

## Chapter IX

### SLAVERY

IF there is one item which is almost wholly absent from our world but which was universally taken for granted in the first century A.D. it is that of slavery. Let us begin by seeing how it operated among the Jews. If you had been the son or daughter of a well-to-do citizen of Jerusalem, your father might very well have had in his establishment one or more servants who were not hired in the way that we hire cooks, housemaids and gardeners, but who were actually the *property* of your father. That is to say he had bought them somewhere, and they were not free to leave his service. He owned them as much as you may own a dog or a pony that has been given you for a present. There were several ways in which this could happen. Suppose that a man was destitute. He could, if he liked, sell himself to somebody, and in that case he became the bondman of that person. This meant that except under certain conditions he lost his freedom. He could also, if he had a little girl under the age of twelve, and whom he was too poor to maintain, sell her to somebody as a female slave. In this case, however, the child could be bound for no longer than a maximum of six years, and when she became old enough to marry, she had either to be taken in marriage by her master or his son, if he had one, or if they did not want her, she had to be set free. Another way in which people became slaves was owing to crime or debt. If someone owed money, he could sell himself to his creditor, and if he were a thief, and were unable to make restitution of the stolen goods, the court could

sell him to be sold to the person from whom he had stolen them. Prisoners of war could also be bought and sold by the states whose armies had captured them, and so Jews could, if they so wished, buy foreign slaves. Slaves, however, even though they were chattels, had certain privileges, and were under some measure of legal protection. Thus, a foreign slave could be circumcised and become virtually a Jew, being allowed to attend Passover and eat the Passover meal, and if his master were a priest, to share the food with the priest. Also he was not to be allowed to work on Sabbath. He might be chastised, but he must not be deliberately killed, and he must not suffer mutilation on his master's hands. Indeed, Jews prided themselves that they never treated their slaves with cruelty.<sup>1</sup> That, they said, was only done among the Gentiles. Still the position of slaves was, to our thinking, a degraded one. They could not own property absolutely. Anything which came into their possession belonged to their masters, and they could be bequeathed by will in just the same way as pieces of furniture or livestock on a farm. They could, however, under certain circumstances, be set free, by what was called an act of manumission, or they might be redeemed by their friends or relatives if they had the money to do so. Whenever a slave was freed, he or she was entitled under ordinary conditions to a sum of money as a parting gift or gratuity. This rule did not apply in the case of slaves who had sold themselves into bondage, nor to those who had managed to get redeemed at a lower rate than their original purchase price. And then there was

<sup>1</sup> There was a Roman saying: 'He who buys a Hebrew slave buys a master to himself', because such slaves could demand special treatment. Juvenal depicts a Roman lady of the smart class as saying haughtily: 'Is a slave really a man?'

always the old Jewish custom of the year of Jubilee, in which slaves could be set free. When freed, they often took the name of their former owner, so that in Rome, many slaves of Jewish origin, when they became freedmen, took good Roman names.<sup>1</sup> Although it was the duty of the master to give decent burial to any slave who died in his service, he was forbidden to make any mourning ceremonies for the deceased.

Let us now turn to the condition of slaves among non-Jewish peoples. Those who admire the Greeks ought to realise how completely Greek civilisation was built upon the existence of a slave class. According to a census made in the state of Attica in 309 B.C., there were then 21,000 male, free citizens of full age against 400,000 slaves and another estimate makes the total population of 500,000 to be made up of 90,000 citizens, 45,000 resident aliens, and 365,000 slaves. Even the poorest citizen in Athens owned at least one slave. The father of Demosthenes owned about fifty, and Nicias had a thousand slaves working for him in the mines. Roman slaves were usually employed in the household or on the farm, and not, as in Greece, for industrial purposes. The conditions of slaves in the Greek mines were disgraceful. Under Greek law all prisoners of war automatically became the property of the conqueror, but a good many were set free on payment of a ransom. Nevertheless, most of the Greek slaves were acquired by purchase, some of them being kidnapped by pirates

<sup>1</sup> The price of Jewish slaves is given in the Talmud as either one to two or five to ten *mnas*, whereas a Gentile slave could fetch as much as 100 *mnas*. This difference was due to the fact that the maximum time for the use of a Jewish slave could only be six years, till the next year of Jubilee, whereas a Gentile slave might remain his master's property all his life and was therefore more valuable.

sold in the slave markets of Athens and the other Greek states, and there were also regular slave-traders. The Greeks, perhaps, on the whole treated their slaves rather better than neighbouring nations, but that is saying much. Slaves in the mines worked in chains, and the rate of mortality was terribly high, owing to the lack of ventilation. Slaves generally expected to be tortured if giving evidence in a law court, but on the other hand the life of the slave was protected even from his master, and he could not be put to death without the sentence of a law court. Slaves in danger of having their chastity violated could take sanctuary in a temple, and then claim the privilege of being sold to a different master. Among the Greeks slavery went on much in this way up to Christian times, and even then it persisted for some centuries, and only faded out gradually.

