

The Attitude of Judaism towards War.

BY THE REV. J. ABELSON, D.LIT., PRINCIPAL OF ARIA COLLEGE, PORTSMOUTH.

THE war overshadows everything. Its subtle influence trickles down to the most unsuspected nook and cranny of the everyday existence. Hence it is only natural that the literary sphere should suffer invasion by it too, and that the stream of books and pamphlets poured out from our printing-presses without surcease should be coloured with a more than proportionate admixture of bellicose material. Verily, to the making of war-books there is no seeming end. People are averse to reading anything that has no bearing upon the world's great trouble. All other problems sink into the limbo of the neglected. They look so ridiculously small, so impotent and unavailing. Why trouble to contend with the dwarf when the giant is in front of you, hurling at you his arrows, firebrands, death; challenging you to a combat which demands all your reserves of strength and resource?

The readers of war-literature fall into many classes. Some read because they want to know why the war started, others because they want to discover when it will end. To some again it is a welcome opportunity for renewing acquaintance with history and geography; to others again it is the means of gaining a freshened insight into the ever-diverting problem of international politics. All these classes of readers are moved either by mere sentiment or by a desire for enlightenment, or by both of these combined. And this is quite natural and proper. But there is another set of readers, who read because they are perplexed with the religious issues involved. They want to find out whether war is, or is not, a complete contradiction of the truth of religion. For war means the violent and wanton destruction of human life. It is murder, and those who participate in it are blood-guilty. As such, it is a violation of the primary moral laws enjoined by God, laws which tell us about loving our neighbour and forgiving our enemy and spreading peace and pursuing it at all costs. If the contending nations profess a religion, does not their action grossly belie their profession? Is it, or is it not, hypocrisy in a fighting man to pray to God? Is war any sort of proof that religion has no hold on men, no mean-

ing for them, and that the world, in spite of what any of us may say to the contrary, has in reality advanced very little beyond the 'tooth and claw' period of animal existence?

Every religion examines the problem from its own special angle. What has Judaism to say? It is noteworthy that Jewish text-books on ethics and religion either ignore the question or give it a very scant space. The best text-book by an English Jew—the Rev. Morris Joseph's *Judaism as Creed and Life*—says, 'The war-loving Jew is a contradiction-in-terms.' Again, in another place, the book says, 'The Jew who is true to himself . . . can never consistently belong to a war-party.' Now these assertions are true on two assumptions, viz.—(a) that the Jew is free to choose between the two alternatives, war and peace; (b) that the war in question is offensive and not defensive. Granted these two conditions, it follows from the most prominent teachings as well as from the general spirit and tenor of Judaism that it is as Jewish to love peace as it is un-Jewish to desire war. But these two conditions existed only when the Jews were an independent and autonomous nation settled on their own land and governed by their own laws. If they went so far as to clamour for war when settlement by peaceful means was possible, then were they guilty of breaking with the teachings of their faith. A similar guilt was theirs if they initiated an unprovoked war, if a desire for conquest or a greed for new possessions urged them on to start a struggle with an unoffending kingdom. The Prophets of the Old Testament lived in the heart of such contingencies; and, as we know, their mission consisted in quelling all war-like aspirations among the Israelites and advocating peace as the sublimest ideal of life. But all this is ancient history. The Jew has for long been a native or a naturalized subject of every land under the sun. He has had no hand in the making of war, no voice in the unmaking of it. It is his to do the bidding of the particular country in which he dwells. His patriotism takes on just this turn. He coalesces completely with the aims and interests of his land. An elementary feeling of citizenship dictates this course. When

war breaks out, the State calls for troops. To hold back would be disloyalty on his part. When his country is engaged in warfare it is not for him to question why! but to rally to her help, and work, with the others, for victory. He cannot say, 'I am a Jew, and my religion forbids my belonging to a war-party.' No; he must, for the nonce, actually and really become 'a war-loving Jew.' Here then comes, on deeper consideration, the pressing query, 'Is it right or is it wrong for a Jew to participate in active warfare?' Does Judaism allow or does it forbid the practice of using armed force? A general survey of Jewish law and custom points to the fact that we possess no authoritative dogmas on the question. In Christian theology we do meet with certain pronouncedly dogmatic assertions on the part of the Church Fathers. They spoke in the name of the Church, and their views were meant to be binding on the would-be recruit. Men like Tertullian, St. Basil, Athanasius, Augustine, all expressed themselves freely and strongly on the matter. But there is anything but unanimity in their opinions, and—what is more to the point—wars went on just the same whatever they may have thought or advised. It was always the question of high morality *versus* stern necessity, the ideal pitted against the real. Military service involved the taking of life. Religion and morality rebelled against this. But human nature being what it is, men and nations will always quarrel and wars will always recur. The weak and defenceless will then have to be protected. Homes, families, lives must be secured against invasion, against savage orgies of lust and cruelty. Hence to forbid men enlisting or taking part in warfare would in the end amount to an act of gross injustice. Hence too, whatever may have been the scruples of the Church's leaders, whatever they may have preached about the lawfulness or unlawfulness of a Christian to bear arms, whatever distinctions they may have attempted to draw between holy and unholy wars, theirs was nothing more than a voice crying in the wilderness; and wars raged unchecked throughout the centuries, regardless of all dogmas, doctrines, rubrics, and what not. The Crusaders are a typical proof. They are enough to show us to what a fantastic *reductio ad absurdum* the mediæval Church was led by an attempt to put a halo of sanctity round what was in reality a series of brutal and bloodthirsty onslaughts on innocent lives and property.

