

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתבות עולם ירמיהו שזו

“THE OLD PATHS.”—Jer. vi. 16.

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WE have just considered that extraordinary command of the oral law which provides, that, if the reader in the synagogue should make a mistake in reading the prayers, the congregation shall wait for him for an hour: except the mistake occur in cursing the Epicureans, for then “He is not to be waited for, but let another instantly rise up in his stead, for he is, perhaps, infected with Epicureanism.” The special notice of this case is as honourable to the Jews as it is condemnatory of the oral law. It would appear from this that such mistakes had occurred. Readers in the synagogues have sometimes stumbled and stammered when they came to this fearful malediction. And truly we are not surprised, if a man of piety, acquainted with God’s Word, should be overwhelmed in publicly cursing his fellow-men, and be unable to bring the words of imprecation over his lips. The care, which the scribes took to legislate for such an occurrence, implies an honourable testimony to the good feeling of the nation, though it strongly marks their own intolerance, and forms a striking contrast to the spirit inculcated in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. When his disciples asked him to teach them to pray he taught them a short form; but, short as it was, it contained the petition, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us,” and was followed by this admonition, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt. vi. 14, 15.)

The intolerance, which we have noticed, proves sufficiently that the religious ideas of the oral law have not been drawn from Moses and the prophets; and this will appear still further from the absurd legends which are alluded to in the prayers of the synagogue, as if they were acknowledged verities. In the Liturgy for the feast of Pentecost, which is now approaching, we find more than one such allusion, to which we would most earnestly call your attention. And first of all, those prayers recognise the legend of Leviathan and Behemoth. In the morning service for that day the Jews repeat the following words:—

מטו דילן דמקדמון פש בארמיותא : מלולה דלויין
 וחור מור רמותא : חד בודו כו כונך ועבדי קיבותא :

בקרדו מנגה בהמות ברבותא : יקדש נון לקבלי בציצין
 בנבורתא : מקור ליה בריה בחרביה רברותא : ארסמון
 לצדיק יתקן ושוחתא : מסחרין עלי חבי דכרדי וגומרתא
 גנדין קמיתון ארסמון דנרתא : מהפנקן ורוו בכסי
 רוותא : חמור מדה דמראשית גמיר בי נעוותא :

Which D. Levi thus translates:—“He will certainly bestow on us the portion which he hath promised us of old. The sporting of Leviathan with the ox of the high mountains,* when they shall approach each other and engage in battle. With his horn he thrusts at the mightiest beasts, but the Leviathan will leap towards him with his fins and great strength. His Creator will then approach him with his great sword, and will prepare him for an entertainment (or a banquet) for the righteous; who will be seated at a table formed of jasper and carbuncle, with a river of balm flowing before them. When they will delight themselves and be satiated with the bowls of wine prepared at the creation, and reserved in the wine-press.” In this portion of the Liturgy of the synagogue, there is a very plain reference to the battle between Behemoth and Leviathan. The felicity of the righteous in the world to come is also described, and a part of it is said to consist of the banquet, which God will prepare for them from the flesh of Leviathan, when he shall have killed him. It is true that D. Levi has the following note on this banquet. “All this is to be understood in a figurative sense, and by no means literally, as several Christian commentators have done, and thus cast undeserved reproach on the rabbinical writers.” But he has neither given us his authority, nor his reasons for this assertion; nor has he explained the meaning of the figure. We should be glad to know what ninety-nine out of every hundred Jews understand when they hear this read in the synagogue. What do they understand by the name Behemoth? What by Leviathan? What by God’s killing him? What by preparing him as a banquet for the righteous? But however Jews in the present day may explain it away, there can be little doubt how the authors of this hymn and the Jews of old understood it. In the Talmud we have the following account of these two great beasts:—

אמר רב יוחנן אמר רב כל שבטא דקדוש ברוך בשלמו
 * This alludes to בהמות. See Job, xl. 15, &c., D. Levi.

זכר ונקבה בראם אף ליתן נחש בריח ליתן נח' עקלתון
 זכר ונקבה בראם ואלמלא נוקקין זה לזה מחרובין כל
 העולם כלו מה עשה הק' בה סיום את הזכר והרג הנקבה
 ומלחה לצדיקים לשתדל לבוא שנת' והרג את הזכרין אשר
 בים ואף בהמות בהרי אף זכר ונקבה בראם ואלמלא
 נוקקין זה לזה מחרובין כל העולם כלו מה עשה הק' בנח
 מיום הזכר וצנין הנקבה ושמה לצדיקים לשתדל לבוא .

