

**SKETCHES OF JEWISH  
SOCIAL LIFE IN THE  
DAYS OF CHRIST**

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Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ by Rev. Alfred Edersheim

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**REV. ALFRED EDERSHEIM**

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SKETCHES  
OF  
JEWISH SOCIAL LIFE  
IN  
*THE DAYS OF CHRIST.*

BY THE  
REV. DR. EDERSHEIM,  
AUTHOR OF "THE TEMPLE: ITS MINISTRY AND SERVICES,"  
"THE BIBLE HISTORY," ETC.



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# SKETCHES OF JEWISH LIFE,

In Illustration of the New Testament.

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## CHAPTER I.

### PALESTINE EIGHTEEN CENTURIES AGO.

EIGHTEEN and a half centuries ago, and the land which now lies desolate—its bare, grey hills looking into ill-tilled or neglected valleys, its timber cut down, its olive- and vine-clad terraces crumbled into dust, its villages stricken with poverty and squalor, its thoroughfares insecure and deserted, its native population well-nigh gone, and with them its industry, wealth, and strength—presented a scene of beauty, richness, and busy life almost unsurpassed in the then known world. The Rabbis never weary of its praises, whether their theme be the physical or the moral pre-eminence of Palestine. It happened, so writes one of the oldest Hebrew commentaries,<sup>1</sup> that Rabbi Jonathan was sitting under a fig-tree, surrounded by his students. Of a sudden he noticed how the ripe fruit overhead, bursting for richness, dropped its luscious juice on the ground, while at a little distance the distended udder of a she-goat

<sup>1</sup> See Hamburger, *Real-Enc. d. Judenth.* i. p. 816, note 37.

was no longer able to hold the milk. "Behold," exclaimed the Rabbi, as the two streams mingled, "the literal fulfilment of the promise: 'a land flowing with milk and honey.'" "The land of Israel is not lacking in any product whatever," argued Rabbi Meir, "as it is written (Deut. viii. 9): 'Thou shalt not lack anything in it.'"<sup>1</sup> Nor were such statements unwarranted; for Palestine combined every variety of climate, from the snows of Hermon and the cool of Lebanon to the genial warmth of the Lake of Galilee and the tropical heat of the Jordan valley. Accordingly not only the fruit trees, the grain, and garden produce known in our colder latitudes were found in the land, along with those of sunnier climes, but also the rare spices and perfumes of the hottest zones. Similarly, it is said, every kind of fish teemed in its waters, while birds of most gorgeous plumage filled the air with their song.<sup>2</sup> Within such small compass the country must have been unequalled for charm and variety. On the eastern side of Jordan stretched wide plains, upland valleys, park-like forests, and almost boundless corn and pasture lands; on the western side were terraced hills, covered with olives and vines, delicious glens, in which sweet springs murmured, and fairy-like beauty and busy life, as around the Lake of Galilee. In the distance stretched the wide sea, dotted with spreading sails; here was luxurious richness, as in the ancient possessions of Issachar, Manassch, and Ephraim; and there, beyond these plains and valleys, the highland scenery of Judah, shelving down through the pasture tracts of the Negev, or

<sup>1</sup> In discussing the lawfulness of a peppercorn on the Day of Atonement. *Yoma*, 91 b, towards the end.

<sup>2</sup> Detailed references are here, of course, impossible; but compare, for example, the accounts of so careful and able a naturalist as Canon Tristram.

South country, into the great and terrible wilderness. And over all, so long as God's blessing lasted, were peace and plenty. Far as the eye could reach, browsed "the cattle on a thousand hills;" the pastures were "clothed with flocks, the valleys also covered over with corn;" and the land, "greatly enriched with the river of God," seemed to "shout for joy," and "also to sing." Such a possession, heaven-given at the first and heaven-guarded throughout, might well kindle the deepest enthusiasm.

"We find," writes one of the most learned Rabbinical commentators, supporting each assertion by a reference to Scripture,<sup>1</sup> "that thirteen things are in the sole ownership of the Holy One, blessed be His Name! and these are they: the silver, the gold, the priesthood, Israel, the first-born, the altar, the first-fruits, the anointing oil, the tabernacle of meeting, the kingship of the house of David, the sacrifices, the land of Israel, and the eldership." In truth, fair as the land was, its conjunction with higher spiritual blessings gave it its real and highest value. "Only in Palestine does the *Shechinah* manifest itself," taught the Rabbis. Outside its sacred boundaries no such revelation was possible.<sup>2</sup> It was there that rapt prophets had seen their visions, and psalmists caught strains of heavenly hymns. Palestine was the land that had Jerusalem for its capital, and on its highest hill that temple of snowy marble and glittering gold for a sanctuary, around which clustered such precious memories, hallowed thoughts, and glorious, wide-reaching hopes. There is no religion so

<sup>1</sup> *R. Bechai*. The Scripture references are: Hagg. ii. 8; Ex. xxix. 1; Numb. iii. 13; Lev. xxv. 55; Ex. xx. 24; Ex. xxv. 2; Ex. xxx. 31; Ex. xxv. 8; Numb. xxviii. 2; I Sam. xvi. 1; Lev. xxv. 23. Comp. Relandi, *Palast.* (ed. 1716), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the discussion in *Mechilta* on Ex. xii. 1.



