

ISRAEL ABRAHAMS

CHAPTERS ON
JEWISH
LITERATURE

Israel Abrahams
Chapters on Jewish Literature

«Public Domain»

Abrahams I.

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PREFACE

These twenty-five short chapters on Jewish Literature open with the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 of the current era, and end with the death of Moses Mendelssohn in 1786. Thus the period covered extends over more than seventeen centuries. Yet, long as this period is, it is too brief. To do justice to the literature of Judaism even in outline, it is clearly necessary to include the Bible, the Apocrypha, and the writings of Alexandrian Jews, such as Philo. Only by such an inclusion can the genius of the Hebrew people be traced from its early manifestations through its inspired prime to its brilliant after-glow in the centuries with which this little volume deals.

One special reason has induced me to limit this book to the scope indicated above. The Bible has been treated in England and America in a variety of excellent text-books written by and for Jews and Jewesses. It seemed to me very doubtful whether the time is, or ever will be, ripe for dealing with the Scriptures from the purely literary stand-point in teaching young students. But this is the stand-point of this volume. Thus I have refrained from including the Bible, because, on the one hand, I felt that I could not deal with it as I have tried to deal with the rest of Hebrew literature, and because, on the other hand, there was no necessity for me to attempt to add to the books already in use. The sections to which I have restricted myself are only rarely taught to young students in a consecutive manner, except in so far as they fall within the range of lessons on Jewish History. It was strongly urged on me by a friend of great experience and knowledge, that a small text-book on later Jewish Literature was likely to be found useful both for home and school use. Such a book might encourage the elementary study of Jewish literature in a wider circle than has hitherto been reached. Hence this book has been compiled with the definite aim of providing an elementary manual. It will be seen that both in the inclusions and exclusions the author has followed a line of his own, but he lays no claim to originality. The book is simply designed as a manual for those who may wish to master some of the leading characteristics of the subject, without burdening themselves with too many details and dates.

This consideration has in part determined also the method of the book. In presenting an outline of Jewish literature three plans are possible. One can divide the subject according to *Periods*. Starting with the Rabbinic Age and closing with the activity of the earlier Gaonim, or Persian Rabbis, the First Period would carry us to the eighth or the ninth century. A well-marked Second Period is that of the Arabic-Spanish writers, a period which would extend from the ninth to the fifteenth century. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century forms a Third Period with distinct characteristics. Finally, the career of Mendelssohn marks the definite beginning of the Modern Period. Such a grouping of the facts presents many advantages, but it somewhat obscures the varying conditions prevalent at one and the same time in different countries where the Jews were settled. Hence some writers have preferred to arrange the material under the different *Countries*. It is quite possible to draw a map of the world's civilization by merely marking the successive places in which Jewish literature has fixed its head-quarters. But, on the other hand, such a method of classification has the disadvantage that it leads to much overlapping. For long intervals together, it is impossible to separate Italy from Spain, France from Germany, Persia from Egypt, Constantinople from Amsterdam. This has induced other writers to propose a third method and to trace *Influences*, to indicate that, whereas Rabbinism may be termed the native product of the Jewish genius, the scientific, poetical, and philosophical tendencies of Jewish writers in the Middle Ages were due to the interaction of external and internal forces. Further, in this arrangement, the Ghetto period would have a place assigned to it as such, for it would again mark the almost complete sway of purely Jewish forces in Jewish literature. Adopting

this classification, we should have a wave of Jewish impulse, swollen by the accretion of foreign waters, once more breaking on a Jewish strand, with its contents in something like the same condition in which they left the original spring. All these three methods are true, and this has impelled me to refuse to follow any one of them to the exclusion of the other two. I have tried to trace *influences*, to observe *periods*, to distinguish *countries*. I have also tried to derive color and vividness by selecting prominent personalities round which to group whole cycles of facts. Thus, some of the chapters bear the names of famous men, others are entitled from periods, others from countries, and yet others are named from the general currents of European thought. In all this my aim has been very modest. I have done little in the way of literary criticism, but I felt that a dry collection of names and dates was the very thing I had to avoid. I need not say that I have done my best to ensure accuracy in my statements by referring to the best authorities known to me on each division of the subject. To name the works to which I am indebted would need a list of many of the best-known products of recent Continental and American scholarship. At the end of every chapter I have, however, given references to some English works and essays. Graetz is cited in the English translation published by the Jewish Publication Society of America. The figures in brackets refer to the edition published in London. The American and the English editions of S. Schechter's "Studies in Judaism" are similarly referred to.

Of one thing I am confident. No presentation of the facts, however bald and inadequate it be, can obscure the truth that this little book deals with a great and an inspiring literature. It is possible to question whether the books of great Jews always belonged to the great books of the world. There may have been, and there were, greater legalists than Rashi, greater poets than Jehuda Halevi, greater philosophers than Maimonides, greater moralists than Bachya. But there has been no greater literature than that which these and numerous other Jews represent.