The Synagogue Fathers did not dogmatize and took up no 'attitudes' in this sense. It is hard to imagine the case of a Jew going to a Rabbi and asking him whether he would sanction his following the calling of a soldier. Were such a query put forth, the reply would probably be, 'Yes, you may, provided you try your best to observe as many of the cardinal principles and ceremonies of Judaism as your military duties will allow you to do.' The legality of war itself from the standpoint of Jewish teaching was never called into question. And there is a way of accounting for the fact. Judaism whether as religious belief or as system of law never sets itself in opposition to the salient facts of life as they are. It possesses that 'sweet reasonableness' which Matthew Arnold so often talked about. It is an eminently practical religion shot through with a strong current of downright utilitarianism. It preaches ideals, great and sublime ideals, many of them unattainable except after a course of most rigorous self-sanctification. But in pleading for the ideal it never loses sight of the real. Its feet are always planted on solid earth. It never bids man fly away from the sordid facts of the ordinary world and live somewhere in the clouds. The world must be taken at its face-value, with all its imperfections, with all its wickedness and sin; and the more the good man mingles with the throng, the greater his struggles with the ubiquitous forces of darkness, the greater will be his chances of self-improvement, the clearer and nearer will be his road to sainthood. Not superciliously to shun the world as an unclean thing, but to live in it and yet remain clean: this is Judaism's programme. Now, to apply it. War is a fundamental world-fact (pending, of course, some really efficacious future Hague Conference). The differences of nations are composed only by resort to force. There is an inevitableness about it. That its abolition is most desirable is quite beside the question. It exists. That is enough. Judaism faces the grim facts and does not run away from them. It is but a piece of common sense to act thus. It does not bid its adherents live as though war did not exist. This would be impracticable, unworldly, illogical. It sanctions the bearing of arms because worldly necessity irrevocably demands it—hoping, of course, all the while that the combatants will be as merciful to one another as circumstances permit and that peace and quietude will come sooner

rather than later. Judaism is too logical to adopt the Quaker attitude forbidding the bearing of arms. The Quaker enjoys liberty only because the police, the army, and the navy are all equipped ready to defend his home and country from outside danger; so that the liberty he enjoys is really the negation of his principles and scruples. The Tolstoyan attitude of 'non-resistance' is similarly impracticable and illogical. Judaism shuns these extremes, and hence it naturally can have no word of protest against the Jew who bears arms.

But the real criterion as to Judaism's true attitude towards war is to be found in Jewish history rather than in Jewish theology. To find out what Judaism thought about war you must look at what the Jew thought of it. Theology and religion are, after all, but the theory. History shows us the theory worked out, put to the touchstone of practice. Religion is the teacher, superimposed, giving the lesson to the pupil and guiding him. History shows how well or ill the pupil has learnt his lesson. It is quite a commonplace of literature that with the Jew, most of all nations, religion and life were always linked in an inseparable companionship, obverse sides of the same shield, warp and woof of one and the same texture. Hence the way in which the Jew behaved towards the question of war is but an illustration in the concrete of how his religion taught him to behave in the abstract. We turn to the primal epoch—the life of the Israelite in Old Testament times. What do we find? We find that some of the most famous saints among the early Hebrews were men occupied in war. The Land of Promise was won only at the sword's point. God is described as 'a man of war,' as 'Lord of hosts.' A typical passage in Deuteronomy runs thus: 'For the Lord your God, he it is that fighteth for you.' The Psalms abound in warlike imputations to the Deity, such as, 'Blessed be the Lord my rock, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight.' And side by side with these bellicose sentiments, nay, intermixed with them, we get heaps of intensely humanitarian ordinances on the sublimest of planes, bidding us show pity for the meanest creature that breathes, and to be exemplars of human mercy in imitation of the transcendent Divine mercy! But what must be premised in the study of all these texts is the fact that to the Israelite of those days all his wars were

