

# ZIONISM AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL: IV

By Moses Miller

IN the first article of this series we examined the Marxist definition of the "nation" and showed how it had been arrived at. Basing ourselves on this analysis, we went on to prove that the Jewish people as a whole could not be said to constitute a nation. In the next two articles we showed how idealistic definitions of the Jewish people—that is, conceptions that the Jews were determined by consciousness alone—fail to answer many basic questions of Jewish history, and in fact have distorted present-day perspectives of the Jewish people in the struggle for their rights. In the present article we shall delve a little more deeply into the elements that determine the nature of the Jewish people in the past and present.

The noted Jewish scholar, Solomon Zeitlin, recently wrote that "No definition of the Jew can be made *de novo*; it must be based upon the centuries-old experience of the Jewish people."<sup>1</sup> We could accept this thesis provided we agreed with the meaning of the term "experience." Zeitlin correctly argues that Jews throughout the world are not a nation because "Jews had no common territory" since the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. From this it might appear that Zeitlin believes that we cannot know what is a people's "experience" unless we study the material conditions of their existence. But he quickly repudiates this approach. In reply to those who maintain that Jews in different lands constitute various types of groups such as a nation in one country, a national minority in another and a national group in yet another, Zeitlin remarks: "This division is artificial. Its premise is that what Jews are and what Judaism is depend upon a temporary set of political conditions. But political conditions may change at any time; and international conditions cannot define the nature of Judaism."

Here Zeitlin denies any connection between the "experience" of the Jew and any such mundane considerations as politics or economics. Yet, further along in Zeitlin's article one finds the following statement: "Yes, the Jews who now live in Palestine constitute a nationality. . . . But their nation will not include the great majority of Jews in the world who live outside of Palestine." With this statement we readily agree. But it contradicts Zeitlin's previous thesis. For if "political" and "international considerations," as Zeitlin said earlier, cannot modify and direct the course of Jewish experience, how is it possible that Jews in Israel should constitute a nation and Jews in other parts of the world should constitute something else?

What Zeitlin means by "experience" becomes clear when he gives his own definition of Jewish status. "As for the Jews themselves, they never surrendered their own idea of

Judaism. They maintained that Judaism was a universal religion, themselves the people of God." Thus "experience" becomes a purely subjective phenomenon. The history of any given period, according to this view, would be determined by what people said and thought about themselves. If this approach is applied to early Biblical history and the social protest of the prophets, we should be forced to conclude that the evils of the time were only the result of the wickedness of men. For that is how the prophets explained their times. But an historical analysis of the period shows that the social struggles, which precipitated eloquent protests by the prophets, resulted from basic economic conditions.

## Basis of Prophecy

Following is an historical analysis of the Biblical period which shows not only the real struggles of the age but also why the prophets became conscious of these struggles in the terms in which they did. "In the *Old Testament*," writes Eric Roll in his *A History of Economic Thought* (1946), "there is mirrored the struggle between the tribal society, with communal property and communally controlled economic activity, and the impersonal economic process of a class society based on private property. . . ."

"The picture of the society of the time which is drawn in *Kings*, and more emphatically still in the laments, protests, and visions of the prophets, is one of marked division between rich and poor. The luxury of the court [Hebrew monarchy—*M.M.*] was based upon the gradual development of an enslaved class. The expense of the royal household, wars, and lavish public buildings were financed by tolls . . . by conscription of labor and heavy taxation. The results were impoverishment of the masses, alienation of land. . . ."

"This change of economic structure is reflected in the spiritual revolt of the prophets. . . . They were able to describe objectively the consequences of the existing social order, but they did not understand the forces which were responsible for the appearance of the order itself. . . ."

"The evils which the prophets denounced were not realized to be part of a new economic structure; they were ascribed to a change of men's hearts. Covetousness and corruption, unrelated to the more favorable soil in which they could now flourish were alone regarded as the cause of misery. The remedy was equally an idealistic one: a full acceptance of God's law. . . . A clear vision of a new social structure for the future was impossible. The expansion of the forces of production and man's growing mastery over nature still demanded the recently established institutions. In so far, therefore, as the prophets were concerned with the social order as well as with man's behavior,

<sup>1</sup> "What Then Are the Jews?" *Menorah Journal*, Autumn 1947.

they could only express a vain hope for a return to more primitive conditions" (p. 13).