Rabbinism was a sequel to the Bible, and if like all sequels it was unequal to its original, it nevertheless shared its greatness. The works of all Jews up to the modern period were the sequel to this sequel. Through them all may be detected the unifying principle that literature in its truest sense includes life itself; that intellect is the handmaid to conscience; and that the best books are those which best teach men how to live. This underlying unity gave more harmony to Jewish literature than is possessed by many literatures more distinctively national. The maxim, "Righteousness delivers from death," applies to books as well as to men. A literature whose consistent theme is Righteousness is immortal. On the very day on which Jerusalem fell, this theory of the interconnection between literature and life became the fixed principle of Jewish thought, and it ceased to hold undisputed sway only in the age of Mendelssohn. It was in the "Vineyard" of Jamnia that the theory received its firm foundation. A starting-point for this volume will therefore be sought in the meeting-place in which the Rabbis, exiled from the Holy City, found a new fatherland in the Book of books.

CHAPTER I

THE "VINEYARD" AT JAMNIA

Schools at Jamnia, Lydda, Usha, and Sepphoris.—The Tannaim compile the Mishnah.—Jochanan, Akiba, Meir, Judah.—Aquila.

The story of Jewish literature, after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Christian era, centres round the city of Jamnia. Jamnia, or Jabneh, lay near the sea, beautifully situated on the slopes of a gentle hill in the lowlands, about twenty-eight miles from the capital. When Vespasian was advancing to the siege of Jerusalem, he occupied Jamnia, and thither the Jewish Synhedrion, or Great Council, transferred itself when Jerusalem fell. A college existed there already, but Jamnia then became the head-quarters of Jewish learning, and retained that position till the year 135. At that date the learned circle moved further north, to Galilee, and, besides the famous school at Lydda in Judea, others were founded in Tiberias, Usha, and Sepphoris.

The real founder of the College at Jamnia was Jochanan, the son of Zakkai, called "the father of wisdom." Like the Greek philosophers who taught their pupils in the gardens of the "Academy" at Athens, the Rabbis may have lectured to their students in a "Vineyard" at Jamnia. Possibly the term "Vineyard" was only a metaphor applied to the meeting-place of the Wise at Jamnia, but, at all events, the result of these pleasant intellectual gatherings was the Rabbinical literature. Jochanan himself was a typical Rabbi. For a great part of his life he followed a mercantile pursuit, and earned his bread by manual labor. His originality as a teacher lay in his perception that Judaism could survive the loss of its national centre. He felt that "charity and the love of men may replace the sacrifices." He would have preferred his brethren to submit to Rome, and his political foresight was justified when the war of independence closed in disaster. As Graetz has well said, like Jeremiah Jochanan wept over the desolation of Zion, but like Zerubbabel he created a new sanctuary. Jochanan's new sanctuary was the school.

In the "Vineyard" at Jamnia, the Jewish tradition was the subject of much animated inquiry. The religious, ethical, and practical literature of the past was sifted and treasured, and fresh additions were made. But not much was written, for until the close of the second century the new literature of the Jews was *oral*. The Bible was written down, and read from scrolls, but the Rabbinical literature was committed to memory piecemeal, and handed down from teacher to pupil. Notes were perhaps taken in writing, but even when the Oral Literature was collected, and arranged as a book, it is believed by many authorities that the book so compiled remained for a considerable period an oral and not a written book.

This book was called the *Mishnah* (from the verb *shana*, "to repeat" or "to learn"). The Mishnah was not the work of one man or of one age. So long was it in growing, that its birth dates from long before the destruction of the Temple. But the men most closely associated with the compilation of the Mishnah were the Tannaim (from the root *tana*, which has the same meaning as *shana*). There were about one hundred and twenty of these Tannaim between the years 70 and 200 C.E., and they may be conveniently arranged in four generations. From each generation one typical representative will here be selected.

The Tannaim

First Generation, 70 to 100 C.E

Jochanan, the son of Zakkai

Second Generation, 100 to 130 C.E

Akiba

Third Generation, 130 to 160 C.E

Meir

Fourth Generation, 160 to 200 C.E

Judah The Prince

The Tannaim were the possessors of what was perhaps the greatest principle that dominated a literature until the close of the eighteenth century. They maintained that *literature* and *life* were co-extensive. It was said of Jochanan, the son of Zakkai, that he never walked a single step without thinking of God. Learning the Torah, that is, the Law, the authorized Word of God, and its Prophetic and Rabbinical developments, was man's supreme duty. "If thou hast learned much Torah, ascribe not any merit to thyself, for therefor wast thou created." Man was created to learn; literature was the aim of life. We have already seen what kind of literature. Jochanan once said to his five favorite disciples: "Go forth and consider which is the good way to which a man should cleave." He received various answers, but he most approved of this response: "A good heart is the way." Literature is life if it be a heart-literature—this may be regarded as the final justification of the union effected in the Mishnah between learning and righteousness.

Akiba, who may be taken to represent the second generation of Tannaim, differed in character from Jochanan. Jochanan had been a member of the peace party in the years 66 to 70; Akiba was a patriot, and took a personal part in the later struggle against Rome, which was organized by the heroic Bar Cochba in the years 131 to 135. Akiba set his face against frivolity, and pronounced silence a fence about wisdom. But his disposition was resolute rather than severe. Of him the most romantic of love stories is told. He was a herdsman, and fell in love with his master's daughter, who endured poverty as his devoted wife, and was glorified in her husband's fame. But whatever contrast there may have been in the two characters, Akiba, like Jochanan, believed that a literature was worthless

unless it expressed itself in the life of the scholar. He and his school held in low esteem the man who, though learned, led an evil life, but they took as their ideal the man whose moral excellence was more conspicuous than his learning. As R. Eleazar, the son of Azariah, said: "He whose knowledge is in excess of his good deeds is like a tree whose branches are many and its roots scanty; the wind comes, uproots, and overturns it. But he whose good deeds are more than his knowledge is like a tree with few branches but many roots, so that if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, it remains firm in its place." Man, according to Akiba, is master of his own destiny; he needs God's grace to triumph over evil, yet the triumph depends on his own efforts: "Everything is seen, yet freedom of choice is given; the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the work." The Torah, the literature of Israel, was to Akiba "a desirable instrument," a means to life.

