

נ ת י ב ו ת ע ו ל מ

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתבות עולם. ירמיה ו' טז

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ONE of the most glorious circumstances in the national history of Israel, as well as one of the most extraordinary facts in the records of mankind, is the descent of the Lord God upon Mount Sinai to proclaim the law. Glorious it is for Israel, for never did nation hear the voice of the Lord, speaking out of the midst of the fire, as Israel heard. The display of God's grace and favour is the glory of his people, and here they were both displayed pre-eminently. The grandeur and awfulness of the scene we cannot now enter upon, except to remark, that the grandeur of the reality is equalled by the dignity of the narrative, which Moses has left us in the sixth and xxth chapters of Exodus. None but an inspired historian could have treated an event, so honourable to his nation, with such majestic simplicity. The style and tone furnish an irresistible evidence to the truth of the relation. And perhaps this evidence is much strengthened by the contrast presented in the writings of the rabbies. There is no part of the Scripture history which they have more amplified by additions of their own; as plainly stamped with falsehood, as the other with truth. We have here a wide field before us, but shall confine ourselves to those legends, which are authenticated in the synagogue prayers for the anniversary of that great event. In the morning service for the second day is found an account of the giving of the law, in which the following wonderful passage occurs:—

צבאות קדש אחוזם בעתה. צלע כנגית עליהם
כפעת. צרופה קבלו במנד ואימחז;

"Dread seized the holy hosts, when thou didst turn the mountain over them as a tub: they received the pure law with fear and tremor." (D. Levi's Pentecost Prayers, fol. 150.) Here is a circumstance in the giving of the law, which few readers of the Pentateuch will remember. All will grant that to see Mount Sinai hanging over them, like a tub or an extinguisher, was a very dreadful sight, if it really happened. But surely every reasonable Israelite will inquire upon what evidence it rests? In all the previous history God appears as a merciful Father, visiting his children in their affliction, redeeming them from bondage, and exhibiting miracle after miracle as their safety or their necessity required; how is it, then, that He appears so

suddenly in the character of a tyrant or a destroyer, ready to drop the mighty mountain upon the heads of his people, and cover them up for ever under the rocky mass? Moses throws no light upon the subject. The oral law, the Talmud must explain the mystery.

ויתצבו בתחתית ההר א'ר אנדימי בר חמא בר חמא למד שכמה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כנגית ואמ' להם אמ אתם מקבלים התורה מושב ואם לאו שם תהיא קבורתכם אמ' רב אחא בר' יעקב מכאן מודעת רבה לאוריה וכו' :

"And they stood at the nether part of the mountain (or beneath the mountain). (Exod. xix. 17.) R. Avdimi, the son of Chama, the son of Chasa, says, These words teach us that the Holy One, blessed be He, turned the mountain over them like a tub, and said to them, If ye will receive the law, well; but if not, there shall be your grave. R. Acha, the son of R. Jacob, says, This is a great confession for the law." (Shabbath, fol. 88, 1.) From this extract it appears that the whole foundation of the fable is a sort of pun upon the words "בחתית ההר" "beneath the mountain," or as the English translators rightly have it, "at the nether part of the mountain." R. Avdimi thought that these words meant, as Rashi says, חרות דודר ממש "under the mountain in the strictest sense of the words." But then the puzzle was how the Israelites got into that situation. R. Avdimi's imagination supplied the rest. But in the first place the word חרות occurs often enough in both the singular and plural, but never has this signification. In the second place this fable directly contradicts the Mosaic account. God had already sent notice to inform the people of the giving of the law, and they had replied "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." (V. 8.) In the third place, if the mountain was turned over them like a tub, how did Moses get up to the top, and what necessity was there for the command, "Go down, charge the people lest they break through?" &c. (V. 21.) And, lastly, if the law was forced upon the Israelites contrary to their wish, cannot they make this an apology for disobedience? Is not this what R. Acha, the son of Jacob, actually does, when he says, "This is a great confession for the law?" So at least Rashi explains his words.