This clear cut and fundamental description of the Biblical period will not be found in any single bourgeois Jewish history book. As a result, one can get no real picture of the period, nor even, for that matter, any insight into the true significance of the prophetic revolt. Certainly the history of the Jewish people, particularly in ancient and even in medieval times, *appears* from all accounts to be the history of a *religious* group. This is particularly true when one's approach to history is based on a study of the sayings and the literature of any given period. From these sources one would most certainly conclude that religion was not only the dominating, but also the *decisive* factor in Jewish survival. But to accept the opinions which men held in any given period without analyzing why they held these opinions and the conditions that led them to develop these ideas is not to reconstruct history but the history of men's illusions. Unfortunately, this principle has been recognized perhaps least by historians of the Jewish people.

### **Religion and Jewish Experience**

Like all primitive peoples the early Hebrews were confronted with newly developing economic conditions, which were undermining their comparatively peaceful existence. But ancient tribal peoples of course were unable to understand that the ensuing struggles were class struggles. Their level of consciousness, determined by the material conditions of their life, led them to explain the events of their time in terms of a supernatural power which was wreaking its vengeance upon the people for their iniquities. The historian of this period who substantially accepts this ancient view and concludes that religion determined the struggles of the epoch, is in fact turning history on its head. For it was not religion that was shaping the destiny of the Jew but the Jew in society who was shaping religion. Nor is this true only of the Hebrew tribes. The histories of all ancient peoples appear to be determined by religion because social phenomena were meaningful to ancient peoples only when clothed in religious garb. Too many historians confuse the actual *content* of the struggle with the religious *form* in which the struggle was expressed.

The "experience" of the Jewish people is not a mystical phenomenon but a product of socio-economic conditions. Our people's outlook, philosophy and ideology are molded by the material conditions of life. And we must study the socio-economic conditions of the Jewish people if we are to understand Jewish survival and status. It is also essential to add this little recognized fact, namely, that Jewish life has unceasingly been intertwined with that of other peoples. The Jewish "experience" cannot be really understood, therefore, without a knowledge of the material conditions of the peoples in whose midst the Jews lived.

We cannot delve into the entire history of the Jewish people here. The task is obviously beyond the scope of this series and in the final analysis is unnecessary for our purposes. One period which we must explore in some de-

tail, however, is that in which capitalism begins to emerge. For this is the period in which the national question arises. A thorough and comprehensive survey of this period is necessary if we are to begin to establish a firm foundation for understanding clearly the development and the formation of the several Jewish communities in modern life. But Jewish life in this period of the formation of nations, that is, the feudal period, cannot be fully grasped unless we understand the essence and content of feudal life *as a whole*. We shall therefore devote the remainder of this article to gaining a general picture of feudal society and show in the next article how the emergence of Europe from feudalism determined the course of the "Jewish problem" in modern times.

### **Classes in Feudal Life**

Feudal life, in the main, was dominated by the manorial system, *i.e.*, a system in which the class divisions of society were based upon land ownership. Two social classes emerge clearly and sharply in this period, the nobility and the peasantry. People lived in widely separated manors, each of which was ruled over by a given lord or noble. Carleton J. Hayes describes these classes as follows: "The nobility comprised men who gained a living from the soil without manual labor. They held the land on feudal tenure, that is to say, they had a right to be supported by the peasants living on their estates, and in return, they owed to some higher or wealthier nobleman or to the king certain duties. . . . The estate of each nobleman might embrace a single farm, or 'manor' as it was called, inclosing a petty hamlet or village; or it might include dozens of such manors; or if the landlord were a particularly mighty magnate or powerful prelate, it might stretch over whole counties. . . ."

"To the lord of the manor the serf was under many and varied obligations, the most essential of which may be grouped conveniently as follows: (1) The serf had to work without pay two or three days in each week on the strips of land and the fields whose produce belonged exclusively to the nobleman. In the harvest season extra days, known as 'boon days' were stipulated on which the serf must leave his own work in order to harvest for the lord. . . . (2) The serf had to pay occasional dues, customarily 'in kind.' (3) Ovens, wine presses, grist-mills, and bridges were usually owned solely by the nobleman, and each time the peasant used them he was obliged to give one of his loaves of bread, a share of his wine, a bushel of his grain, or a toll-fee, as a kind of rent. . . ."

The serf was thus neither completely free nor yet completely slave. He had his own plot of ground and was allowed to work it for his own benefit at least one or two days a week. Yet he was not a free man. He was "attached to the soil" and was forbidden to leave unless he purchased his freedom. Nor was he a wage laborer for he received no wages for the work he performed for his lord.