Among the distinctions of Akiba's school must be named the first literal translation of the Bible into Greek. This work was done towards the close of the second century by Aquila, a proselyte, who was inspired by Akiba's teaching. Aquila's version was inferior to the Alexandrian Greek version, called the Septuagint, in graces of style, but was superior in accuracy. Aquila followed the Hebrew text word by word. This translator is identical with Onkelos, to whom in later centuries the Aramaic translation (*Targum Onkelos*) of the Pentateuch was ascribed. Aramaic versions of the Bible were made at a very early period, and the Targum Onkelos may contain ancient elements, but in its present form it is not earlier than the fifth century.

Meir, whom we take as representative of the third generation of Tannaim, was filled with the widest sympathies. In his conception of truth, everything that men can know belonged to the Torah. Not that the Torah superseded or absorbed all other knowledge, but that the Torah needed, for its right study, all the aids which science and secular information could supply. In this way Jewish literature was to some extent saved from the danger of becoming a merely religious exercise, and in later centuries, when the mass of Jews were disposed to despise and even discourage scientific and philosophical culture, a minority was always prepared to resist this tendency and, on the ground of the views of some of the Tannaim like Meir, claimed the right to study what we should now term secular sciences. The width of Meir's sympathies may be seen in his tolerant conduct towards his friend Elisha, the son of Abuya. When the latter forsook Judaism, Meir remained true to Elisha. He devoted himself to the effort to win back his old friend, and, though he failed, he never ceased to love him. Again, Meir was famed for his knowledge of fables, in antiquity a branch of the wisdom of all the Eastern world. Meir's large-mindedness was matched by his large-heartedness, and in his wife Beruriah he possessed a companion whose tender sympathies and fine toleration matched his own.

The fourth generation of Tannaim is overshadowed by the fame of Judah the Prince, *Rabbi*, as he was simply called. He lived from 150 to 210, and with his name is associated the compilation of the Mishnah. A man of genial manners, strong intellectual grasp, he was the exemplar also of princely hospitality and of friendship with others than Jews. His intercourse with one of the Antonines was typical of his wide culture. Life was not, in Rabbi Judah's view, compounded of smaller and larger incidents, but all the affairs of life were parts of the great divine scheme. "Reflect upon three things, and thou wilt not fall into the power of sin: Know what is above thee—a seeing eye and a hearing ear—and all thy deeds are written in a book."

The Mishnah, which deals with things great and small, with everything that concerns men, is the literary expression of this view of life. Its language is the new-Hebrew, a simple, nervous idiom suited to practical life, but lacking the power and poetry of the Biblical Hebrew. It is a more useful but less polished instrument than the older language. The subject-matter of the Mishnah includes both law and morality, the affairs of the body, of the soul, and of the mind. Business, religion, social duties, ritual, are all dealt with in one and the same code. The fault of this conception is, that by associating things of unequal importance, both the mind and the conscience may become incapable of discriminating the great from the small, the external from the spiritual. Another ill consequence was that, as literature corresponded so closely with life, literature could not correct the faults of life,

when life became cramped or stagnant. The modern spirit differs from the ancient chiefly in that literature has now become an independent force, which may freshen and stimulate life. But the older ideal was nevertheless a great one. That man's life is a unity; that his conduct is in all its parts within the sphere of ethics and religion; that his mind and conscience are not independent, but two sides of the same thing; and that therefore his religious, ethical, æsthetic, and intellectual literature is one and indivisible,—this was a noble conception which, with all its weakness, had distinct points of superiority over the modern view.

The Mishnah is divided into six parts, or Orders (*Sedarim*); each Order into Tractates (*Massechtoth*); each Tractate into Chapters (*Perakim*); each Chapter into Paragraphs (each called a *Mishnah*). The six Orders are as follows:

Zeraim ("Seeds"). Deals with the laws connected with Agriculture, and opens with a Tractate on Prayer ("Blessings").

Moed ("Festival"). On Festivals.

Nashim ("Women"). On the laws relating to Marriage, etc.

Nezikin ("Damages"). On civil and criminal Law.

Kodashim ("Holy Things"). On Sacrifices, etc.

Teharoth ("Purifications"). On personal and ritual Purity.