מורעא רבה שאם יזמינם לדין למה לא קימת' מה שקבלת' עליכ' יש להם תשובה שקבלה באונס :

"A great confession, for if he call them to judgment, saying, Why have ye not kept that which ye took upon yourselves, they have an answer, that they were forced to receive it." (Rashi Comment. in loc.) And this fable, contrary to the narrative of Moses, derogatory to the mercy of God, and subversive of the principle of human responsibility, the rabbies have introduced into the prayers of the synagogue, and there it still stands as an evidence of the absence of God's Spirit from those, who rejected Jesus of Nazareth, and imposed the oral law upon Israel. But this want of wisdom appears not only in the nature of the additions, which they have made to the Word of God, but also in the conflicting statements which these additions contain: In the legend, just given, Israel is represented as having been unwilling to receive the law, and yet in the morning service for the first day of Pentecost, we have an allusion to another legend, which describes the great reward bestowed upon them, because they received it with such a ready mind.

הם קבלו על תורה עלימו ' ונעשה לנשמע וקדימו ' מרם נשמע נעשה נמו ' יצדקה בה דחשבה למי' ולשני תרים סוימו ' למלכה ולחונה ללויה ארימו ' .

"They willingly took the yoke of his law upon them, and caused the expression, We will do, to precede 'We will hearken;' before they heard it they said, 'We will do,' and which was accounted for righteousness to them; and they were dignified with two crowns; and rendered awful with the sovereignty of the priesthood, and the Levitical institution." (Pentecost Prayers, fol. 86.) At first sight it would appear as if this were a mere figurative expression to denote either the priesthood and the levitical institution, or the monarchy and the priesthood. But then a difficulty occurs why are only two crowns mentioned? Every one knows that in a figurative sense the oral law says that Israel is crowned with three crowns, as it is said,

בשלש תרים נכתרו ישראל כתר תורה וכתר מלכות וכתר מלכות :

"Israel is crowned with three crowns, the crown of the law, and the crown of the priesthood, and the crown of the kingdom." (Hilchoth Talmud Torah, chap. iii. 1.) Why then does this prayer only mention two? It is because it refers to a totally different circumstance. The number of the crowns, and the reason assigned for their bestowal, "because they caused the expression 'We will do,' to precede 'We will hearken,'" both identify the allusion as being made to the following Talmudic legend:—

בשעה שהקדימו ישראל נעשה לנשמע באו ששים

ריבוא של מלאכי השדה לכל אחד ואחד מישראל קשרו לו שני תרים אחד כנגד נעשה ואחד כנגד נשמע וכיון שהמאו ישראל ירדו מאה ועשרים ריבוא מלאכי חבלה וספקי' שני' ויתבללו בני ישראל את עינם מהו חורב :

"In the hour when Israel caused, 'We will do,' to precede 'We will hearken,' there came six hundred thousand ministering angels, one to each Israelite, and invested him with two crowns, one answering to 'We will do;' and the second answering to 'We will hearken.' But when Israel sinned, there descended twelve hundred thousand evil angels, and took them away: as it is said, 'The children of Israel stripped themselves (or were stripped) of their ornaments by the mount Horeb.'" (Ex. xxxiii. 6.) (Shabbath, fol. 88, 1.) Here, then, is no allegory, no allusion to the allegorical crowns of Israel, but a narrative of a supposed fact, which occurred in the history of each of the six hundred thousand Israelites, who went forth from Egypt. The commentary in the Talmud evidently treats this as a grave and authentic history, for it tells us the material, of which the crowns were composed.

שני תרים של הדו היו לשיך כשנשלם משה פין עור פניו :

"The two crowns were crowns of glory, therefore when Moses wore them the skin of his face shone." From this it is evident that the rabbins considered this legend to be as authentic as the fact recorded in the Bible (Exod. xxxiv. 30), that the skin of Moses' face shone. They were not satisfied with the honour conferred upon Moses, but were led by a vain-glorious feeling to extend it to every individual Israelite, and to add, what is not said of Moses, but what increases the marvellousness of the narrative, that six hundred thousand angels descended for the purpose of crowning Israel, and that twice that number was necessary for the removal of the crowns once conferred. But how does this story agree with the former? If the Israelites were compelled to receive the law against their will, by the terrors of the mountain hanging over their heads, what great merit was there to deserve these two crowns? If the Israelites were so willing, and received such a glorious reward, what necessity was there for turning the mountain over them like a tub? These stories are inconsistent in themselves, and utterly without foundation in the Word of God, and are therefore most unworthy of a place in the prayers of Israel. But this prayer has other particulars equally wonderful, to which we proceed. A sentence or two farther on, this prayer describes the effect which the delivery of the ten commandments produced upon Israel.

