

MOSES

(1904)

The influence of great men on the history of the human race is a subject of much discussion among philosophers. Some maintain that the great men create history, and the masses are nothing more than the material on which they work. Others assert that the masses are the moving force, and the great men of every age are only inevitable products of that age and its conditions. Such discussions make one reflect on the tendency of philosophers to shut their eyes to what lies in front of them, and to seek by roundabout paths what is really so near. [Surely it is obvious that the real great men of history, the men, that is, who have become forces in the life of humanity, are not actual, concrete persons who existed in a certain age. There is not a single great man in history of whom the popular fancy has not drawn a picture entirely different from the actual man; and it is this imaginary conception, created by the masses to suit their needs and their inclinations, that is the real great man, exerting an influence which abides in some cases for thousands of years—this; and not the concrete original, who lived a short space in the actual world, and was never seen by the masses in his true likeness.]

And so it is when learned scholars burrow in the dust of ancient books and manuscripts, in order to raise the great men of history from the grave in their true shapes; believing the while that they are sacrificing their eyesight for the sake of "historical truth."

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It is borne in on me that these scholars have a tendency to overestimate the value of their discoveries, and will not appreciate the simple fact that not every archeological truth is also an historical truth. Historical truth is that, and that alone, which reveals the forces that go to mould the social life of mankind. Every man who leaves a perceptible mark on that life, though he may be a purely imaginary figure, is a real historical force; his existence is an historical truth. And on the other hand, every man who has left no impress on the general course of life, be his concrete existence at a particular time never so indisputable, is only one of the million: and the truth contained in the statement that such an one existed is a merely literal truth, which makes absolutely no difference, and is therefore, in the historical sense, no truth at all. Goethe's Werther, for instance, was a pure fiction; but his influence on that generation was so immense as to cause a large number of suicides: and therefore he is, in the historical sense, much more truly a real person than this or that actual German of the same period, who lived an actual concrete life, and died, and was forgotten, and became as though he had never been. Hence I do not grow enthusiastic when the drag-net of scholarship hauls up some new "truth" about a great man of the past; when it is proved by the most convincing evidence that some national hero, who lives on in the hearts of his people, and influences their development, never existed, or was something absolutely unlike the popular picture of him. On such occasions I tell myself: all this is very fine and very good, and certainly this "truth" will erase or alter a paragraph of a chapter in the book of archeology; but it will not make history erase the name of its hero,

or change its attitude towards him, because real history has no concern with so-and-so who is dead, and who was never seen in that form by the nation at large, but only by antiquarians; its concern is only with the living hero, whose image is graven in the hearts of men, who has become a force in human life. And what cares history whether this force was at one time a walking and talking biped, or whether it was never anything but a creature of the imagination, labelled with the name of some concrete man? In either case history is certain about his existence, because history feels his effects.

And so when I read the Haggadah on the eve of Passover, and the spirit of Moses the son of Amram, that supremest of heroes, who stands like a pillar of light on the threshold of our history, hovers before me and lifts me out of this nether world, I am quite oblivious of all the doubts and questions propounded by non-Jewish critics. I care not whether this man Moses really existed; whether his life and his activity really corresponded to our traditional account of him; whether he was really the savior of Israel and gave his people the Law in the form in which it is preserved among us; and so forth. I have one short and simple answer for all these conundrums. This Moses, I say, this man of old time, whose existence and character you are trying to elucidate, matters to nobody but scholars like you. We have another Moses of our own, whose image has been enshrined in the hearts of the Jewish people for generations, and whose influence on our national life has never ceased from ancient times till the present day. The existence of this Moses, as a historical fact, depends in no way on your investi-

gations. For even if you succeeded in demonstrating conclusively that the man Moses never existed, or that he was not such a man as we supposed, you would not thereby detract one jot from the historical reality of the ideal Moses—the Moses who has been our leader not only for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai, but for thousands of years in all the wildernesses in which we have wandered since the Exodus. 99 |

And it is not only the existence of this Moses that is clear and indisputable to me. His character is equally plain, and is not liable to be altered by any archeological discovery. This ideal—I reason—has been created in the spirit of the Jewish people; and the creator creates in his own image. These ideal figures, into which a nation breathes its most intense aspirations, seem to be fashioned automatically, without conscious purpose; and therefore, though they cannot, of course, escape a certain superfluous and inharmonious embroidery, and though we cannot insist that every detail shall be organically related to the central idea, yet the picture as a whole, if we look at its broad outlines, does always represent that idea which is the cause of its existence, and as it were the seed from which the whole tree has grown.

I take, therefore, a comprehensive view of the whole range of tradition about Moses, and ask myself first of all: What essentially is Moses? In other words, what manner of thing is the national ideal which has its embodiment in Moses? There are heroes and heroes—heroes of war, heroes of thought, and so forth; and when we examine an ideal picture we must first be clear as to the essential nature of the ideal which the artist had in his mind and attempted to portray.

most precarious, and persecution has driven him from country to country. Israel has never lived in the present. The present, with its evil and its wickedness, has always filled us with anguish, indignation, and bitterness. But just as constantly have we been inspired with brilliant hopes for the future, and an ineradicable faith in the coming triumph of the good and the right; and for these hopes and that faith we have always sought and found support in the history of our past, whereon our imagination has brooded, weaving all manner of fair dreams, so as to make the past a kind of mirror of the future. Our very Hebrew language, the garment of the Jewish spirit, has no present tense, but only a past and a future. The question has been much debated, whether the fundamental characteristic of the Jewish spirit is optimism or pessimism; and extreme views have been propounded on both sides. But all such discussion is futile. The Jew is both optimist and pessimist; but his pessimism has reference to the present, his optimism to the future. This was true of the Prophets, and it is true of the people of the Prophets.

There has, indeed, been one short period in modern Jewish history when Israel grew utterly weary of toil and trouble, and began to long for solace in the present, taking pleasure in the fleeting hour, as other nations do, and demanding no more of life than what it can give. And when once this longing was aroused, and became Israel's ideal (despite its fundamental opposition to the prophetic outlook), the prophetic characteristic at once manifested itself here also: the ideal was pursued to extreme lengths, without any regard to the obstacles that lay in the way of its attainment.

The Jews of that period had no pity on the vision of a great future, to which their ancestors clung throughout history. They wiped it out at a single stroke, as soon as its abandonment seemed to be a necessary step to the attainment of the ideal of to-day. And with the future the past necessarily went, seeing that it had no meaning except as a mirror of the future. But we all know the end of the story. The ideal of to-day was not attained; and all the labor of that period, its attempt to destroy one world and build another, left nothing but ruin and the bitterness that comes of wasted effort.

But this was a mere passing phase, a sort of fainting-fit, a temporary loss of consciousness. The prophetic spirit cannot be crushed, except for a time. It comes to life again, and masters the Prophet in his own despite. So, too, the prophetic people regained consciousness in its own despite, and we see once again some beginning of the "reincarnation of Moses." The Spirit which called Moses thousands of years ago and sent him on his mission, against his own will, now calls again the generation of to-day, saying,

"And that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all; in that ye say, we will be as the nations . . . as I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand . . . will I be king over you."