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CHAPTER II

FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS AND THE JEWISH SIBYL

Great national crises usually produce an historical literature. This is more likely to happen with the nation that wins in a war than with the nation that loses. Thus, in the Maccabean period, historical works dealing with the glorious struggle and its triumphant termination were written by Jews both in Hebrew and in Greek. After the terrible misfortune which befell the Jews in the year 70, when Jerusalem sank before the Roman arms never to rise again, little heart was there for writing history. Jews sought solace in their existing literature rather than in new productions, and the Bible and the oral traditions that were to crystallize a century later into the Mishnah filled the national heart and mind. Yet more than one Jew felt an impulse to write the history of the dismal time. Thus the first complete books which appeared in Jewish literature after the loss of nationality were historical works written by two men, Justus and Josephus, both of whom bore an active part in the most recent of the wars which they recorded. Justus of Tiberias wrote in Greek a terse chronicle entitled, "History of the Jewish Kings," and also a more detailed narrative of the "Jewish War" with Rome. Both these books are known to us only from quotations. The originals are entirely lost. A happier fate has preserved the works of another Jewish historian of the same period, Flavius Josephus (38 to 95 C.E.), the literary and political opponent of Justus. He wrote three histories: "Antiquities of the Jews"; an "Autobiography"; "The Wars of the Jews"; together with a reply to the attacks of an Alexandrian critic of Judaism, "Against Apion." The character of Josephus has been variously estimated. Some regard him as a patriot, who yielded to Rome only when convinced that Jewish destiny required such submission. But the most probable view of his career is as follows. Josephus was a man of taste and learning. He was a student of the Greek and Latin classics, which he much admired, and was also a devoted and loyal lover of Judaism. Unfortunately, circumstances thrust him into a political position from which he could extricate himself only by treachery and duplicity. As a young man he had visited Rome, and there acquired enthusiastic admiration for the Romans. When he returned to Palestine, he found his countrymen filled with fiery patriotism and about to hurl themselves against the legions of the Caesars. To his dismay Josephus saw himself drawn into the patriotic vortex. By a strange mishap an important command was entrusted to him. He betrayed his country, and saved himself by eager submission to the Romans. He became a personal friend of Vespasian and the constant companion of his son Titus.

Traitor though he was to the national cause, Josephus was a steadfast champion of the Jewish religion. All his works are animated with a desire to present Judaism and the Jews in the best light. He was indignant that heathen historians wrote with scorn of the vanquished Jews, and resolved to describe the noble stand made by the Jewish armies against Rome. He was moved to wrath by the Egyptian Manetho's distortion of the ancient history of Israel, and he could not rest silent under the insults of Apion. The works of Josephus are therefore works written with a *tendency* to glorify his people and his religion. But they are in the main trustworthy, and are, indeed, one of the chief sources of information for the history of the Jews in post-Biblical times. His style is clear and attractive, and his power of grasping the events of long periods is comparable with that of Polybius. He was no mere chronicler; he possessed some faculty for explaining as well as recording facts and some real insight into the meaning of events passing under his own eyes.

He wrote for the most part in Greek, both because that language was familiar to many cultured Jews of his day, and because his histories thereby became accessible to the world of non-Jewish readers. Sometimes he used both Aramaic and Greek. For instance, he produced his "Jewish War" first in the one, subsequently in the other of these languages. The Aramaic version has been lost, but the Greek has survived. His style is often eloquent, especially in his book "Against Apion." This was

an historical and philosophical justification of Judaism. At the close of this work Josephus says: "And so I make bold to say that we are become the teachers of other men in the greatest number of things, and those the most excellent." Josephus, like the Jewish Hellenists of an earlier date, saw in Judaism a universal religion, which ought to be shared by all the peoples of the earth. Judaism was to Josephus, as to Philo, not a contrast or antithesis to Greek culture, but the perfection and culmination of culture.

The most curious efforts to propagate Judaism were, however, those which were clothed in a Sibylline disguise. In heathen antiquity, the Sibyl was an inspired prophetess whose mysterious oracles concerned the destinies of cities and nations. These oracles enjoyed high esteem among the cultivated Greeks, and, in the second century B.C.E., some Alexandrian Jews made use of them to recommend Judaism to the heathen world. In the Jewish Sibylline books the religion of Israel is presented as a hope and a threat; a menace to those who refuse to follow the better life, a promise of salvation to those who repent. About the year 80 C.E., a book of this kind was composed. It is what is known as the Fourth Book of the Sibylline Oracles. The language is Greek, the form hexameter verse. In this poem, the Sibyl, in the guise of a prophetess, tells of the doom of those who resist the will of the one true God, praises the God of Israel, and holds out a beautiful prospect to the faithful.

The book opens with an invocation:

Hear, people of proud Asia, Europe, too,
How many things by great, loud-sounding mouth,
All true and of my own, I prophesy.
No oracle of false Apollo this,
Whom vain men call a god, tho' he deceived;
But of the mighty God, whom human hands
Shaped not like speechless idols cut in stone.

The Sibyl speaks of the true God, to love whom brings blessing. The ungodly triumph for a while, as Assyria, Media, Phrygia, Greece, and Egypt had triumphed. Jerusalem will fall, and the Temple perish in flames, but retribution will follow, the earth will be desolated by the divine wrath, the race of men and cities and rivers will be reduced to smoky dust, unless moral amendment comes betimes. Then the Sibyl's note changes into a prophecy of Messianic judgment and bliss, and she ends with a comforting message:

But when all things become an ashy pile,
God will put out the fire unspeakable
Which he once kindled, and the bones and ashes
Of men will God himself again transform,
And raise up mortals as they were before.
And then will be the judgment, God himself
Will sit as judge, and judge the world again.
As many as committed impious sins
Shall Stygian Gehenna's depths conceal
'Neath molten earth and dismal Tartarus.

But the pious shall again live on the earth,
And God will give them spirit, life, and means
Of nourishment, and all shall see themselves,
Beholding the sun's sweet and cheerful light.
O happiest men who at that time shall live!