"R. Judah said, Rav said, Every thing that God created in this world he created male and female. And thus he did with Leviathan the piercing serpent, and Leviathan the crooked serpent, he created them male and female. But if they had been united, they would have desolated the entire world. What then did the Holy One do? He took away the strength of the male Leviathan, and slew the female and salted her for the righteous for the time to come, for it is said, 'And he shall slay the whale (or dragon) that is in the sea.' (Isaiah xxvii. 1.) In like manner with regard to Behemoth upon a thousand mountains, he created them male and female, but if they had been united they would have desolated the entire world. What then did the Holy One do? He took away the strength of the male Behemoth, and made the female barren, and preserved her for the righteous for the time to come."—(Bava Bathra, fol. 74, col. 2.) In this narrative there are no marks of allegory. The creation of the world is not an allegory, but a fact. The creating of living creatures male and female is another fact. The weakening of the male and the salting of the female to prevent the desolation of the world does not look like a figure. The Jewish commentators certainly take the matter very seriously, and speak of the creation of Leviathan, not as of an allegory, but as of a real occurrence. Thus R. Moses, the son of Nachman, in his commentary on the words, "And God made great whales," after describing the great size, adds,—

ורבותינו אמרו כי החמינים הגדולים הוא ליתן ובת
 זוני שבראם זכר ונקבה והרג הנקבה ומלח' לצדיקים
 לשתדל לבוא אשדס כי מפני זה לא היה ראוי שיאמר בהם
 יהי כן כי לא עמרו עוד :

"And our rabbies have said that 'the great whales' mean Leviathan and his mate, for God created them male and female, and slew the female, and salted her for the righteous for the time to come: and perhaps this is the reason why the words, 'And it was so,' are not added, for they (the race of Leviathan) did not continue." (Com. in Gen. i. 21.) From this it is evident that the famous rabbi knew nothing of an allegory, for he makes this legend the reason why certain words used after the other works of creation are not here applied. In like manner Abarbanel speaks of this same pair of living creatures as real, and as possibly belonging to the class of great whales.

הוא כלל הכתוב השקף והרגה סאהו אמר הכתוב
 שברא השם בהם מינים מתחלפים כי יש מהם חמינים
 גדולים וכמו שיאמרו ב' הספינה אמר רבה בר רב הונא
 זמנא דהוא היה קא אולמנא בספינתא הוימנא להדיא כורא
 דיתבא ליה חלמא על גביה וקרא אנבא מלחה סבריני די
 יבשרא היא וסלקין רתיבין ובשלי' הם גביה דכורא
 ואותהדק ואי לא היה ספינתא מקרבא לן היה משבש
 לן . וכרובא ביה יסרו גם היום ויודי דים באניות ואלי
 שליתן ובת וזנו שטרס רבותינו מאלה היו עם היות
 שהמלוסטים מבני עמנו ידסרו לאותה הגדה ענינים
 עמוקים מהחכמה ואין צורך להם במקום הזה .

"But if the Scripture class creeping things and fish together, then this verse tells us that God created various species, for some of them are great whales, as is said in the 5th chapter of Bava Bathra, 'Rabbah Bar Bar Channa says, once upon a time we were sailing in a ship, and we saw that fish upon whose back the sand remains and rushes grow; we thought it was terra firma, and landed; and remained there and cooked. But when the fish's back grew warm, he turned round, and if the ship had not been at hand we must have been drowned.' They that go down to the sea in ships in the present time tell similar stories: and perhaps the Leviathan and his mate mentioned by our rabbies belonged to this species. However the philosophers of the children of our people attribute to this chapter matter deeper than philosophy, but which we do not want in this place." (Com. in Gen. i. 21.) It is true that Abarbanel here distinctly admits the existence of mysteries in that chapter of the Talmud. But it is equally plain, that he considered the Leviathan, mentioned by the rabbies, not as an allegory but a real creation; and therefore assigned it to the same class as the wonderful fish seen by Bar Bar Channa, unless we take his words as a sly insinuation, that the story of Leviathan is about as true as that narrated by the veracious Rabbi.

