

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתבות עולם • ירמיהו טז

"THE OLD PATHS."—Jer. vi. 16.

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It appears from the undisguised acknowledgments of the New Testament, that the doctors and rabbies of the Jews, the Pharisees and Scribes, were the implacable enemies of Jesus of Nazareth, and that they were the main instruments in effecting his death. The modern Jews consider this fact as a sufficient apology for their rejection of his claims to the Messiahship. They take it for granted that the great and learned men of that day were also good men, and that they had valid reasons for their conduct. They think if Jesus of Nazareth had been the true Messiah, that the Sanhedrin, the great Jewish council of the time, would have acknowledged him, and conclude that, as they rejected him, he cannot be the true Messiah. The New Testament, on the contrary, accounts for their unbelief by plainly telling us, that they were bad men; and that they were enemies to the Lord Jesus, because he told them the truth, and exposed their hypocrisy. Now, which of these two representations accords with the truth? Were the Scribes and Pharisees, those great advocates of the *oral law*, זוררים, שבעל פה, good men or bad men? The readers of our first number will be in some degree qualified to answer this question. Could those be good men who profanely talked of the lawfulness of killing an unlearned man, and who contemptuously compared the wives and daughters of the unlearned to "vermin and beasts?" If they could talk with levity of "rending like a fish" an unlearned man, one of their own brethren who had never done them any harm, what were they likely to do with one who exposed their wickedness, and boldly told them that they by their traditions made void the law of God? The very fact, that Jesus of Nazareth was put to death by such men, is presumptive evidence, that he was a good man, and that his claims were just. But, however that be, it is worth while to inquire into the charges which the New Testament brings against these learned men, and to see whether they are substantiated by the memorials of their character and spirit, which they themselves have left us in their laws. One of the charges preferred against them is, that they were ambitious men, covetous of worldly honour, and loving the pre-eminence. "But all their works they do to be seen of men; they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments. And

love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi." (Matt. xxiii. 5-7.) Now, is this charge true? Does the oral law justify this assertion, or does it prove, on the contrary, that the enemies of Jesus were humble, pious men, whose piety serves as a warrant for the uprightness of their conduct in their treatment of the Lord Jesus? Let the reader judge from the following laws which these men framed with respect to themselves. In the first place they claim for themselves more honour and reverence than is due to a man's own parents—

כשם שאדם מצוה בכבוד אביו וביראתו כך הוא דייב בכבוד רבו וביראתו יתר מאביו וכו'

"As a man is commanded to honour and fear his father, so he is bound to honour and fear his Rabbi more than his father; for his father has been the means of bringing him into the life of this world, but his Rabbi, who teaches him wisdom, brings him to the life of the world to come." (Hilchoth Talmud Torah, c. 5.) This general rule is bad enough, but the particulars are still worse. "If a man should see something that his father has lost, and something that his Rabbi has lost, he is first to return what his Rabbi has lost, and then to return that which belongs to his father. If his father and his Rabbi be oppressed with a load, he is first to help down that of his Rabbi, and then that of his father. If his father and his Rabbi be in captivity, he is first to ransom his Rabbi and afterwards his father; unless his father be the disciple of a wise man (i. e. learned), in which case he may ransom his father first." How fearful is this doctrine. A man is to see his father, the author of his existence, the guardian of his infancy, who has laboured for his support, and watched over him in the hour of sickness, he is to see this friend, to whom, under God, he owes everything, pining away in the bitterness of captivity, and yet, when he has got the means of restoring him to liberty and his family, he is to leave him still in all his misery, and ransom the Rabbi; where is this written in the Old Testament? "Honour thy father and thy mother," is there the first commandment that follows after our duty to God, and the first movement of natural affection. But this Rabbinical doc-