The Jews found some consolation for present sorrows in the thought of past deliverances. The short historical record known as the "Scroll of Fasting" (*Megillath Taanith*) was perhaps begun before the destruction of the Temple, but was completed after the death of Trajan in 118. This scroll contained thirty-five brief paragraphs written in Aramaic. The compilation, which is of great historical value, follows the order of the Jewish Calendar, beginning with the month Nisan and ending with Adar. The entries in the list relate to the days on which it was held unlawful to fast, and many of these days were anniversaries of national victories. The *Megillath Taanith* contains no jublations over these triumphs, but is a sober record of facts. It is a precious survival of the historical works compiled by the Jews before their dispersion from Palestine. Such works differ from those of Josephus and the Sibyl in their motive. They were not designed to win foreign admiration for Judaism, but to provide an accurate record for home use and inspire the Jews with hope amid the threatening prospects of life.

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CHAPTER III THE TALMUD

I (220-280) Palestine—Jochanan, Simon, Joshua, Simlai; Babylonia—Rab and Samuel.

II (280-320) Palestine—Ami, Assi, Abbahu, Chiya; Babylonia—Huna and Zeira.

III (320-380) Babylonia—Rabba, Abayi, Rava.

IV (380-430) Babylonia—Ashi (first compilation of the Babylonian Talmud).

V and VI (430-500) Babylonia—Rabina (completion of the Babylonian Talmud).

The *Talmud*, or *Gemara* ("Doctrine," or "Completion"), was a natural development of the Mishnah. The Talmud contains, indeed, many elements as old as the Mishnah, some even older. But, considered as a whole, the Talmud is a commentary on the work of the Tannaim. It is written, not in Hebrew, as the Mishnah is, but in a popular Aramaic. There are two distinct works to which the title Talmud is applied; the one is the Jerusalem Talmud (completed about the year 370 C.E.), the other the Babylonian (completed a century later). At first, as we have seen, the Rabbinical schools were founded on Jewish soil. But Palestine did not continue to offer a friendly welcome. Under the more tolerant rulers of Babylonia or Persia, Jewish learning found a refuge from the harshness experienced under those of the Holy Land. The Babylonian Jewish schools in Nehardea, Sura, and Pumbeditha rapidly surpassed the Palestinian in reputation, and in the year 350 C.E., owing to natural decay, the Palestinian schools closed.

The Talmud is accordingly not one work, but two, the one the literary product of the Palestinian, the other, of the Babylonian *Amoraim*. The latter is the larger, the more studied, the better preserved, and to it attention will here be mainly confined. The Talmud is not a book, it is a literature. It contains a legal code, a system of ethics, a body of ritual customs, poetical passages, prayers, histories, facts of science and medicine, and fancies of folk-lore.

The Amoraim were what their name implies, "Expounders," or "Discourers"; but their expositions were often original contributions to literature. Their work extends over the long interval between 200 and 500 C.E. The Amoraim naturally were men of various character and condition. Some were possessed of much material wealth, others were excessively poor. But few of them were professional men of letters. Like the Tannaim, the Amoraim were often artisans, field-laborers, or physicians, whose heart was certainly in literature, but whose hand was turned to the practical affairs of life. The men who stood highest socially, the Princes of the Captivity in Babylonia and the Patriarchs in Palestine, were not always those vested with the highest authority. Some of the Amoraim, again, were merely receptive, the medium through which tradition was handed on; others were creative as well. To put the same fact in Rabbinical metaphor, some were Sinais of learning, others tore up mountains, and ground them together in keen and critical dialectics.

The oldest of the Amoraim, Chanina, the son of Chama, of Sepphoris (180-260), was such a firm mountain of ancient learning. On the other hand, Jochanan, the son of Napacha (199-279), of dazzling physical beauty, had a more original mind. His personal charms conveyed to him perhaps a sense of the artistic; to him the Greek language was a delight, "an ornament of women." Simon, the son of Lakish (200-275), hardy of muscle and of intellect, started life as a professional athlete. A later Rabbi, Zeira, was equally noted for his feeble, unprepossessing figure and his nimble, ingenious mind. Another contemporary of Jochanan, Joshua, the son of Levi, is the hero of many legends. He was so tender to the poor that he declared his conviction that the Messiah would arise among the beggars and cripples of Rome. Simlai, who was born in Palestine, and migrated to Nehardea in

Babylonia, was more of a poet than a lawyer. His love was for the ethical and poetic elements of the Talmud, the *Hagadah*, as this aspect of the Rabbinical literature was called in contradistinction to the *Halachah*, or legal elements. Simlai entered into frequent discussions with the Christian Fathers on subjects of Biblical exegesis.

