**John Traske -- London's *Persecuted* Pastor!**

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| Many 17th-century Englishmen were disparagingly labeled "Judaisers". One such man was JOHN TRASKE. An historian of the day -- reflecting on the man's popular image -- noted that "of the brokers of Judaism, John Traske was a principal." Traske was so-called because he was the first English pastor to lead his congregation into Sabbath keeping and obedience to YEHOVAH God's laws. The fact that this was a crime in every sense highlights the intolerance of the day, and underlines a problem those who discovered the Sabbath would face. |

**by Leon J. Lyell**

Despite the fact that Traske caused a major scandal which even interested King James, virtually no reliable historical work exists which explores his life and congregation in any detail. Yet his life is most important in reconstructing the story of the modern rediscovery of the Sabbath.

A major problem in discovering any detail about the most significant period of Traske's life is that the surviving material was written by his enemies. Nonetheless a careful reading allows a broad, if sometimes blurred picture of his life.

One of the tragedies of Traske's story is that he wrote a full account of his life and work as a Sabbath keeper while in prison in 1618. He had learned that Edmund Howes, who was preparing the continuation of Stow's ***General Chronicle of England***, wanted to see him.

Sadly, Howes only made a brief mention of Traske. The meager entry must have been as disappointing to Traske as it is to us today.

John Traske and the 'Traskites' as his followers were called, were significant for other reasons also. The official reaction to their Judaising provided the first public forum for debate on the literal interpretation of the Old Testament law, and the nature of Jewish-Christian relations in over three hundred years.

**Traske's Early Life**

John Traske was born in Somerset about 1585. The youngest son of Lionel Traske, he was baptized on 15 October 1585 at East Coker, Somerset and married on 23 November 1606 in the same parish.

Traske made his living as a school master at a gentleman's house, and could presumably have lived out a comfortable, and perhaps uneventful, life in that role.

Something changed his direction in life, however. What was it? Sadly we do not know; but we do know that his wife died just before this new direction. One can imagine that to become a widower after only a few years of marriage must have been a dramatic blow to the schoolmaster. Perhaps the tragedy forced some deep soul searching upon him.

Whatever the cause, Traske now devoted himself to the religious life, and began preaching. He applied for ordination to James Montague, bishop of Bath and Wells, but was rejected by the bishop's chaplain Dr. Samuel Ward because he did not have sufficient training.

Traske persisted, and by 1611 had been ordained. By 1615 he had visited London on at least one preaching tour and published one sermon. Towards the end of that year he was imprisoned in Newgate for "going up and down as a wandering minister."

It must be remembered that at this time preaching was the prerogative of the state supported Church of England. Only those trained and credentialed by the Church could instruct in public. Further, such instruction could not deviate from official doctrine, and could not be done anywhere or anytime. It was only after a tide of dissatisfaction with these policies by many such as Traske, and two civil wars, that some freedom of speech was allowed.

Traske, it seems, felt quite proud to have been admitted to the ministry as he had never been more than a guest at any University. Apparently he had eventually qualified himself by the production of a summary of divinity, which was highly influenced by Wolfgang Marculus.

**A Pearl For Prince**

To the influence of Marculus, Traske added an emphasis which he took from the Puritan "preparationist" theologians, and combined these in his book ***A Pearl For A Prince*** published in 1615.

The "Puritans" at this time were those within the Church seeking to reform its morals and practices. An open split would be some years away, although tensions were clearly evident at this early date.

Traske wrote to help those preparing for saving faith. He stressed that while faith is the gift of God;

"the ground where faith is sown, is a humble soul, a wounded spirit, or rent heart, to such God gives the grace of faith, as are so prepared for it."

While such teaching was acceptable to mainline Puritanism, Traske himself began to find it lacking. He had many doctrinal disagreements in public, which lead one detractor to write that he "marched like Jehu most furiously, making divisions in the Church about London." Again we have no details of these disagreements.

**Traske and Controversy**

The above quote may give some early insight into Traske's volatile personality, if not his doctrine. It becomes clear that he was a bold man, who also had a gift for effective, powerful preaching. Ever proud of the truths he held, he always spoke his mind, at this early period, in a way which opponents regarded as provocative.

It was also this strength of personality which enabled him to maintain views different from even the accepted opponents of the established Church, and to lead a congregation which had become now quite separate from the Church of England.

