

**SPECIAL SERIES NO.
5; A SKETCH OF
JEWISH HISTORY**

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Special Series No. 5; A Sketch of Jewish History by Gustav Karpeles

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SKETCH OF JEWISH HISTORY

BY

GUSTAV KARPELES

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN



PHILADELPHIA

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PREFATORY NOTE

The following lectures, translated from the German, were delivered by Doctor Karpeles during the winter of 1895-96 before the lodges of the Independent Order *B'ne B'rith* at Berlin. The translation is done from stenographic notes printed as manuscript and not published. A few slight changes have been made.

Reviews 12-4-39 M. T. T.

A brief and graphic sketch like this necessarily brings the individual views of the writer into great prominence. There may be room for other views diverging widely from his. The Committee believes, however, that the work will be useful in stimulating readers of Jewish History to a renewed and more vigilant examination of the subject in works they have not read carefully, as well as in the great work of Graetz, with which all have a certain familiarity.

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I

A SOLITARY little vessel is drifting on a vast ocean ; neither wind nor wave can do it harm. Oft-times the mountain-high billows seem about to suck it into their swirl and sink it to the bottom of the sea ; but ever again it rides upon the crests of the waves, serenely sailing on in its course. Under this metaphor our sages of old conceived the history of Israel. Israel is the tiny craft sailing in loneliness across a boundless ocean. Again and again he seems about to be engulfed by the nations ; again and again it looks as though Israel were stricken forever from the list of the peoples of earth, but he always reappears, rejuvenated, with added numbers, with increased strength.

To draw a picture, however sketchlike, of Israel's history from its earliest beginnings to the present time, it is necessary to divide it up into several periods. Naturally, the boundary lines between the periods cannot be sharply drawn. As it is, text-books of history have too long held to the traditional division into the epochs known as ancient times, middle ages, and the modern period. In point of fact, the ancient times overlap the so-called middle ages, which in turn trench upon the modern period. The division hitherto accepted must sooner or later be abandoned. Historians treating of Israel's vicissitudes are more favorably situated.

Epochs
of Jewish
History

Israel's antiquity is a well-defined period ; it comes to a close on a certain day, that on which the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of national independence occurred. The mediæval period was of great length, reaching down even into the last century. The reader can, therefore, judge for himself of how long a modern period we have the right to speak.

Closer inspection of the history of Israel, however, reveals six great periods, the end of each marked either by the removal of his activity to a new scene, or by a change of his attitude towards the problems of the spiritual life.

The *first* of these periods naturally is that extending from the earliest glimmering of historical consciousness to the destruction of the First Temple and the Captivity of Israel in Babylonia, the period to be considered in this paper. The return of the Babylonian exiles to Jerusalem and their fortunes until the total annihilation of national independence are embraced in the history of the *second* period, the most remarkable and the most important in the life of Israel, who, in its course, originated a new religion, Christianity.

The *third* period covers nearly ten centuries, during which the amazing intellectual work deposited in the two Talmuds and their cognate literature was accomplished. The *fourth* period opens with the real diaspora, the great migration of Israel from the Orient, in quest of a new home among the nations, which he found with the Arabs of Spain and northern Africa, where the Jewish

mind unfolded in new and prolific beauty, and gave to the mediæval periods of Israel's history their characteristic impress.

The *fifth* period of Jewish history begins with the day of Israel's faring forth from Spain, his second home, once more to seek an abiding place. In the search, the nation is scattered over the European lands—Holland, Germany, Poland, everywhere. It is the period of stagnation in the intellectual life of the Jews, the reaction from exuberant productiveness to lassitude and sterility—a period during which the woe inflicted by the outside world is ever on the increase, and the spirit of the nation lies crushed into impotence. It lasts until the middle of the eighteenth century, until Moses Mendelssohn inaugurates a new era by introducing the Jews into the intellectual life of Germany, and through it once more into the civilization of the world at large. The inspiration of this our *sixth* and last period has not yet expended its force, and the current of thought that will call forth its successor cannot be predicted.

He who enters upon the consideration of the history of Israel in the spirit of critical research, as one might study, for instance, the history of the Phœnicians, the Arabs, or the French, will find much that is incomprehensible and inexplicable. The fact is, —and it is conceded by cool, dispassionate, even hostile historians—that the history of the Jews is a history of miracles and enigmas. But the miracles and enigmas are explained by the course of the history:

Peculiarity
of Jewish
History

the *history* is testimony to the truth of the *miracles!* The historical account remains a riddle only to him who scans it callously and phlegmatically; but he who considers it with the eye of faith, who approaches it mindful of the biblical injunction: "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground," sees every feature of the history clearly; before him the development of Israel lies as an open book, telling how he has risen from humble, obscure beginnings to a position of prime importance in the culture and evolution of mankind.

On a sunny day—so reports the first modern historian of the Jews—nomad tribes entered the land of Canaan; they were our ancestors. We open the first books of the Bible, for in treating of the earliest period of Israel's history, we are in the fortunate position of having but to repeat an oft-told tale, whose incidents are part and parcel of our memory. Who is not familiar with the stories of the Bible? The Garden of Eden is disclosed to our view; we hear the serpent hiss; the rush of the waters of the deluge falls upon our ears; Noah's ark arises out of the abyss of destruction; with absorbed interest we follow the history of our patriarchs, the exemplars of our race.

Patriarch-
al History The father of our nation, Abraham, appears before our vision, sturdy and great, towering above his age. In a time in which men and beasts are offered as sacrifices everywhere, he understands God's summons to sacrifice his only son in the spirit, and so realizes that human sacri-