strictly local as that of Israel. Heathenism was indeed the worship of national deities, and Judaism that of Jehovah, the God of heaven and earth. But the national deities of the heathen might be transported, and their rites adapted to foreign manners. On the other hand, while Christianity was from the first *universal* in its character and design, the religious institutions and the worship of the Pentateuch, and even the prospects opened by the prophets were, *so far as they concerned Israel, strictly of Palestine and for Palestine.* They are wholly incompatible with the permanent loss of the land. An extra-Palestinian Judaism, without priesthood, altar, temple, sacrifices, tithes, first-fruits, Sabbatical and Jubilee years, must first set aside the Pentateuch, unless, as in Christianity, all these be regarded as blossoms designed to ripen into fruit, as types pointing to, and fulfilled in higher realities.<sup>1</sup> Outside the land even the people are no longer Israel: in view of the Gentiles they are Jews; in their own view, "the dispersed abroad."

All this the Rabbis could not fail to perceive. Accordingly when, immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, they set themselves to reconstruct their broken com-

<sup>1</sup> This is not the place to explain what substitution Rabbinism proposed for sacrifices, etc. I am well aware that modern Judaism tries to prove by such passages as 1 Sam. xv. 22; Ps. li. 16, 17; Isa. i. 11-13; Hos. vi. 6, that, in the view of the prophets, sacrifices, and with them all the ritual institutions of the Pentateuch, were of no permanent importance. To the unprejudiced reader it seems difficult to understand how even party-spirit could draw such sweeping conclusions from such premisses, or how it could ever be imagined that the prophets had intended by their teaching, not to explain or apply, but to set aside the law so solemnly given on Sinai. However, the device is not new. A solitary voice ventured even in the second century on the suggestion that the sacrificial worship had been intended only by way of accommodation, to preserve Israel from lapsing into heathen rites!

monwealth, it was on a new basis indeed, but still within Palestine. Palestine was the Mount Sinai of Rabbinism. Here rose the spring of the *Halachah*, or traditional law, whence it flowed in ever-widening streams; here, for the first centuries, the learning, the influence, and the rule of Judaism centred; and there they would fain have perpetuated it. The first attempts at rivalry by the Babylonian schools of Jewish learning were keenly resented and sharply put down.<sup>1</sup> Only the force of circumstances drove the Rabbis afterwards voluntarily to seek safety and freedom in the ancient seats of their captivity, where, politically unmolested, they could give the final development to their system. It was this desire to preserve the nation and its learning in Palestine which inspired such sentiments as we are about to quote. "The very air of Palestine makes one wise," said the Rabbis. The Scriptural account of the borderland of Paradise, watered by the river Havilah, of which it is said that "the gold of that land is good," was applied to their earthly Eden, and paraphrased to mean, "there is no learning like that of Palestine." It was a saying, that "to live in Palestine was equal to the observance of all the commandments." "He that hath his permanent abode in Palestine," so taught the Talmud, "is sure of the life to come." "Three things," we read in another authority, "are Israel's through suffering: Palestine, traditional lore, and the world to come." Nor did this feeling abate with the desolation of their country. In the third and fourth centuries of our era they still taught, "He that dwelleth in Palestine is without sin."

Centuries of wandering and of changes have not torn the passionate love of this land from the heart of the people.

<sup>1</sup> See my *History of the Jewish Nation*, pp. 247, 248.

Even superstition becomes here pathetic. If the Talmud<sup>1</sup> had already expressed the principle, "Whoever is buried in the land of Israel, is as if he were buried under the altar," one of the most ancient Hebrew commentaries<sup>2</sup> goes much farther. From the injunction of Jacob and Joseph, and the desire of the fathers to be buried within the sacred soil, it is argued that those who lay there were to be the first "to walk before the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps. cxvi. 9), the first to rise from the dead and to enjoy the days of the Messiah. Not to deprive of their reward the pious, who had not the privilege of residing in Palestine, it was added, that God would make subterranean roads and passages into the Holy Land, and that, when their dust reached it, the Spirit of the Lord would raise them to new life, as it is written (Ezek. xxxvii. 12-14): "O My people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel . . . and shall put My Spirit in you, and ye shall live; and I shall place you in your own land." Almost every prayer and hymn breathes the same love of Palestine. Indeed, it were impossible, by any extracts, to convey the pathos of some of those elegies in which the Synagogue still bewails the loss of Zion, or expresses the pent-up longing for its restoration.<sup>3</sup> Desolate, they cling to its ruins, and believe, hope, and pray—oh, how ardently! in almost every prayer—for the time that shall come, when the land, like Sarah of old, will, at the bidding of the Lord, have youth, beauty, and fruitfulness

<sup>1</sup> *Cheth.* iii. a.—the reference here being most curiously to Ex. xx. 24: "An altar of earth shalt thou make to Me." Indeed, that whole page of the Talmud is very characteristic and interesting.

<sup>2</sup> *Ber. Rabba.*

<sup>3</sup> See especially the sublimest of these elegies, that by Judah ha-Levi.