During this period, Traske lived with a Master Drake of Devonshire, gave public lectures, and left his door open to all comers for private instruction, both day and night.

One incident illustrates Traske's reputation at this time. One John Bodley left L400 in his will to Exeter for the maintenance of a preacher to speak on the "Sabbath" (as the Puritans preferred to call Sunday). John Hazard was nominated.

The administrators of the fund wrote to William Cotton, the bishop of Exeter, to ask if he had any objections to Hazard. Cotton interviewed Hazard on 5 April 1616, and told him;

"You have preached false doctrine...and besides you have been a companion with Traske."   
  
"My lord", Hazard replied, "It is not so, for I can bring good testimony that I have twice publicly in two separate sermons at Lyme confuted the erroneous fancies of Traske...the whole town of Lyne can witness the same."

George Abbott, the archbishop of Canterbury was eventually asked to make the final decision, and gave Hazard the lectureship in spite of the alleged connection with Traske. He did however resign after a year for an unknown reason.

**Traske Remarries**

Traske arrived in London again about the beginning of 1617, and his reputation quickly spread. Listen to the words of his opponent again;

"His own and his disciples prayers are commonly roarings, and such loud out-crys as may be heard in distant rooms and houses, voluntarily framed and filled for the most part with frequent imprecations that God would confound the adversaries and persecutors of his little flock."

Soon after his arrival he married Dorothy Coome in February 1617. His bride was a spinster of the same age (about 31), and came from the same London city parish of St. Sepulchre where he now made his home.

**His Teaching**

An account of his teaching at this time indicates that Traske was developing an individual version of preparationist theology.

While it had always been alleged that Traske had tended to "walk in the path of nonconformity", it was now claimed that he considered all men to be in one of three spiritual conditions. In the first they were unconcerned for their salvation, in the second they were in a state of penitence seeking to reach the third and final state, that of grace.

Various other allegations about his teaching were made, but it is not clear how far these were the garbled and inaccurate reports of enemies concerned at his growing effectiveness.

It is certain that Traske's sermons moved his audience to tears, and to desire peace with God. Amongst other things, he advised his hearers to seek God's will by fasting and prayer.

**Traske's Congregation**

As mentioned above, Traske's congregation was completely separate from the Church of England. While the country was full of congregations which were nonconformist, it was a much more serious step to break all associations with the national Church.

Traske meanwhile was coming to require express Biblical instructions for most things that were done. Such an emphasis lead naturally enough to the detailed instructions of the Torah -- the first five books of the Old Testament.

Traske was one of the first in modern times to regard the Old Testament not merely as the history of ancient Israel, but as a storehouse of timeless truths which God could speak to his own generation. Traske sought to understand and obey these newly discovered words of the Lord.

This aspect is significant because without it Traske would probably never have accepted the Sabbath once presented to him. This was not to happen for a short while however.

One of Traske's close associates, a tailor named Hamlet Jackson, seems to have been first to come to the conclusion that the regulations governing the diet of God's ancient people were also binding upon Christians (See Leviticus 11).

Jackson soon secured Traske's agreement, and Traske won over the rest of the group. Traske's congregation thus became the first of modern times to avoid unclean meat.

Their opponents now knew that it was Traske's belief that "whatsoever is to be done, is their be a law for the doing thereof, we are to leave all mens opinions, and follow that word in doing it."

Traske next began to adopt what mainstream Puritanism labeled "laws ceremonial" to guide the congregation in their "building, planting, wearing of apparel, and sundry other things as well as eating."

Again we can only guess what these comments actually refer to, but presumably many of the instructions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are being referred to. (See for example Deuteronomy 22:8, 20:8; Leviticus 25:1-7, Deuteronomy 24:l9-21; Deuteronomy 22:5,11,12; Numbers 15:37-41)

Meanwhile, Hamlet Jackson's private Bible study was leading him to the belief that the Sabbath had never been abrogated by God, and that therefore Christians should observe it rather than Sunday as their weekly day of rest and worship. It seems that he did not discuss the matter with Traske.