<sup>2</sup>Carleton J. Hayes, *A Political and Social History of Modern Europe* (1925), p. 30.

Each manor was in fact a world unto itself, a self-sufficient economic entity. Practically everything that was needed for existence was produced on the manorial estate. And this was true not only of agriculture. In most instances, either serfs or freedmen, attached to the manor as artisans, produced all necessary articles. Only in rare cases were any products bought by the lords from travelling artisans. Feudal society was therefore also characterized by a *natural* economy, or in other words an economy whose primary purpose was that of production for use, for satisfying the needs of a given community and not of production for sale or for the attainment of profit.

This self-sufficiency and self-contained economic existence fostered exclusiveness and hardly motivated any urge towards contact with the outside world. The manor or even the larger feudal principality constituted a little island seldom affected to any extent by events in any other manor or domain. The effect upon the feudal mind of this type of economic system and existence is significant. Concepts and ideas, which seem commonplace to us, had no meaning to the feudal man. Feudal men undoubtedly had some sense of belonging to a given community, primitive as the feeling may have been. Yet such concepts as "Patriotism," love of homeland, a sense of "national unity," were unknown in the feudal world. "According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*," writes Hans Kohn, "the term 'patriot' was first used at the end of the seventeenth century for one who supported the rights of the country against the King. . . . The word 'patriotic' in the modern sense was first used in 1757; the word 'patriotism' in 1726. The word 'national' in the sense of peculiar to a people of a particular country, characteristic or distinctive of a nation, was first used in 1625; in the sense of patriotic in 1711. The word 'nationalist' was first used in 1715; 'nationality' in the sense of nationalism or national feeling, in 1772; whereas 'nationalism' was not used at all until 1836."<sup>3</sup>

### **A Self-Contained Economy**

From a study of the feudal mode of existence, one can see that it was self-contained and isolated. The consciousness of feudal man was "particularistic," that is, physically and intellectually bounded by his limited manorial community. This type of economic existence did not require driving forces that would necessitate closer, more intimate ties between large aggregates of people. "To a man of the middle ages 'his country' meant little more than the neighborhood in which he lived," writes E. A. Westermarck. "The first duty of the vassal was to be loyal to his lord; but no national spirit bound together the various barons of one country. . . . When Machiavelli declared that he preferred his country to the safety of his soul, people considered him guilty of blasphemy; and when the Venetians defied the papal thunders by averring that they were Venetians in the first place and only Christians in the second, the world heard them with amazement."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The Idea of Nationalism, p. 647.

<sup>4</sup>Origin and Development of Moral Ideas, Vol. II, p. 180.

In the transition from the feudal to modern, capitalistic society, an integral part of the struggle for nationhood was the tremendous conflict in each country over the question of language. We recall, for example, the attempt on the part of the tsars of Russia to "Russify" all nationalities within the empire. Attempts were constantly made to force the Russian language upon all non-Russian nationalities and forcible means were constantly used to illegalize and outlaw the native tongues of the many peoples in the empire. Language was thus used as an important political weapon in the struggle for the subjugation of peoples. And in turn these peoples in their struggle for self determination bitterly fought back and used the question of language as an important weapon for uniting the people against the tsar.

But no such struggles ever took place in feudal times. While Latin was the universal language of the Middle Ages (a phenomenon with which we shall deal later), the structure of feudal society led to the development of local dialects and tongues. Language did not constitute a political question nor were struggles ever waged over the issue of subordinating one language to another. To the medieval mind, language was regarded merely as a means for communication and nothing else.

### **Church in Feudal Society**

In view of all these considerations, it is easy to see that the economy of feudal times operated against the rise of stable national communities and national consciousness. However, another basic phase of feudal life also operated powerfully against the rise of national consciousness. This was the Catholic Church. In sharp contrast to the particularism and exclusiveness of the manorial system stood the Catholic Church, which was universal and cosmopolitan. "The Middle Ages," writes Frederick Engels, "had developed out of raw primitiveness. It had done away with old civilization, old philosophy, politics, jurisprudence, in order to begin anew in every respect. The only thing which it had retained from the old shattered world was Christianity and a number of half ruined cities deprived of their civilization. As a consequence, the clergy retained a monopoly of intellectual education, a phenomenon to be found in every primitive stage of development, and education itself had acquired a predominantly theological nature.