The centre of interest now changes to Babylonia. Here, in the year 219, Abba Areka, or Rab (175-247), founded the Sura academy, which continued to flourish for nearly eight centuries. He and his great contemporary Samuel (180-257) enjoy with Jochanan the honor of supplying the leading materials of which the Talmud consists. Samuel laid down a rule which, based on an utterance of the prophet Jeremiah, enabled Jews to live and serve in non-Jewish countries. "The law of the land is law," said Samuel. But he lived in the realms of the stars as well as in the streets of his city. Samuel was an astronomer, and he is reported to have boasted with truth, that "he was as familiar with the paths of the stars as with the streets of Nehardea." He arranged the Jewish Calendar, his work in this direction being perfected by Hillel II in the fourth century. Like Simlai, Rab and Samuel had heathen and Christian friends. Origen and Jerome read the Scriptures under the guidance of Jews. The heathen philosopher Porphyry wrote a commentary on the Book of Daniel. So, too, Abbahu, who lived in Palestine a little later on, frequented the society of cultivated Romans, and had his family taught Greek. Abbahu was a manufacturer of veils for women's wear, for, like many Amoraim, he scorned to make learning a means of living, Abbahu's modesty with regard to his own merits shows that a Rabbi was not necessarily arrogant in pride of knowledge! Once Abbahu's lecture was besieged by a great crowd, but the audience of his colleague Chiya was scanty. "Thy teaching," said Abbahu to Chiya, "is a rare jewel, of which only an expert can judge; mine is tinsel, which attracts every ignorant eye."

It was Rab, however, who was the real popularizer of Jewish learning. He arranged courses of lectures for the people as well as for scholars. Rab's successor as head of the Sura school, Huna (212-297), completed Rab's work in making Babylonia the chief centre of Jewish learning. Huna tilled his own fields for a living, and might often be met going home with his spade over his shoulder. It was men like this who built up the Jewish tradition. Huna's predecessor, however, had wider experience of life, for Rab had been a student in Palestine, and was in touch with the Jews of many parts. From Rab's time onwards, learning became the property of the whole people, and the Talmud, besides being the literature of the Jewish universities, may be called the book of the masses. It contains, not only the legal and ethical results of the investigations of the learned, but also the wisdom and superstition of the masses. The Talmud is not exactly a national literature, but it was a unique bond between the scattered Jews, an unparalleled spiritual and literary instrument for maintaining the identity of Judaism amid the many tribulations to which the Jews were subjected.

The Talmud owed much to many minds. Externally it was influenced by the nations with which the Jews came into contact. From the inside, the influences at work were equally various. Jochanan, Rab, and Samuel in the third century prepared the material out of which the Talmud was finally built. The actual building was done by scholars in the fourth century. Rabba, the son of Nachmani (270-330), Abayi (280-338), and Rava (299-352) gave the finishing touches to the method of the Talmud. Rabba was a man of the people; he was a clear thinker, and loved to attract all comers by an apt anecdote. Rava had a superior sense of his own dignity, and rather neglected the needs of the ordinary man of his day. Abayi was more of the type of the average Rabbi, acute, genial, self-denying. Under the impulse of men of the most various gifts of mind and heart, the Talmud was gradually constructed, but two names are prominently associated with its actual compilation. These were Ashi (352-427) and Rabina (died 499). Ashi combined massive learning with keen logical ingenuity. He needed both for the task to which he devoted half a century of his life. He possessed a vast memory, in which the accumulated tradition of six centuries was stored, and he was gifted with the mental orderliness which empowered him to deal with this bewildering mass of materials.

It is hardly possible that after the compilation of the Talmud it remained an oral book, though it must be remembered that memory played a much greater part in earlier centuries than it does now. At all events, Ashi, and after him Rabina, performed the great work of systematizing the Rabbinical literature at a turning-point in the world's history. The Mishnah had been begun at a moment when the Roman empire was at its greatest vigor and glory; the Talmud was completed at the time when the Roman empire was in its decay. That the Jews were saved from similar disintegration, was due very largely to the Talmud. The Talmud is thus one of the great books of the world. Despite its faults, its excessive casuistry, its lack of style and form, its stupendous mass of detailed laws and restrictions, it is nevertheless a great book in and for itself. It is impossible to consider it further here in its religious aspects. But something must be said in the next chapter of that side of the Rabbinical literature known as the *Midrash*.

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CHAPTER IV

THE MIDRASH AND ITS POETRY

Mechilta, Sifra, Sifre, Pesikta, Tanchuma, Midrash Rabbah, Yalkut.—
Proverbs.—Parables.—Fables.

In its earliest forms identical with the Halachah, or the practical and legal aspects of the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Midrash, in its fuller development, became an independent branch of Rabbinical literature. Like the Talmud, the Midrash is of a composite nature, and under the one name the accumulations of ages are included. Some of its contents are earlier than the completion of the Bible, others were collected and even created as recently as the tenth or the eleventh century of the current era.

Midrash ("Study," "Inquiry") was in the first instance an *Explanation of the Scriptures*. This explanation is often the clear, natural exposition of the text, and it enforces rules of conduct both ethical and ritual. The historical and moral traditions which clustered round the incidents and characters of the Bible soon received a more vivid setting. The poetical sense of the Rabbis expressed itself in a vast and beautiful array of legendary additions to the Bible, but the additions are always devised with a moral purpose, to give point to a preacher's homily or to inspire the imagination of the audience with nobler fancies. Besides being expository, the Midrash is, therefore, didactic and poetical, the moral being conveyed in the guise of a *narrative*, amplifying and developing the contents of Scripture. The Midrash gives the results of that deep searching of the Scriptures which became second nature with the Jews, and it also represents the changes and expansions of ethical and theological ideals as applied to a changing and growing life.

