range of his ethical interests to a multitude of situations which had not and could not

have arisen in the pastoral life. Land, with all its problems, and commerce, with all its intricacies, were factors in the new life which had little or no parallel in the old, and Israel did not see that Jahveh had something of profound importance to say on these subjects.

It is quite probable that the conditions against which Isaiah stormed had been festering for a long time. The old conditions of land tenure probably ceased to exist. Numbers must have laid field to field and reduced the former occupiers to a state of slavery. The justice laid down by Moses had become so confounded with positive law and priestly regulations that it ceased to have any value, and it is obvious that the priests and the kings no longer feared the command: "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark." No matter what the changes were in connexion with commerce and foreign notions of finance, money-lending, tribute, and tariffs, it would have been possible for Israel and Judah to have maintained the old system of land tenure and withstand nearly all alien influences; not from without but from within came the tremendous changes which brought about the downfall of the Hebrews. It may be that Gentiles benefited by the destruction of the old system, and became landed proprietors. In the Book of Amos we learn of the rapacity of landlords, but they are especially singled out as Hebrew landlords who took an extortionate share of the farmer's produce. In the Book of Hosea, now dated about a generation after Amos, there is a cry for the old justice, that the leaders, both priests and kings, should secure it to do for their subjects all that was done before the days of the monarchy, when the judges ruled. Amos seems to be quite sensible of the curse that has fallen upon the people: "For as much, therefore, as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat," then again, "In all

vineyards shall be wailing," and, "Ye have turned justice into gall and the fruit of rightness into hemlock." The book closes with a picture of restoration which is repeated by Ezra and later by Immanuel. If Israel will only turn to the old faith and restore justice, the promise is: "I will plant them in their land, and they shall no more be pulled out of the land I have given them." Hosea refers to the removal of the landmarks, and says that upon the princes of Judah God will pour out his wrath like water. Habakkuk cries for justice: "Why dost thou show me iniquity and cause me to behold grievance? For spoiling and violence are before me; and there are that raise up strife and contention."

The same conditions and the same complaint at the time of Ezra, and the same conditions and the same complaint at the time of Immanuel. All the prophets demanded the restoration of the old law. The references to the "new" covenant seem to be additions which are not necessary. If the restoration of the old law, which the prophets demand, is enough to cure the ills of the people, why is a "new" covenant necessary? If a return to the laws of the old covenant will bind the Hebrews to the God of Moses, why is it necessary to introduce a Messiah? This question is of importance here, because there hangs on it the greater question of what Jesus meant when he said: "I come not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it." Theologians cannot have it both ways; either the old law of redemption was sufficient or not sufficient. Perhaps the Pharisees who opposed Jesus did so because he was at one with the tradition. Perhaps simple ideas have no place in complex civilizations. This may be the reason why later prophets thought justice was not enough. As it is today, no practical man would dream of suggesting anything so simple as a return to economic justice. Yet, Jesus, in the midst of a highly complex civilization,

said it was enough to love God with all the heart and all the mind, and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Surely, when he said this, he must have been conscious that the old law of Moses should be fulfilled, because the fulfilment would be enough. Where, then, the necessity of a Messiah to intervene between man and God? For those whose history of Israel goes no further back than the later prophets it may seem vital that their prophecies should be fulfilled. But why should their prophecies be fulfilled, rather than that the requirements of the old law should be fulfilled?