trine silences the voice of nature, and makes void the law of God. What is the doctrine of the New Testament here? "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own household, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. v. 8.) The disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ never claimed for themselves any honour like this. In the passage just cited, they plainly declare that the first, in the circle of duties to men, is the duty to our own flesh and blood. And the only case in which the New Testament permits a deviation from this rule, is that where the same exception is made in the law of Moses, when love to parents would interfere with love to God. "If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke xiv. 26.) Here father and mother, and kindred, are put in one category with a man's own life, in order to show that there is but one case in which the natural ties of blood may be overlooked, and this is when the service of God requires it. As it is also written in the law of Moses, "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend who is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou nor thy fathers. . . . Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him, neither shall thine eye pity him," &c. (Deut. xiii. 6-9.) And thus the tribe of Levi is praised, because "He said unto his father and his mother, I have not known him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor know his own children." (Deut. xxxiii. 9.) But this Talmudical law is widely different. It has no saving clause to show that the case specified is an exception to the general rule. It does not pretend to suppose that the father is a bad man, or an idolater, or an apostate. It specifies but one exception, and that is, where the father is "the disciple of a wise man;" otherwise, though he be a good man and a pious man, a loving and tender parent, still he is to be disregarded by his own son, and the Rabbi preferred before him. Is it possible to doubt that the men who conceived, sanctioned, and promulgated a law like this, had an eye to their own personal honour and interest? Is it reasonable to suppose that men who would sacrifice their own father to the honour of their Rabbi, would be very tender about the life of one who appeared, like Jesus of Nazareth, as an opposer of their pretensions? Or can the Jews, with the law and the prophets in their hands, suppose that these men pointed to "the old path," "the good way?" This is certainly not the doctrine of Moses. He says—

אמר משה כל דבר אשר יאמר רבינו ויאמר רבינו כל דבר אשר יאמר

"Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother, and all the people shall say, Amen." (Deut. xxvii. 16.)

But these men did not stop here. They were not content with being exalted above father and mother. They did not scruple to assert, that their honour was as sacred as that of God himself.

ואין לך כבוד גדול מכבוד הרב ולא מורה ממורה הרב. אמרו חכמים מורה רבך כמורה שמים

"Thou must consider no honour greater than the honour of the Rabbi, and no fear greater than the fear of the Rabbi. The wise men have said, The fear of thy Rabbi is as the fear of God."

They endeavour to prove the validity of these extravagant claims by such passages as Exod. xvi. 8, "Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord." But they have taken for granted what they can never prove, and that is, that every Rabbi is invested with the same office and authority as Moses. But where, in all the law of Moses, is there any warrant for such an assumption? Moses could with all propriety say, "Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord," for he held a special commission from God, and had proved to the people the reality of his commission by a series of miracles. But this the Rabbies never pretended to do. In this dearth of evidence the advocates of tradition flee for refuge to Deut. xvii. 8, &c. "If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates; then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the Lord thy God shall choose; and thou shalt come unto the priests, the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and inquire, and they shall show thee the sentence of judgment. And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee; according to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do; thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall show thee to the right hand nor to the left." Here, say the traditionists, is a plain and unequivocal command. No doubt, God here plainly declares what is to be done in a difficult case. He commands the Israelites to go to the place which the Lord God chose, that is, to the place where was found the ark of the covenant; and to inquire, not of the Rabbies, but of the priests, the Levites, and the judge דרשותו. But this passage, instead of proving that "the fear of the Rabbi is as the fear of God," proves the contrary. It supposes first, that the Rabbies and learned