From another point of view, also, the Midrash is a poetical literature. Its function as a species of *popular homiletics* made it necessary to appeal to the emotions. In its warm and living application of abstract truths to daily ends, in its responsive and hopeful intensification of the nearness of God to Israel, in its idealization of the past and future of the Jews, it employed the poet's art in essence, though not in form. It will be seen later on that in another sense the Midrash is a poetical literature, using the lore of the folk, the parable, the proverb, the allegory, and the fable, and often using them in the language of poetry.

The oldest Midrash is the actual report of sermons and addresses of the Tannaite age; the latest is a medieval compilation from all extant sources. The works to which the name Midrash is applied are the *Mechilta* (to Exodus); the *Sifra* (to Leviticus); the *Sifre* (to Numbers and Deuteronomy); the *Pesikta* (to various *Sections* of the Bible, whence its name); the *Tanchuma* (to the Pentateuch); the *Midrash Rabbah* (the "Great Midrash," to the Pentateuch and the Five Scrolls of Esther, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs); and the *Midrash Haggadol* (identical in name, and in contents similar to, but not identical with, the *Midrash Rabbah*); together with a large number of collected Midrashim, such as the *Yalkut*, and a host of smaller works, several of which are no longer extant.

Regarding the Midrash in its purely literary aspects, we find its style to be far more lucid than that of the Talmud, though portions of the Halachic Midrash are identical in character with the Talmud. The Midrash has many passages in which the simple graces of form match the beauty of idea. But for the most part the style is simple and prosaic, rather than ornate or poetical. It produces its effects by the most straightforward means, and strikes a modern reader as lacking distinction in form. The dead level of commonplace expression is, however, brightened by brilliant passages of frequent occurrence. Prayers, proverbs, parables, and fables, dot the pages of Talmud and Midrash alike. The ancient *proverbs* of the Jews were more than mere chips from the block of experience.

They were poems, by reason of their use of metaphor, alliteration, assonance, and imagination. The Rabbinical proverbs show all these poetical qualities.

He who steals from a thief smells of theft.—Charity is the salt of Wealth.—
Silence is a fence about Wisdom.—Many old camels carry the skins of their young.
—Two dry sticks and one green burn together.—If the priest steals the god, on what
can one take an oath?—All the dyers cannot bleach a raven's wing.—Into a well
from which you have drunk, cast no stone.—Alas for the bread which the baker
calls bad.—Slander is a Snake that stings in Syria, and slays in Rome.—The Dove
escaped from the Eagle and found a Serpent in her nest.—Tell no secrets, for the
Wall has ears.

These, like many more of the Rabbinical proverbs, are essentially poetical. Some, indeed, are either expanded metaphors or metaphors touched by genius into poetry. The alliterative proverbs and maxims of the Talmud and Midrash are less easily illustrated. Sometimes they enshrine a pun or a conceit, or depend for their aptness upon an assonance. In some of the Talmudic proverbs there is a spice of cynicism. But most of them show a genial attitude towards life.

The poetical proverb easily passes into the parable. Loved in Bible times, the parable became in after centuries the most popular form of didactic poetry among the Jews. The Bible has its parables, but the Midrash overflows with them. They are occasionally re-workings of older thoughts, but mostly they are original creations, invented for a special purpose, stories devised to drive home a moral, allegories administering in pleasant wrappings unpalatable satires or admonitions. In all ages up to the present, Jewish moralists have relied on the parable as their most effective instrument. The poetry of the Jewish parables is characteristic also of the parables imitated from the Jewish, but the latter have a distinguishing feature peculiar to them. This is their humor, the witty or humorous parable being exclusively Jewish. The parable is less spontaneous than the proverb. It is a product of moral poetry rather than of folk wisdom. Yet the parable was so like the proverb that the moral of a parable often became a new proverb. The diction of the parable is naturally more ornate. By the beauty of its expression, its frequent application of rural incidents to the life familiar in the cities, the rhythm and flow of its periods, its fertile imagination, the parable should certainly be placed high in the world's poetry. But it was poetry with a *tendency*, the *mashal*, or proverb-parable, being what the Rabbis themselves termed it, "the clear small light by which lost jewels can be found."

The following is a parable of Hillel, which is here cited more to mention that noble, gentle Sage than as a specimen of this class of literature. Hillel belongs to a period earlier than that dealt with in this book, but his loving and pure spirit breathes through the pages of the Talmud and Midrash:

Hillel, the gentle, the beloved sage,
Expounded day by day the sacred page
To his disciples in the house of learning;
And day by day, when home at eve returning,
They lingered, clustering round him, loth to part
From him whose gentle rule won every heart.
But evermore, when they were wont to plead
For longer converse, forth he went with speed,
Saying each day: "I go—the hour is late—
To tend the guest who doth my coming wait,"
Until at last they said: "The Rabbi jests,
When telling us thus daily of his guests
That wait for him." The Rabbi paused awhile,
And then made answer: "Think you I beguile

You with an idle tale? Not so, forsooth!
I have a guest whom I must tend in truth.
Is not the soul of man indeed a guest,
Who in this body deigns a while to rest,
And dwells with me all peacefully to-day:
To-morrow—may it not have fled away?"

Space must be found for one other parable, taken (like many other poetical quotations in this volume) from Mrs. Lucas' translations:

Simeon ben Migdal, at the close of day,
Upon the shores of ocean chanced to stray,
And there a man of form and mien uncouth,
Dwarfed and misshapen, met he on the way.

