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A New Look at Old Books

THE BRONZE BOW by Elizabeth Speare. Houghton Mifflin Co. 1961

THE BRONZE BOW is two books in one. One book is a short story of Jesus' ministry. The other is the story of the Jews' striving for liberation from the Roman oppressors. Daniel, the hero, is caught between these two stories and acts as a bridge between them. The author, unfortunately, vastly oversimplified the political, economic, and religious situations at the time. Briefly, the author seems to divide the people into Romans and Jews (with some foreigners in the cities), and the Jews themselves into the masses, the Pharisees, and the rebellious malcontents. The book implies that the Pharisees and rebels, though far apart in everything else, are alike in that they reject Jesus - the Pharisees for his loose interpretation of the Law, and the rebels for his preaching of non-violence. The masses are Jesus' followers. There is a bit wrong with this picture. It implies that Jesus' teachings were completely revolutionary, too difficult for the scribes, rabbis, and elders of the synagogue to understand, that his followers took him on faith alone. The doctrine of love he taught was not so new; vengeance, to which Daniel had given his life, had always been reserved for the Lord in Judaism. Compassion for the poor and needy was specifically dictated by Jewish Law. Provision for orphans, widows, and others in need had been mandated for centuries. (Daniel's resentment of his treatment by the rabbis in the village merely sounds like that of a hot-tempered apprentice resisting his master's discipline.) Permanent slavery had never been permitted - all slaves were freed after seven years bondage. And the laws governing these bondservants were for the times, extremely liberal and unknown elsewhere. What was new, was Jesus' very free interpretation of the Laws and the strong emphasis on one aspect of the Laws - the humanitarian one. As the author rightly shows, Jesus was a practicing Jew, although not a Pharisee.

Many leaders were springing up at this time of oppression. It was a bewildering and confusing time. Some leaders were thieves, like Rosh; some were sincere, but misguided; some were wild-eyed revolutionaries; some preached cooperation with the Romans, etc. Author-

ity, in general, took a dim view of all the new movements. There were two factions in Judaism already, and only unity and cohesiveness, backed by tradition, would hold the Jews together as a nation. The reader gets little inkling of the tremendously turbulent times. All he sees are Rosh and Jesus - one all evil who preys upon his own people under the guise of liberating them, and the other all good and self-sacrificing. This over-simplification extends also to the other characters.

Daniel himself is a very simple character; his are just the trappings of complexity. Can anyone but a simpleton spend so much time with Rosh and his men (all of whom are bandits) and not know that they are merely acting patriots? Can a real person, with real feelings learn about the death of the slave, Samson, and gain so little from it? Can anyone but a stupid oaf drive his sister back into the darkness of her madness so ruthlessly and carelessly? Oh

yes, he supposedly was sorry about it all afterwards. Leah had withdrawn from the world, yet Malthace and Marcus and Daniel had slowly drawn her back into it. Assuming that her brother's accusations could drive her deeper into herself so suddenly, how could she come out so quickly, so completely healed? She did not want to be healed. (How she could ever have become friends with Marcus, a stranger in the uniform of those who crucified her father - is extremely difficult to understand.)

Simon the Zealot appears, originally, as a kind, conscientious, intelligent young man. He is puzzled by the times he lives in. He is searching for freedom and truth. Finally, after months of listening carefully to Jesus he becomes one of his followers. Simon accepts a purely spiritual answer to his search for freedom on the basis of his feeling that Jesus is the Messiah. His explanations to Daniel of how man can be free even in chains, amounts to "To those who have faith, no explanation is necessary; to those who lack it, none is possible."

Both Simon's and Daniel's acceptance of Jesus are not vivid. Though the author describes Daniel's spiritual awakening, somehow it is not convincing. Both Simon and Daniel turn to Jesus only because there is no one else. There are no alternatives - Rosh or Jesus. Choose! (Had Daniel waited about thirty years, he could have been part of a glorious rebellion.) The author implies that all those who fought for freedom from Roman oppression were misguided, silly, or thieves.

We meet no Romans in the book except as passing persecutors. Only Marcus (who is a German) is shown in any depth. All the characters are Jews. Therefore, all the unpleasant characters are Jews. All deniers, all who reject Jesus are Jews. The author even implies that there is a conspiracy amongst some of the Temple authorities to kill Jesus. There are no pleasant, good, just, or wise non-converted Jews in the book.

Daniel is forced to choose between freedom and spirituality. Isn't this a false choice? Granted that his principal motive, revenge, is an awful one, does it then follow logically that freedom from Rome is not worth fighting for for any reason? Patriotism may be the last refuge of scoundrels, but oppression can lead to genocide. Rosh was a scoundrel, but others weren't. Though the might of Rome was formidable and left the bands of youths who rescued Joel shaken, it took Rome four years, their crack legions, and greatest generals to subdue the Jews when they finally revolted. And then Rome had to destroy the Temple and disperse the Jews to ensure that there would be no more plotting. Were all these early champions of religious and political liberty wrong because they did not accept conquest by love as a doctrine to live by?

THE BRONZE BOW is a pacifist novel. Fine. But the author's omission of admirable characters on the side of fighting for justice and freedom, makes this book a piece of special pleading, a piece of propaganda, rather than a historical novel. Christians may find this book inspiring. Non-Christians may find it rather insulting.