The status of Roman slaves was in some ways not so good. The slave was legally a chattel, completely in the power of his master, and was a 'thing' and not a 'person'. At the same time, unlike an animal, a slave could change his status, obtain his freedom, and so become a legal 'person', and slaves were often well treated, and allowed to eat at the same table as their owners. Roman slaves, however, could not legally marry, nor could they actually own any property. Anything conveyed to them thereby became technically the property of their owner. It was a general rule that illegitimate children followed the status of the mother, so that if a female slave had any children, they became slaves themselves, but the usual way in which persons became slaves was either by capture, or by conviction in respect of some crime. Prisoners taken by the Roman army were usually either kept by the State as government slaves, or sold by the Treasury to

private purchasers. Very occasionally they were distributed among the troops by lot. Anybody who evaded military service was also liable to slavery, and some unfortunate people even sold themselves as slaves.

The two chief ways in which slaves might become free were either by a legal act on the part of their owners, or through a remission obtained by various ways, such as the payment of a ransom, or the quashing of slave-status by the State; but there were a good many other ways, such as being turned off by one's owner on account of ill-health, or as a reward for detecting crime.

The occupation of slave-dealer was considered disreputable, but a great deal of money was made out of it. Slaves at Rome were usually sold by auction. They were put on a rostrum where everybody could see them, and they were stripped naked and sometimes medically examined, so as to avoid the concealment of physical defects by dealers. Slaves newly imported (being somewhat in demand) had their feet whitened with chalk, and tied round the neck was a sort of certificate or written guarantee giving the character of the slave. Slaves of exceptional beauty were usually sold by private treaty. A dealer was in theory legally bound to state all the defects in the slave, and if he tricked the buyer by falsehood he was liable to have to take the slave back up to a period of six months from the time of the sale, or to pay compensation. The nationality of the slave had also to be declared. It was a serious criminal offence to harbour runaway slaves, and was the equivalent of being a receiver of stolen property.

We must try to picture ourselves what everyday life both for slaves and free people must have been under such conditions. Although it was usual to allow slaves

days at public festivals, owners might employ their slaves as many hours a day as they pleased, and the punishments inflicted upon them were terrible. Roman slaves barbarously treated female slaves at the slightest provocation in their toilet. Sometimes slaves had a large wooden pole fastened to their necks and their hands tied to it, and were then made to carry it about.

Strange to say, the status of slavery ended with death, so that it was not only the duty of an owner to bury his slave, but slaves were sometimes even given burial along with their owners.

As among the Greeks, so among the Romans and Jews, slavery only gradually declined, but the enhanced status given by Christ to every individual soul, and also the teaching of the Stoic philosophers about the brotherhood of man (which harmonised with it to some extent), made it difficult for the institution of slavery to survive, though it persisted in a measure right on into the Middle Ages, and was unhappily revived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the white races in their treatment of coloured people, owing to a rather wilful misunderstanding of Scripture.

Salo Wittmayer Baron, in his *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1952), says that the rabbis of the first century certainly did much to protect their Gentile slaves. They strongly discouraged concubinage with slaves, as creating a large hereditary class of half-castes. At the same time they also discouraged manumission, since the freeing of slaves created an influx into the Jewish community.

It was said also that the proverbial maxims of slaves were: Love one another. Love robbery. Love licentiousness. Hate your masters, and never tell the truth.

Most of the negroes who control the sale of roast chestnuts today in the streets of Jerusalem on the

Jordan side, are said to be the descendants of negro slaves, but I doubt whether any of these have a pedigree going back to the first century. Anyhow, they are picturesque figures, wearing the brightest of clothing, with little three-legged stools and charcoal braziers.

## Chapter X

### EDUCATION

MANY people still seem to think that in the days of Christ there were no schools, and indeed that universal education is something that was brought in during the nineteenth century. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Organised education of children is a most ancient thing. We find it in Mesopotamia perhaps a thousand years before Christ, where the remains of schools with benches for the scholars have been dug up. We find it in Egypt at the same period, and we know, from the papyrus remains, something of what the school books were like. In the age of the New Testament the education of the young was well developed, although the methods differed in different communities. It was, in the opinion of some scholars the age of the widest literacy for about 1800 years to come. Graffiti scrawled on rocks in Transjordan show what a very large percentage of the population was in some measure able to read and write.<sup>1</sup>

Let us start with Palestine. It will surprise many to know that there were schools at least in every town, and compulsory education in them for all children above the age of six. But matters went much further than that. From its earliest days every Jewish child was surrounded with a distinct atmosphere. First there was the admission to membership of the community by

<sup>1</sup> One of these may be quoted: '—the flute-player went out into the desert and was killed. How vain is life!' (From a rock near the A.F. station at Mafrak.)