men may differ in judgment, that there may be a controversy, and consequently that one party may be in the wrong. It, therefore, effectually overthrows Rabbinical infallibility. It shows that these learned men are, after all, only poor fallible creatures like ourselves, and that, therefore, we are not to fear them as we would fear God, nor reverence their dictates, as the Word of God. It shows secondly, that in a case of difficulty, the Israelites were not to appeal to the Rabbies, but to the priests כהנים, and to the judge שופט, and even to them only in the place which the Lord should choose. There is not one word said about the Rabbies or the wise men, and, therefore, this passage completely annihilates all their lofty pretensions. For centuries the place which the Lord chose has been desolate, and there has been no priest standing to minister before the Lord. The Jews have thus lost all possibility of appeal. They have neither ministering priest nor judge, and the Mosaic law nowhere recognises the pretensions of the Rabbies. But some Jew may say, that though this passage does not prove the authority of the Rabbies, it does at least warrant the Jews in persisting to reject the claims of the Lord Jesus, for that he was condemned by the priests, and in Jerusalem, the place which the Lord chose. We confess that this objection is plausible; but can easily prove that it is nothing more. In order to this, we ask the Jews, whether the above command to abide by the sentence of the priests is in every case, and without any exception, binding? To this question there are two answers possible—Yes and No. If they say No, then they admit that the priests might sometimes be in the wrong, and we would, of course, take advantage of this admission to show that they erred in their judgment on Jesus of Nazareth. They will then, most probably, say, Yes; the sentence of the priests, the Levites, and the judges is in every case binding, and Israel is commanded not to deviate from it, either to the right hand or to the left, upon pain of capital punishment. We beg of them then to turn to the 26th chapter of the Prophet Jeremiah, and to consider the case there set before them. We there find that Jeremiah had delivered a message from God, very similar to our Lord's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem. "I will make this city a curse to all the nations of the earth." We find, further, that for this message the priests condemned Jeremiah to death, just as their successors condemned Jesus of Nazareth. "Now it came to pass, when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak unto all the people, that *the priests*, and the prophets, and all the people took him, saying, 'Thou shalt surely die.'" We find, further, that this sentence was pronounced "in the place

which the Lord had chosen," in the temple itself. "And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the Lord." We find, further, that the sentence against Jeremiah was no rash sudden act, but the deliberate judgment of the priests. For when the princes of Judah came afterwards to inquire into the matter, "Then spake *the priests* and the prophets unto the princes and to all the people, saying, *This man is worthy to die*, for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears." Now, then, we ask again, whether the people of Israel was in duty bound to abide by this sentence, and not to decline from it, either to the right hand or to the left? We fearlessly reply, that they were not bound by this sentence, and that, if they had executed it, they would have been guilty of murder, as Jeremiah himself declares: "But know ye for certain, that if ye put me to death, ye shall surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon this city, and upon the inhabitants thereof: for of a truth the Lord hath sent me unto you to speak all these words in your ears." We infer, therefore, that it was possible for the priests, assembled in solemn deliberation in the house of the Lord, to err in judgment, and to pronounce an unrighteous sentence. We infer, further, that it was possible for the priests so far to err, as to condemn to death a true prophet of the Lord. We infer, further, that in such a case the people was not bound by this mistaken judgment; but that it was their duty to decline from it, both to the right hand and to the left. We infer, lastly, that as the priests might mistake, and unjustly condemn to death a true prophet, their sentence against Jesus of Nazareth forms no more argument against the Messiahship of Jesus, than the similar sentence just considered did against the true prophetic character of Jeremiah; and that it affords just as little warrant for Jewish unbelief as the former sentence did for putting Jeremiah to death.

But it may be asked, if the judgment of the priests was not infallible, and if men were sometimes justifiable in refusing it, what use was there in the above commandment to apply to them in cases of difficulty, and to abide by their sentence? The answer to this is very simple. The priest that stood to minister before the Lord had it in his power, before the destruction of the first Temple, to inquire of the Lord, and to receive a miraculous answer from God himself, which answer was, of course, infallible, and universally obligatory, without the possibility of exception. We find in the Old Testament many instances in which the Israelites availed themselves of this power, as in Judges xx. 27. "And the children of Israel inquired of the Lord (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days: and Phineas