"In the hands of the clergy, politics and jurisprudence, as well as other sciences, remained branches of theology, and were treated according to the principles prevailing in the latter. The dogmas of the church were at the same time political axioms, and Bible quotations had the validity of law in every court. . . . This supremacy of theology in the realm of intellectual activities was at the same time a logical consequence of the situation of the church as the most general force coordinating and sanctioning existing feudal domination."<sup>5</sup>

The feudal church was equally powerful as both a reli-

<sup>5</sup>Peasant Wars in Germany, p. 52.

gious and secular institution. The church was one of the greatest landowners. This combination of spiritual and temporal power made the church "the great international center of feudalism. It united the whole of feudalized Western Europe, in spite of all internal wars, into one grand political system . . . It surrounded feudal institutions with the halo of divine consecration."<sup>6</sup>

### *A Theological Intellectual Life*

Education was in the hands of the church. Theology was the foundation of all knowledge in this period, hence education, like medieval religion itself, was universalistic, that is, was not oriented to a time and place, but was conceived as eternal and unchanging. Theology was the "queen of the sciences" and all secular investigation was considered the "handmaiden of theology." This order of knowledge flowed from the fact that the feudal economy had little need of technological advance. No incentive was therefore offered to experimentation and the development of technique. Knowledge of the Bible and the Gospels was considered all that a man need know.

Though the vernacular languages and literature began to develop in the eleventh century, during most of the feudal period Latin was the universal language for education, politics and the limited trading that did exist in western Europe. Those who could read, the clergy, were limited to the Bible and a few theological works. The church also discouraged any attempt on the part of the mass of the population to learn to read. There are many church edicts that show effectively how the church helped the feudal order to maintain the status quo. One such edict says: "We forbid the layman to have books of the Old and New Testament. Translations of these books into the popular language are forbidden. Pope Innocent III in his epistle 'to all those faithful in Christ' wrote: 'the secret foundations of faith cannot be revealed to everyone, as they may not be understood . . . and therefore it was said in the divine law, that if a beast approached a mountain, it would be stoned. Likewise, a common person cannot reach the heights of the holy gospels.'"

However, feudal society was not absolutely static, for then it would exist perpetually. It contained within itself forces which gradually matured until they effectively challenged the feudal mode of production. "The greatest division of material and mental labor," said Marx and Engels, "is the separation of town and country." This division of labor developed during feudalism until it brought about the emergence of the town, whose growth signifies the increase in influence of the merchant, trader and artisan, an influence which initiated the processes which finally led to the downfall of feudalism.

In *A History of Europe*, Ferdinand Schevill pictures this growth of the town. "The earliest medieval trade," he writes, "had necessarily been determined by the political-

economic conditions prevailing under feudalism. We must think of the long centuries of the Germanic settlement as substantially without security, without roads, without conveniences of living of even the humblest sort. Society satisfied at best an irreducible minimum of human wants and was simpler, ruder and more impecunious than we can easily imagine. There, when about 1000 A.D. trade began to revive, it crept slowly and cautiously along what in a socially chaotic world stood out as the safest routes of travel. These were the shore-lines of the Mediterranean, the North, and the Baltic seas, as well as the courses of the leading navigable rivers, such as the Po, the Seine, the Rhone, the Danube, the Rhine and the Thames. Along these sea and river routes the first thriving towns came to life, though with the spread of the movement the interior, in its turn, became gradually dotted with settlements planted at bridges or crossroads or nestling under the protecting shadow of some castle or monastery" (p. 25).

### *Trade and the Rising Town*

In the early feudal period, the town, like the village or the manor, was under the sway of the local lord and production in the main was for local use and not for profit. Relations in the town were based on a similar hierarchical class structure to those of the manor. Just as the manor relationships were based on land ownership with the lord who owned the property as complete master and the serf or the peasant tied to the land, the town hierarchy was likewise established between the individual artisan, who owned his own tools and commanded a small capital, and the apprentice and the journeyman whom he dominated and attached to himself by contractual bonds.

As trade began to develop and handicraft production simultaneously advanced, new horizons opened for the artisan and the merchant. The conditions under which the town and therefore the artisan and merchant were subordinated to the feudal lord, became shackles upon town development. Opportunities of producing for a larger market and for profit were restricted by the feudal system while the possibilities for the free producer, which heretofore had not existed, constantly widened. The artisan therefore tried to throw off those restrictions which hampered his development as a free producer. Friction between the town and the feudal lord inevitably intensified.

The history of medieval Europe shows that in those places where geographical and social factors favored the development of overseas trade, towns arose and became major trading centers. That is why towns first developed in Italy, which is situated along the Mediterranean and therefore most advantageously located for trade in certain luxuries like silk with the Byzantine and the Arab empires.