At this stage Traske continued to observe the "Lord's Day" (Sunday) although he now refrained from lighting fires or dressing meat on that day. In other words he sought to obey God's Sabbath laws to the best of his knowledge, applying them to the day he believed was the "Christian Sabbath." (See Exodus 35: 3)

**Traske's Evangelization Campaign**

At a point just before the Sabbath became an issue of concern for Traske, he decided to ordain four messengers to proclaim their discoveries of principles for Christian living and obedience, and to cure diseases by anointing with oil. (See James 5:14-15)

Traske also considered that his work might have prophetic significance. He apparently wondered whether he might be the second Elijah sent to discover the antiChrist (cf. Malachi 4:5-6). While there are other hints of Traske's prophetic interest, it is clear that his main interest lay elsewhere. He believed that his view of scripture had restored truth as it was in the days of the apostles.

For Traske the situation was that "the whole letter of the Scriptures lying dead from the apostles days to our times, were now revived and stood on their feet." The Old Testament was much more than a "type" pointing to Calvary, it offered infallible instruction in a society which had lost contact with God.

The Puritans in general had cried against the obvious corruption and ignorance of the clergy. Many looked for a more vital religion, and found that the new King James translation of the Bible into English allowed them to seek God for themselves.

Traske discovered not only spiritual answers, but instructions for the daily doings and diets of England's saints. His straightforward reading of the Bible found ready acceptance amongst much of the populous.

**Traske Accepts the Sabbath**

It was with these convictions of the vitality of scriptural prescription, that the four new evangelists Hamlet Jackson, Returne Hebdon and two others were dispatched.

One Saturday, after the mission had been launched Hamlet Jackson -- while still an observer of the Sunday Sabbath -- "saw a shining light about him which struck him into amazement... and thereupon concluded that the light of the law was more fully discovered to him, than to any other since the apostles."

Jackson resolved then to observe the seventh-day Sabbath, and returned to Traske. Traske was convinced, and soon won over the entire congregation.

The most scandalous offense of the Traskites was that they now kept the Sabbath, and ignored the Lord's Day as an ordinary day of work.

One account speaks of Traske's wife who taught children to read. She would now only teach them five days a week, because she now observed the Sabbath, (a day on which most Englishmen worked), and thought it best not to work on Sunday for fear of persecution.

Many Englishmen now found it difficult to accept that Traske was still a Christian, and the widespread irrational fear of things "Jewish" would now begin to effect the Traskites.

**Traske in Prison**

Towards the end of 1617, this "Judaising sect" could no longer be ignored. Traske and some of his followers were soon in prison, though we have no details on the series of events that saw them arrested.

On February 14, 1618, John Chamberlain wrote to Sir Dudley Carleton about Traske;

"...who was first a puritan, than a separatist, and now is become a Jewish-Christian, observing the Sabbath on Saturday, abstaining from swines flesh and all things commanded in the law. You will not think what a number of foolish followers he hath in this town and some other parts, and yet he has not been long of this opinion..."

King James himself followed the case. It seems that at one Sunday dinner, Traske and his flock were almost the sole subject of discussion. The king apparently thought it amusing that Traske found it unlawful to eat the popular black pudding. The Law, of course, prohibits eating blood in any form. (Leviticus 3:17, 7:26,17:10-12)

The immediate consequence of Traske's arrest, was his appearance before the Court of High Commission. There the bishops attempted to argue him back to orthodoxy. Finding him more stubborn than they expected, he was imprisoned "that he might not infect others".

This move was not immediately successful either in converting Traske, or keeping his views from others! While in prison he seems to have converted Edward and Nicholas Rookwood of Euston, Suffolk. The two gentlemen, father and son, had been imprisoned for debt, and after meeting Traske were won to the Sabbath.

Meanwhile, after studying the practices of the Quartodecimans as recorded in Eusebius' ***Church History***, Traske adopted the date of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. The book had been one of many given to Traske by the bishops in order to encourage his reform! How amazed they must have been when he concluded that Easter was no more Christian than Sunday!

This most recent adoption was not merely a theoretical position. Traske lead his followers to conduct a Passover seder ritual in prison.

Fellow prisoners observed Traske in the unusual practice of eating white unleavened loaves, and discussing with his followers whether they should eat a pascal lamb with their meal. Traske thereby became the first known Christian of modern times to observe the date of the Passover, a practice some modern Sabbath keepers emulate.

**Traske's Persecutors**

It was reported that Traske not only boasted of his personal abilities, but that the King, the Church of England, and all other Protestant churches would eventually come to agree with him. This attitude only made Traske's persecutors more angry.