These two great rabbies, then, did not take the legend of Leviathan figuratively, and we might add some other similar testimonies, but that Behemoth also claims a share of our attention, and an inquiry into his nature will contribute evidence to the same effect, that this legend was not taken figuratively but literally. In the first place D. Levi himself refers us to Job xl. 15, and there we read, "Behold now Behemoth, which I made with thee, he cateth grass like an ox." Here there certainly is no allegory. The words speak of a living creature, and so they are interpreted by all the Jewish commentators, whom we have an opportunity of consulting. Ralbag says—

בהמות' הוא בעל דיים שמו כן :

"Behemoth is an animal, and that is his name." (Com. in loc.) Aben Ezra on the

words, "Behold now Behemoth, which I made with thee," says—

בהמות' שג' בהמה גדולה אין ביישוב גדולה ממנה
ויעצם עמך לפי שהיה ביבשה כי בארצות זכור ולויהין
שהוא בים וש אויב' כי פיעם עמך שהבהמות נולדו
ביום אחד עם אדם הוראשין זה דרך דרש

"Behemoth is the name of a great beast. In the habitable world there is not a greater than it. The reason why the words 'with thee' are added is, that it is a land animal, and at the end he mentions Leviathan, which is an animal of the sea. But some say the meaning of 'with thee' is, that the beasts were created on the same day with the first Adam, but this interpretation is after the manner of a drash." (Aben Ezra in loc.) This passage not only gives Aben Ezra's opinion as to the real existence of Behemoth, but shows that other commentators to whom he alludes were of the same mind. Rashi not only asserts the existence, but says plainly, לשרד, בהמות, "Behemoth, that is prepared for the time to come." And again, in his Commentary on Ps. 1. 10, he takes the words, בהמות בדורי אף, which we translate, "The cattle upon a thousand hills," as referring to "Behemoth upon a thousand hills:" and says—

הוא המתוקן לסעודת העתיד שהוא רעהו אף הרים
ליום וכל יום ויום צוממין

"This is he that is prepared for the banquet of the time to come, for he eats up the produce of a thousand hills in one day, and every day they grow again." The context of these words evidently show that Rashi, the most popular, and the most read of all the Jewish commentators, looked for a real, not an allegorical, feast upon the flesh of the Leviathan and Behemoth. The preceding and following words speak not of allegorical, but of real cattle and fowls. According to Rashi, the whole passage would read thus:—"I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he-goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and Behemoth upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountain," &c. Here, then, Behemoth is introduced amongst real animals all fit for food, so that it is impossible to take it figuratively. This animal is also suitable in size for so great an entertainment, he consumes the produce of a thousand mountains every day. This was also the opinion of Jonathan, for in his Targum on the fiftieth Psalm he has paraphrased the tenth verse as follows:—

ארום דלי כל חיות הורשא ותרחד לצדיקא בנן בן
בעירא דכין ודור בר דעי בכל יומא במורין אלמא :

"For every beast of the wood is mine, and I have prepared for the righteous in Paradise pure cattle, and the wild ox, that feeds every day upon a thousand mountains." All these testimonies (and many more might be added)

plainly prove, that the Jews, in times past, looked for a real and substantial feast upon Leviathan and Behemoth; and when we remember that the commentary of Rashi is the first that is put into the hands of the Jewish youth all over the world, and that it is generally regarded as almost, if not altogether, inspired, it is easy to conclude what is the opinion of the great majority of Jews, even in the present day, as to this entertainment. Maimonides, indeed, denies that there will be any eating and drinking in the world to come. He says,—

העולם הבא אין בו גוף וגויה אלא נשמות הצדיקים בלבד
בלא גוף כמלאכי השרת. האל האין בו גויה אין בו לא
אכלה ולא שתייה וגו'

"In the world to come there is neither body nor corporeality, but only the souls of the righteous without a body, like the ministering angels. So neither is there eating and drinking." (Hilchoth T'shuvah c. viii. 2.) But this is a solitary opinion, as is evident from the note on the passage by Abraham ben Dior, who says,—

דברי האש הזה בנימי קרובים למי שאמרו אין תודיעת
המדינת לנשות אלא נשמות בלבד דודי ראשי לא היה דעת
הוא על זה

"The words of this man are, in my eyes, very near to those of him who says that there is no resurrection to the body, but only to the soul; and I swear by my life that this was not the opinion of our wise men of blessed memory." Indeed Maimonides himself acknowledges, in his Commentary upon the Mishna, that the majority of the Jews thought very differently of the world to come. He then enumerates five classes of opinions, amongst which one is, that at that time the earth will bring forth clothes ready made, and bread ready baked; but in every one of the five, good eating and drinking is a main article. Of the fifth class he says,—