ואחז בדברו החריד עולמו . ועשרים וארבעה מיל
מהלך נעו עמו . שמים וזו כדשמיש נאמרו :

“ When he spoke the first word, his world was terrified, and when they heard two commandments, they moved backward the space of twenty-four miles.” (Pentecost Prayers, fol. 87.) To understand this, we must again refer to the Talmud, which gives us the particulars.

אמר ריביל כל דיבור היבור שיצא מפי הקב"ה והורו ישראל לאחוריהן ^ל מל היו מלאכי השרת מודיין אותן שנה' מלאכי צבאות יודוהן יודוהן אל תקי יודוהן אלא יודוהן :

“ Rabbi Joshua, the son of Levi, says, as each commandment proceeded from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, Israel retreated twelve miles, and the ministering angels led them back, as it is said, ‘ the angels of the host did flee apace.’ (Ps. lxxviii. 13.) Do not read יודוהן ‘ they fled;’ but יודוהן ‘ they led.’” (Shabbath, fol. 88,2.) In this short passage we have two deliberate alterations of the Word of God, in order to square it with this absurd tradition. In the first place, “ Kings of hosts ” is changed into “ angels of hosts,” and in the second place, “ They fled,” is changed into “ they led.” These alterations do of themselves throw discredit upon the story which requires them, and not only upon this story, but upon the whole oral law, which allows such trifling with the Word of God. But our business is at present with the legend, and as it is told a little more circumstantially in the Jalkut, it will be well to give that version of it also.

יבטחו מרחוק הורו לשנים עשר מיל מגיד שהיו ישראל נרחקין לאחוריהן שנים עשר מיל וחזרוהן לפנין שני' עשר מיל הרי עשרים וארבעה מיל על כל דבור ודבור נמצאו מהלכין באותו היום מאתים וארבעים מיל באותה שעה אמר הקב"ה למלאכי השרת דרו וסייעו את אחיהם שנאמר מלאכי צבאות יודוהן יודוהן יודוהן בלימה יודוהן בדוורו :

“ They removed and stood afar off” (Exod. xx. 18.)—a distance of twelve miles. This shows us that Israel retreated backwards twelve miles, and then advanced forwards twelve miles, altogether twenty-four miles, as each commandment was delivered. Thus they travelled in that day two hundred and forty miles. At that time the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the ministering angels, Descend and help your brethren, for it is said, ‘ The Kings of hosts did lead, did lead.’ (Ps. lxxviii. 13.) That is, they led when they went, and they led them when they returned.” (Jalkut Shimoni, part i. fol. 53, 1.) It is hardly needful to point out the absurdity of this narration. Just think of the Israelites running away twelve miles, when they heard a commandment, and then brought back

again, and then running away again. How unlike the simple and dignified narrative which Moses has left! We ask every intelligent Israelite what he thinks? Is this story a falsehood? If so, why is it left in the prayers of the synagogue? If it stood alone, we might suppose that by some oversight or other it had crept in, but we have already noticed many like it, and the very next sentence of this same prayer contains another.

בדחתו לדבר לעם עלים . רעשו אומות העולם . פחדו קראם ורעדו החילים . חל כילדה הבדלים . סערו חזרו וסר צילם . האצל קמואל באו כלכם . לנחש בקסמי קלקלים . ושאלו לו מה זה בא לעולם . שמא היום למימי חורר עלם :

“ When he came down to speak to the immortal people, the people of the world were moved, dread seized them, and trembling laid hold on them; pain troubled them as a woman in travail: they were shaken and disturbed, and their shadow departed from them; they all came to Kemuel, to divine with their erroneous divinations, and asked him, What is this that hath happened to the world? Perhaps the world is this day to return to its chaos.” The preceding story told us what happened to Israel, the allusion in this sentence tells us of the terror which came upon the Gentiles; but to understand the allusion, we must again refer to the Talmud.