Noting Traske's stubbornness, the court of High Commission adopted another method of persuasion. From November 1617 until he was brought before the Star Chamber the following June, Traske was only allowed to eat which "in his opinion is supposed to be forbidden".

Traske's reaction was to write directly to the King to complain of his treatment by the bishops. When this produced no reply, he wrote again. In the eyes of the authorities, however, he had made his situation worse because he addressed the king as one would address an equal. He had not used the terms usually reserved for royal petitions.

The Court of the Star Chamber quickly found him guilty of "detraction and scandal" upon the king, and of a serious attempt to "divert his majesties subjects from their obedience, to follow him and his Jewish opinions."

Before his sentence was delivered, the distinguished Lancelot Andrews delivered a speech against the "Judaical opinions of Mr. Traske". It was one of only three occasions when Andrews took part in such cases, and is some indication of how influential Traske had been. Andrews admonished;

"It is a good work to make a Jew a Christian, but to make a Christian a Jew, has always been a foul act, and severely to be punished."

Lord Chancellor Bacon was concerned as well. His notes for his speech to the judges in Star Chamber on 26 June 1618 show that he expressed the view that, "New opinions spread very dangerous, the late Traske a dangerous person."

Andrews had urged severity, and after his speech a barbaric sentence was given.

**Traske's Sentence**

Traske was sentenced in Star Chamber on 19 June 1618 to be kept a prisoner in the Fleet for the rest of his life, so as to prevent him from infecting others. He was also fined a thousand pounds, and expelled from the ministry. But that was not the end of it.

Traske was to be whipped from the prison of the Fleet to the Palace of Westminister, with a paper on his head. The paper probably announced his crimes. There he was to be set on the Pillory and have one of his ears nailed to it.

After he had stood there some time, he was to be burned in the forehead with the letter 'J' because he had "broached Jewish opinions".

Finally, he was to be whipped from the Fleet to the Cheepside, again set up on the pillory, and there to have his other ear nailed to it.

Within twelve days the sentence had been carried out, and Traske was returned to prison.

**Traske's Recantation**

The next episode we have on record may seem surprising after what had transpired. Traske seems to have changed his views, and because it so pleased his captors, his own words on the subject have been preserved.

After about a year in prison, Traske says, "God was pleased to withdraw the cloudy veil from my eyes". On December 1, 1619, Bacon wrote;

"This day Traske in open court made retraction of his wicked opinions in writing."

Traske was soon set free, and published the substance of his recantation in 1620, entitled ***A Treatise of Liberty from Judaism***. The publication was presumably a condition of his release.

"The first thing I understood", Traske recalled in speaking of the Church of England, "was my Mother's great authority. This I was thoroughly settled in about six months, when I came to see my foul failing." This lesson in authority had come six months before his recantation at the time of his whipping and branding. Pain indeed is an effective teacher!

But perhaps it was something other than physical pain which broke his resolve. Traske's arrogance towards his captors, and expectation that God would vindicate him before them, not only made his sufferings worse, it probably lead him to doubt God. Pride had become his stumbling block.

**Traske Still Popular**

Traske resumed preaching after his release. He traveled around the country, and continued to impress those who heard him with his stentorian voice. Those near to him would have been able to clearly see the 'J' burned into his forehead, a branding which would remain for life.

By the summer of 1627, he was in trouble again. The event underlines Traske's continuing popularity.

Joshua Purcas was to be hanged in London at the end of July. Traske spoke to him in Newgate prison at the request of his relatives, and with the permission of the prison chaplain. He attempted to have Purcas confess his crimes before God, but to his death Purcas denied the charge.

Traske preached at the hanging, and was then invited to the funeral. He was obliged to refuse because he had already agreed to preach at a christening. Some of Purcas' friends attended the christening under the false impression that Traske would speak against the hanging.

Meanwhile, when the local curate preached at Purcas funeral, the entire congregation walked out! In a later report, Bishop Montague of London wrote to Archbishop Laud that he had refused Traske permission to speak at the funeral because he was "an unworthy person, and a Jew".

The record of Traske's examination over the incident shows that while he claimed to have given up the Sabbath, he admitted that his wife still observed it, "notwithstanding all the reasons he can give her to the contrary." It is also a fact that many others of Traske's former congregation continued to observe the Sabbath publicly.