religious wars undertaken in defence of his religion against the immoral depredations of the neighbouring peoples. In this sense it is correct to say that he was always waging a defensive rather than an offensive warfare. His duty of self-protection was rooted and grounded in the thought that he alone possessed the light and the truth. His defeat or annihilation would have meant an extinction of this light and truth. As the personification of them he had to take a firm stand for their preservation. And, therefore, even if certain wars which the Bible credits to him have the appearance of aggressive and offensive warfare, they can always be construed as being really self-protective and defensive. They were waged to save great ideas which were destined finally to become the prized possession of all civilization. Monotheism, with its implication of a God who is at once moral and just and loving, and with its corollary of the human obligation to execute justice and love mercy—these precious treasures of the Spirit required saving from the wreckers, and it was just these that gave the warrant and sanction for the warfare waged. To attack was really to save, to save the bed-rock principles honour, love, and faith from going down to the pit. And as for the imputed cruelty of many of the old Israelitish wars, it must not be forgotten that standards of kindness and cruelty are highly relative and must never be judged apart from the age to which they belong. What a man of the twentieth century considers cruelty may not have been considered cruelty by a man who lived before the first century. More than one Deuteronomic command enjoins consideration and clemency for the sufferers through war; and laws of this kind could never have been a dead letter for the Jew.

Yet, although the choicest spirits among the Israelites of old—their prophets (who were really statesmen) and poets and religious mentors—could claim no authoritative voice in the sanctioning or forbidding of war, it is clear from most of their recorded utterances that they favoured passive submission to the enemy rather than active opposition. Jeremiah, if it is not too vulgar an epithet to apply to such a sainted character, was clearly a 'peace-at-any-price' man. A man like the Second Isaiah could behold only the terribly inhuman aspect of war; and his loathing for it can be inferred from the incomparably emphatic

ways in which he points the future of nations as an epoch of undisturbed idyllic peace when the sword will be transmuted into the ploughshare and there will no longer be hurting or destroying anywhere. The martial note disappears under the gentler spirit which finds the cosmic ideal not in violence but in great moral and spiritual conquests.

The same preference for the peaceful, as opposed to the martial, attitude colours the characters as well as the utterances of the best Jews in the times immediately following on the Biblical age. The Hasmonean and Herodian epochs of Jewish history are undeniably tainted with many incidents of blood-shedding. Rivalries and jealousies, conspiracies and intrigues amongst both the royal and the priestly castes were abundant, and human life was cheap. The Roman 'procurators' who governed Eastern Asia were athirst for blood. But the Pharisees—the Jews who aimed at living up to both the spirit and the letter of the Torah—were never the instigators of the mischief. Of course they fought. Stern necessity made them take the sword in self-defence. No one can blame them for this. The ordeal was repugnant to them. And more often than not they—the learned men particularly, as the Talmud testifies—were the unresisting victims of the foulest murders, going to their doom uncomplainingly in the fine spirit of the Talmudic adage, 'They who are reviled but do not revile, they who hear their reproach and make no reply, of such doth Scripture say, And his lovers shall be as the sun when it goeth forth in its might.' Of the band of these devoted 'lovers' were men like Hillel and Johanan b. Zakkai and hosts of others who looked with the greatest disapproval and dismay upon the fiery resistance of the Jews to the battalions and battering-rams of Vespasian and Titus, culminating in the bloody orgies attendant upon the fall of the second Temple. But no authoritative voice could declare the warfare illegal.

When, later on, the Jew became a citizen not of a country but of the wide world, his war-politics took on the colour of his particular surroundings. Judaism was his religion, but patriotism was his rule of life. When the nations raged and the

kingdoms tottered and the call for military service rang forth, he sprang to arms without demur, looking for no canons or rubrics or codes to exempt him from his duty. True, he could not have found any even had he looked. The legality or illegality of a Jew to bear arms was an unsolved question. But he did not look. He co-operated with his fellow-citizens of other creeds, sacrificing himself cheerfully—and often on the altar of a country that repaid him evil for good. It was not only his purely martial qualities that shone forth so resplendently. His financial and administrative capacities were of the utmost benefit to the lands in whose wars he took part. The wars of mediæval Spain—to mention only one instance out of many—owed their success in large measure to the moral and material help given them by the Spanish Jews. And the record is the same no matter where we look.

'It is almost universally admitted,' says Alhad Ha 'Am in one of his essays (*On the Transvaluation of Values*), 'that the Jews have a genius for morality, and in this respect are superior to other nations.' With some such thought in his mind he probably coined the word 'Supernation' as applied to the Jews. One is not so sure that the idea will gain undisputed acceptance in all quarters, yet it argues no undue national egotism on our part to say that it voices a preponderating proportion of the real truth. Whatever may have been the zest with which the Jew threw himself into war, he could never look upon it as anything but the outcome of man's bad passions. Peace was the covenant of God for which it was his place to work and pray unceasingly. War was a perversion, a misfortune, a monstrous evil which was bound to disappear once the higher influences of Israel's spiritual teachings would come to fruition. The Jew feels the same to-day, but whether he is to be the instrument for thus educating a world wallowing in blood and tears, it is for others to judge. Yet, if we cannot do it, our inherited moral doctrines of Right and Peace and Love certainly can. And in this sense the Jew will have his place amidst the builders of humanity's brighter future.