This town development contributed greatly to the breakdown of the feudal economic system. The advance of trade tremendously stimulated town development and the concentration of greater numbers of people for trading. On

<sup>6</sup> F. Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, p. 16.

the other hand, the profit gained from trade and commerce acted as a stimulus for further profit-making. As trade continued as a dominant feature of the period, attempts were also begun to find methods of producing the imported products in the European towns themselves. It was not long before merchants imported raw materials to be worked up at home in place of the imported finished product. Here we have the elementary beginnings of the system of manufacture.

### **Obstacles to Commerce**

Tremendous obstacles had to be overcome by this rising merchant class and rising bourgeoisie. The hazards of feudal travel, the lack of roads, the onerous system of tolls paid to the lord at rivers, bridges and roads, the variety of legal systems and coinage, that changed every few miles, are a few of the obstacles that had to be broken down before commodity production could develop.

Thus the merchant and the artisan found themselves increasingly in conflict with the manorial system and its particularism, which worked against the economic unification of the country. These new economic elements also found themselves opposed to the church and its universalism, the array of church laws and traditions which gave powerful sanction to the feudal order. It is no accident, therefore, that the struggle against the Catholic church was one of the first to develop in the breaking down of feudalism. As Engels has pointed out, "all general and overt attacks on feudalism, in the first place attacks on the church, all revolutionary, social and political doctrines, necessarily became theological heresies. In order to be attacked, existing social conditions had to be stripped of their aureole of sanctity."<sup>7</sup>

In effect, therefore, both the merchant and the artisan were undertaking a process which necessarily led to the unification of their country. The merchant who travelled to many countries to buy and sell quickly ran up against competition from other buyers. His ability to buy as cheaply as possible and to sell as dearly as possible, were necessarily conditioned not only by factors operating in the foreign market but even more by conditions at home. His ability to compete could be strengthened if his home country gave him greater protection and cheaper labor and unification of the country would minimize the difficulty of travel and exchange. Antagonisms with competitors from other countries began to appear as national antagonisms based on differences of nation and country. The merchant was therefore vitally concerned that his country should become ever more unified. Towards this end he favored the establishment of a strong central government which could enact laws which would facilitate trade.

The artisan was similarly concerned with the unification of the country although in the earlier stages of this development the artisan was not so favorably situated as the

merchant because of feudal restrictions on the development of production and limitation of the number of journeymen that he could employ. The artisan was dependent on the countryside for raw materials and also for expansion of the market for his finished product. Feudal control hampered his ability to expand production. Like the merchant, he stood to gain from a uniform tax and money system which would make it easier for him to engage in business throughout the country.

### **Feudal Breakdown**

All these consequences of town development involved a tendency to break down the economy and mental outlook of feudal society. Serfs fled to the towns seeking refuge from oppression in the villages and manors. To these towns also came people intent upon transaction of business. The town as a center of economic life continued to grow and to develop. But the town became not only the economic but also the intellectual center of the country. The national language spoken in the town gradually became that of the merchants and of educated people and this language necessarily began to spread throughout the country. Not only did it begin to supplant Latin; it also began to replace the local dialects. Thus national languages came into existence all over western Europe.

These are the factors which Lenin noted when he stated that "Throughout the world the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked up with national movement. The economic basis of these movements is the fact that in order to achieve complete victory for commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the whole market, must have politically unified territory with a population speaking the same language, and all the obstacles to the development of this language and to its consolidation in literature must be removed. Language is the most important means of human intercourse. Unity of language and its unimpeded development are most important conditions for genuinely free and extensive commercial intercourse on a scale commensurate with modern capitalism, for a free and broad grouping of the population in all its separate classes and lastly, for the establishment of close connection between the market and each and every proprietor, big and little, seller and buyer."<sup>8</sup>

And it was Stalin who profoundly observed that "the market is the first school in which the bourgeoisie learns its nationalism."

The rise of the bourgeoisie, its quest for power and its inevitable conflict with the feudal system led to the formation of the nation. In the first stages, therefore, the national struggle is essentially a struggle of the bourgeoisie. In the next article we shall discuss how this movement develops and encompasses the mass of the people and thus becomes a mass democratic struggle and its effects on the development of the Jewish people.

(To be continued)

<sup>7</sup> *Peasant Wars in Germany*, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Right of Nations to Self Determination*, p. 10.