"Hail, Rabbi," spoke the stranger passing by,
But Simeon thus, discourteous, made reply:
"Say, are there in thy city many more,
Like unto thee, an insult to the eye?"
"Nay, that I cannot tell," the wand'rer said,
"But if thou wouldst ply the scorner's trade,
Go first and ask the Master Potter why
He has a vessel so misshapen made?"

Then (so the legend tells) the Rabbi knew
That he had sinned, and prone himself he threw
Before the other's feet, and prayed of him
Pardon for the words that now his soul did rue.
But still the other answered as before:
"Go, in the Potter's ear thy plaint outpour,
For what am I! His hand has fashioned me,
And I in humble faith that hand adore."

Brethren, do we not often too forget
Whose hand it is that many a time has set
A radiant soul in an unlovely form,
A fair white bird caged in a mouldering net?

Nay more, do not life's times and chances, sent
By the great Artificer with intent
That they should prove a blessing, oft appear
To us a burden that we sore lament?

Ah! soul, poor soul of man! what heavenly fire
Would thrill thy depths and love of God inspire,
Could'st thou but see the Master hand revealed,
Majestic move "earth's scheme of things entire."

It cannot be! Unseen he guideth us,

But yet our feeble hands, the luminous
 Pure lamp of faith can light to glorify
 The narrow path that he has traced for us.

Finally, there are the *Beast Fables* of the Talmud and the Midrash. Most of these were borrowed directly or indirectly from India. We are told in the Talmud that Rabbi Meir knew three hundred Fox Fables, and that with his death (about 290 C.E.) "fabulists ceased to be," Very few of Meir's fables are extant, so that it is impossible to gather whether or not they were original. There are only thirty fables in the Talmud and the Midrash, and of these several cannot be paralleled in other literatures. Some of the Talmudic fables are found also in the classical and the earliest Indian collections; some in the later collections; some in the classics, but not in the Indian lists; some in India, but not in the Latin and Greek authors. Among the latter is the well-known fable of the *Fox and the Fishes*, used so dramatically by Rabbi Akiba. The original Talmudic fables are, according to Mr. J. Jacobs, the following: *Chaff, Straw, and Wheat*, who dispute for which of them the seed has been sown: the winnowing fan soon decides; *The Caged Bird*, who is envied by his free fellow; *The Wolf and the two Hounds*, who have quarrelled; the wolf seizes one, the other goes to his rival's aid, fearing the same fate himself on the morrow, unless he helps the other dog to-day; *The Wolf at the Well*, the mouth of the well is covered with a net: "If I go down into the well," says the wolf, "I shall be caught. If I do not descend, I shall die of thirst"; *The Cock and the Bat*, who sit together waiting for the sunrise: "I wait for the dawn," said the cock, "for the light is my signal; but as for thee—the light is thy ruin"; and, finally, what Mr. Jacobs calls the grim beast-tale of the *Fox as Singer*, in which the beasts—invited by the lion to a feast, and covered by him with the skins of wild beasts—are led by the fox in a chorus: "What has happened to those above us, will happen to him above," implying that their host, too, will come to a violent death. In the context the fable is applied to Haman, whose fate, it is augured, will resemble that of the two officers whose guilt Mordecai detected.

Such fables are used in the Talmud to point religious or even political morals, very much as the parables were. The fable, however, took a lower flight than the parable, and its moral was based on expediency, rather than on the highest ethical ideals. The importance of the Talmudic fables is historical more than literary or religious. Hebrew fables supply one of the links connecting the popular literature of the East with that of the West. But they hardly belong in the true sense to Jewish literature. Parables, on the other hand, were an essential and characteristic branch of that literature.

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CHAPTER V

THE LETTERS OF THE GAONIM

Representative Gaonim: Achai, Amram, Zemach, Saadiah, Sherira, Samuel, Hai.

For several centuries after the completion of the Talmud, Babylonia or Persia continued to hold the supremacy in Jewish learning. The great teachers in the Persian schools followed the same lines as their predecessors in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Their name was changed more than their character. The title *Gaon* ("Excellence") was applied to the head of the school, the members of which devoted themselves mainly to the study and interpretation of the older literature. They also made original contributions to the store. Of their extensive works but little has been preserved. What has survived proves that they were gifted with the faculty of applying old precept to modern instance. They regulated the social and religious affairs of all the Jews in the diaspora. They improved educational methods, and were pioneers in the popularization of learning. By a large collection of Case Law, that is, decisions in particular cases, they brought the newer Jewish life into moral harmony with the principles formulated by the earlier Rabbis. The Gaonim were the originators or, at least, the arrangers of parts of the liturgy. They composed new hymns and invocations, fixed the order of service, and established in full vigor a system of *Minhag*, or Custom, whose power became more and more predominant, not only in religious, but also in social and commercial affairs.

The literary productions of the Gaonic age open with the *Sheeltoth* written by Achai in the year 760. This, the first independent book composed after the close of the Talmud, was curiously enough compiled in Palestine, whither Achai had migrated from Persia. The *Sheeltoth* ("Inquiries") contain nearly two hundred homilies on the Pentateuch. In the year 880 another Gaon, Amram by name, prepared a *Siddur*, or Prayer-Book, which includes many remarks on the history of the liturgy and the customs connected with it. A contemporary of Amram, Zemach, the son of Paltoi, found a different channel for his literary energies. He compiled an *Aruch*

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