

BÉKESSY

They Chose the Worst

BARABBAS.

A Novel of the Time
of Jesus.

By Emery Bekessy, with the
collaboration of Andreas
Hemberger. Translated
from the German by Rich-
ard and Clara Winston. . .
324 pp. . . . New York:
Prentice-Hall. . . \$2.75.

Reviewed by
LORINE PRUETTE

THE story of Jesus and his times has absorbed the talents of writing men for lo, these many years, and the end is not yet. Emery Bekessy, a Hungarian writer now in Hollywood, has made a serious and powerful contribution to the fictional portrayal of those days, when the lines of the future of much of the human race were being so inexorably laid down. The fate of the Roman Empire is forever reflected in Pilate's languid cynicism, the fate of the Jews in their disunity, the fate of the man in the street today is to be heard in the roar of the mob in Jerusalem, choosing the bad, destroying the good, shouting "Release Barabbas."

It used to be that writers could tell the story of Jesus and his times for its obvious values, its traditional significance, because it was a story of supreme importance to the Christian world and because it had everything a story could possibly require: action, conflict, tenderness, passion, betrayal and all the dramatic unities. But in these later days of mankind's own determined Gethsemane, the story as drama and religion is clearly not enough. Now the writers and many of the readers are looking for something more; they

are searching the storehouse of accumulated records and legends, testing for those fluorescent materials which may provide us, however briefly, with a little light against the darkness. Not only are they studying reports of commissions on atomic warfare; they are looking for more essential meanings: how does it happen that men and women, in groups, in mobs, and singly too, manage to choose the worse instead of the better way?

Barabbas, in Bekessy's imaginative recreation, is a strong and simple man, a robber chieftain, a possible leader of a people's revolt. If the subtle and devious priests of Israel had chosen to use him to the end, he might have raised such a flaming rebellion as would

have driven the Romans out of Palestine. It is easy to see in Barabbas many of the makings of a modern leader. He had the gift of leadership, the strength of undying hatred, and as a half-Jew, belonging nowhere, the perpetual gnawing striving of the disqualified. But more important than Barabbas's relation to current or recent leaders of men, is the partial parallel between his life and that of the true Messiah.

Barabbas, like Jesus, was tempted by visions of temporal power, he was betrayed by his own man, he was again betrayed by the wise and crafty. He, too, wins the respect of the Procurator, after a

N.Y. Herald
"Books"
1946 Dec. 8.



Emery Bekessy

fashion. There is a brilliant picture of the robber fighting the moth-eaten lion in the Roman arena, and another of the tortured and stupefied man staggering off into the desert to bury the body of his only true friend, Ezra. The author seems to be saying that there was nobility in this man, as in most, and in him also the seeds of his own destruction.

Few recent novels of Christ have pictured so much brutality. The Roman treatment of the despised Jews, the mob's treatment of the condemned Nazarene, these read like reportage of current happenings, and quite as senseless. Tumultuous, violent scenes are succeeded by occasional tender and quiet ones in the home of Lazarus and his sisters. Barabbas has his meetings with Jesus, one that he sought and one that came to him unbidden. Jesus seeks to turn the rebel chieftain from the way of violence, but it is clear that the path of Barabbas has been determined long before. In the end it is a moment of ordinary human decency that delivers Barabbas to his tormentors.

Emery Bekessy has written a vivid, evocative novel.