**Dorothy Traske**

Mrs. Traske began he stay in prison with her husband, but later refused to share his quarters or his recantation. She consistently rejected all attempts by her friends to alleviate her poverty, even though all she had was an annuity of forty shillings and what she earned by doing small services for other prisoners. In those days, prisoners had to pay for all their living expenses.

For years Dorothy Traske lived on bread, water and vegetables.

Then, sometime after 1645, the Long Parliament arranged her transfer to the Gatehouse prison, where she met Paul Best. Best had been imprisoned for denying the doctrine of the Trinity, and seemed to find something in common with Mrs. Traske. The two became firm friends.

Mrs. Traske began to change her diet and eat meat again. However, she soon became ill, and it was this change that her death shortly afterwards was attributed.

In her final illness, she prevailed upon the gaoler that he would not bury her in any Church or Church yard, but rather in the fields. This last wish was apparently honoured.

Another prominent Traskite was Return Hebdon. He was a Sussex gentleman, and one of Traske's four evangelists. Arrested with Traske he remained in prison till his death in 1625.

According to a friend, he gave himself to continual study, fasting and prayer. He left a book of meditations for Dorothy Traske, which was published in 1648.

**Hamlet Jackson**

Jackson was originally imprisoned with the others, and believed that the prison doors would miraculously fly open one day to set him free. Like Traske, when this did not occur, he seems to have recanted and been released.

Upon his release he traveled with Christopher Sands and other 'Traskites' to Amsterdam, and made contact with the Jewish colony there.

Though some claimed that Jackson became a full Jewish convert, there is not the reference to him which could be expected in the records of Dutch Jewry.

Christopher Sands appears to have converted a minister, one Mr. Wright and his wife, as well as Mary Chester to the Sabbath. Mary Chester became associated with Theophilus Brabourne, a later Sabbath keeper. Sands himself had been converted by Jackson.

In short, Traske and his congregation left very few first hand records. His followers -- though dispersed -- continued their beliefs in many cases. Traske's most lasting effect was to be on those who never met him, however. His name remained a popular focus for "Judaising" jibes, and his views remained a viable spiritual force throughout the seventeenth century.

**Traske's Later Life**

Traske's later life is far more obscure than his long lasting popular reputation. There is very little we can be certain of, though once so harshly treated we can imagine that he would have been eager not to draw attention to himself.

Traske seems to have found a comfortable home among the "baptists". I have deliberately described them with a lower case "b" to highlight the fact that they were quite different from modern Baptists in a number of important ways.

Apart from the fact that they did not form a separate denomination, they were not of uniform opinion on a number of issues -- baptism included. The term "baptist" merely is a descriptive one of those congregations which held to believers baptism. This point was of course their key feature in the public eye, and we can assume that Traske agreed with them on this point.

In 1636, Traske was arrested with other baptists of a congregation lead by Henry Jessey. Because of his failing health, Traske was quickly released. He died while visiting friends soon afterwards. These unknown baptists then carried him from their house to Lambeth Church yard.

The entry of the early baptists into the life of England's earliest Sabbath keeper of modern times is significant. Henry Jessey pastored the congregation Traske attended until 1663, and was also a powerful advocate of Jewish re-admission to England.

It has sometimes been claimed by Sabbath keepers that Jessey was also a Sabbath keeper. While we have no indication from anything Jessey wrote, his biographer says that he "kept his opinion much to himself" -- which is not surprising.

According to this source, Jessey observed the Sabbath in his own home with only four or five others. We must surely wonder whether Traske was amongst them, It is certain that the two would have discussed the matter at some time. Jessey would then continue his public ministry of Sundays.

Though the biography was written after Jessey's death, and is the only reference we have to his Sabbath keeping, there is no reason to doubt the credibility of it; especially as it was probably written by a non-Sabbath keeper.

Most of the Sabbath keepers from later in the seventeenth century were baptists and many were also closely involved in seeking the re-admission of the Jews as well as their evangelization. A link between Traske, Jessey and later Sabbath keepers is therefore quite plausible.

Traske's sad life carries many lessons in it for modern Christians, especially Sabbath keepers. For his own day the "Judaising" tag remained, but in fact he was one of the first who began to see that the Old Testament recorded the voice of the Lord speaking directly to him as well as to ancient Israel. Before anyone can accept the Sabbath, they must first see the Old Testament in this way; as the timeless instructions and admonitions of God for His people in all generations.

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