וכן המשיח והם הרבה מתברר' העניינים האלה כלם
ואמורים כי התועלת הוא שיבא המשיח ויהיה המתי'
ונכנסו לנן עין ואמרו שם ושחור ודודו בראים כל ימות
עולם

"And the fifth class (and they are numerous) include all these things, and say that the great hope is, that Messiah shall come and raise the dead, and they shall be gathered into Paradise, and there shall eat and drink and be in good health to all eternity." (Sanhedrin, fol. 119, col. 1.) This then Maimonides gives as the general expectation of the majority, and this expectation exactly agrees with the above description of the feast to be prepared from Leviathan and Behemoth. We have, therefore, not only the testimony of the most celebrated rabbies to prove that this feast is not allegorical but literal, but we have the still stronger evidence of the general expectations of the nation as enumerated by Maimonides.

D. Levi ought therefore to have said that *he* understood it allegorically, but we have seen that this is not the opinion of the nation, nor of the most celebrated rabbies. We are therefore warranted in saying that the prayers of the synagogue not only consecrate the intolerance of the Talmud, but also stamp its absurd legends with authority. It is surely not exceeding the bounds of soberness and modesty to call this story of the battle between Leviathan and Behemoth, and the feast to be prepared of their flesh and the salt meat of the female Leviathan, an absurd legend. David Levi evidently thought it was such, and was therefore glad to betake himself to allegory. In the Bible there is not one word about the killing or salting of the female Leviathan, nor about the capacious stomach of Behemoth, which requires a thousand mountains daily to satisfy it. This is all the pure invention of the rabbies, and we ask the Jews whether such legends form fit subjects for the prayers or praises of the synagogue, or whether they can be acceptable in the eyes of the God of Israel? We do not mean to conceal the fact, that Christian prayer-books may be found with legends as fabulous, and as foolish. But they are the prayer-books of former generations, or of those who still adhere to the traditions of men. With them we have nothing to do. Three hundred years have now elapsed since our forefathers cleared out all such follies. But the Jewish prayer-books still remain unchanged, and unless the Jews make some vigorous effort, the legend of Leviathan and Behemoth will be read with all solemnity in the synagogues of England at the coming feast of Pentecost. It is grievous to think that that nation which once held up the torch of divine truth to enlighten the world should still abide in the darkness and superstitions of the Talmud. And yet this is beyond all doubt the condition of Israel, so long as the divine authority of the Talmud is recognised in their public prayers. Individuals may say, that they do not believe in its follies, nor cherish its intolerance, but this cannot be said of the majority. The synagogue, in its public worship, still pronounces the maledictions, and recites the legends of the oral law, and thus declares, in the most solemn manner that can be devised, that the religion of the Talmud is the religion of the congregation. A mere confession of faith is nothing

to such a declaration as this. A man may trifle with his fellow-men, but sentiments addressed to God in prayer or praise, must justly be considered as the language of the heart.

How different is the doctrine of the New Testament. There all these monstrous fables are utterly rejected; there is not even an allusion to them. Mahomet, confessedly the author of a false religion, has incorporated not a few of the Talmudic legends into the Koran. But the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, though they lived at a time when the patronisers of these fables had power, were altogether preserved from such absurdity. They have transmitted no such distorted view of God's dealings in creation, nor of the joys which he has prepared for his people in eternity. Their doctrine is, that, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." (Acts xv. 18.) He is "The Father of lights, with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning." (James i. 17.) They also give us an account of the felicity of the blessed, but a feast upon Leviathan or Behemoth is not one of its features. "Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and shall be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." (Rev. xxi. 3, 4.) "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John iii. 2.) These are the hopes and expectations which that body of Jews, who rejected the oral law, have taught us to entertain and to cherish. Yes, brethren of the house of Israel, our hope is altogether Jewish. We do not mean to charge upon "the peculiar people of God" the folly of the Talmud. Some of the nation forsook the pure Word of God, and adopted the doctrine of an oral law. The natural consequence was, that they advanced gradually farther and farther in the mazes of error; and there all their followers continue. But we never forget that it was another portion of the Jewish nation which taught us to worship the true and living God. Our only wish is, that you would forsake Jewish error, and embrace Jewish truth.

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