the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days), Saying, shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the Lord said, Go up; for to-morrow I will deliver them into thine hand." And in the history of David's life, there are several instances of his employment of this miraculous power, as 1 Sam. xxiii. 4, "Then David inquired of the Lord yet again. And the Lord answered him and said, Arise, go down to Keilah; for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand." In all such cases where the priest first inquired of the Lord, his sentence was, of course, infallible, and the Israelites were bound to abide by it. But where they did not inquire of the Lord, their sentence was only that of fallible men, and, therefore, not binding upon the consciences of the people. Of this sort was their sentence upon Jeremiah. Being wicked men, they did not choose to ask counsel of the Lord, but pronounced sentence according to the devices of their own hearts. In the case of the Lord Jesus Christ the priests could not ask counsel of the Lord, for in the second temple the Urim and Thummim, and the ark of the covenant were wanting; the miraculous power, therefore, did not exist, and for this very reason the sentence of the priests, during the whole period of the second Temple, was only fallible, like that of other men, and, therefore, not binding, and consequently of no force as an argument against the Messiahship of the Lord Jesus Christ. The above passage, therefore, from the xviii of Deut., is of no use to the Rabbinical Jews, it does not prove the infallibility of the priests in the second Temple, and is still less applicable for sanctioning the traditions of the oral law, and the extravagant claims of the Rabbies. Having given this passage the consideration it deserves, we now return to the laws which the Rabbies have made in favour of themselves, and for their own honour. We consider that the two passages of the oral law already quoted, prove that the New Testament gives a fair delineation of their character. When men, without any warrant from God's Word, claim for themselves the same degree of reverence which is due to God, it must be admitted that they are vainglorious and wicked in no ordinary degree. But it is possible to descend to particulars:—For instance, our Lord says, that these men "loved greetings in the market places, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi." Now one of the laws still extant, forbids a man, when speaking of his Rabbi, to call him by name. אשר לו לתלמיד לקרות לרבו בשמו ואסילו שלא

בשמי

"It is forbidden to a disciple to call his Rabbi by name, even when he is not in his presence." Another law, still extant, pre-

scribes the formula of greeting or salutation.

ולא יתן שלום לרבו או יחזיר לו שלום כדרך שחזני לדיע' ומחזירים זה לזה אלא שחזה לפניו ואומר לו בראה וכבוד שלום עליך רבי

"Neither is he to salute his Rabbi, nor to return his salutation in the same manner that salutations are given or returned amongst friends. On the contrary, he is to bow down before the Rabbi, and to say to him, with reverence and honour, Peace be unto thee, Rabbi." The Rabbinical Jews, who see this, must not mistake us. We do not consider it in anywise sinful, but decorous, to treat a Rabbi with all due respect. We should feel no objection ourselves to make a bow to a Rabbi, and to salute him in the prescribed formula. But we cite these laws to show that the New Testament gives a fair representation of the Pharisees: for men, who could gravely sit down and enter into all these details of the mode in which they were to be honoured, and then give out these laws as divine, and, besides all this, call in the civil power to enforce them, must have had no mean idea of themselves and their own dignity. It must never be forgotten that these laws are not the mere regulations of a religious community. When the Rabbies had the power in their own hands, they enforced them by civil sanctions. They were not satisfied with excluding despisers of rabbinical authority from eternal life, they prosecuted such before the tribunals, and sentenced them to a pecuniary fine and excommunication, as may be seen from the following law:—

וכל המבזה את החכמים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא ודבר הוא בכלל כי דבר יהיה בזה: אף על פי שהמבזה את החכמים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא אם באו עדים שבהו אסילו בדברים חייב נדוי ומנודן אותו בית דין רבים וקונסין אותו לישראל חוב בכל מקום וינתקן אותו לחכם. המבזה את החכם בדברים אסילו לאחר מיתה מנודן אותו בית דין וכו'

"Whosoever despises the wise men has no share in the world to come. But notwithstanding this, if there come witnesses to prove that he has been guilty of contempt even in words, his sentence is excommunication, and the tribunal (house of judgment) excommunicates him publicly, and everywhere mulct him in a fine in gold, and give it to the wise man. He that despiseth a wise man in words, even after his death, is to be excommunicated by the tribunal," &c. We now ask the Jews of modern times what they think of those who made their own personal honour the subject of legislation, who required the same reverence for their words as the Word of God, and who dragged up him that refused it before a tribunal, had him sentenced to pecuniary fine, and excommunication; and, besides all this, excluded him from the hope of everlasting life? Had such men any idea of liberty of conscience?