ישמעו יתרו כהן מדין מה שמעוה שמע ובא ונתגייר ר' יהושע אומר מליחמת עמלק שמע שהרי כתב בצדו ויהושע יהושע את עמלק ואת עמו לפי דבר ר"א המדעי אומר מתן תורה שמע שבשנתנה תורה לישראל קולו הלך כמות העולם ועד סופו וכל אומות העולם אדוהתן ועדה בהימלחן ואמרו שיהי' ובהיכל וכו' אומ' כבר נתקבצו כלם אצל בלעם הרשע ואמרו לו מה קל ההמות אשר שמענו שומא מבל בא לעולם אמר להם ה' למבול ישב וישב ה'מך לעולם כבר נשבע הקב"ה שאינו מביא מבול לעולם אמרו לו מבול של מים אינו מבי' אבל מבול של אש מביא שני' כי הנה באש ה' נשפט אמר להן כבר נשבע שאינו משהות כל בשר ומה קל ההמות הזה ששמענו אמר להן חמדה טובה יש לו בבית גנויו שהיהה גנוה אצלו תתק' עד דורות קדם שנברא העולם וביק' לתנה לבניו שני' ה' עת לעמו יתן פתחו כלם ואמרו ה' יבדך את עמו בשלום :

“ And Jethro the priest of Midian heard.” (Exod. xviii. 1.) What was it that he heard which induced him to come and be a proselyte? R. Joshua says, he heard of the war with Amalek, for immediately before it is written, ‘ And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of his sword.’ (Exod. xvii. 13.) R. Eliezer, the Modite, says, he heard the giving of the law, for when the law was given to Israel, his voice went from one end of the world to the other, and all the nations of the world were seized with trembling in their temples, and they repeated a

hymn, as it is said, 'In his temple doth every one speak of his glory.' (Psalm xxix. 9.) They gathered themselves together to Balaam the wicked, and said to him, What is the voice of the tumult which we have heard? Perhaps a flood is coming upon the world. He replied, 'The Lord sitteth upon the flood; yea the Lord sitteth King for ever.' (Verse 10.) The Holy One, blessed be He, has sworn long since that He will not bring a flood upon the world. They replied, He will not bring a flood of waters, but He will bring a flood of fire; for it is said, 'By fire will the Lord plead.' (Isai. lxvi. 16.) He answered them, He has sworn long since that He will not destroy all flesh. What, then, is the voice of the tumult which we have heard? He said to them, God has had a most desirable good in the house of his treasures, which has been treasured up with him for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the creation of the world, and he now seeks to give it to his children, for it is said, 'The Lord will give strength to his people.' Then they all began and said, 'The Lord will bless his people with peace.'" (Ps. xxix. 11.) (Zevachin, fol. 116, 1.) This is the fable to which your prayers refer, and which all Israel throughout the world is taught to believe, and to commemorate in the solemn act of public worship. That it is a mere fable is very easy to prove. First, it contradicts the narrative given by Moses. This fable says that the tremendous noise made at the giving of the law brought Jethro to Moses—that this was what he heard. But if you will read the whole verse, from which the Talmud quotes a few words, you will find that there was no occasion for asking what Jethro heard, for Moses himself expressly tells us what he heard, and why he came. "When Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses, and for Israel his people, and that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt, then Jethro," &c. (Exodus, xviii. 1-5.) If you will read the whole chapter, you will find that Jethro was come and gone before the law was given, and consequently before the tremendous noise was made; so that it is utterly false that this was the cause of his coming. Secondly, that all the nations heard the voice of God is false, for it also contradicts the language of Moses, who makes

it the peculiar privilege of Israel, that they alone heard the voice. "Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live?" (Deut. iv. 33.) Lastly, this story is palpably absurd. The Talmud represents Balaam, and his Gentile contemporaries quoting Scripture like two rabbies, and that, hundreds of years before the portions which they quote were written. They both quote the xxixth Psalm, a Psalm of David, about 500 years before he was born, and the Gentiles quote the lxvith of Isaiah above 700 years before it was written! And your rabbies have not been content to keep this absurd and foolish story in the Talmud, but have inserted it in the prayers for the solemn festival of Pentecost. According to these prayers, you are taught to believe that, at the giving of the law, God turned mount Sinai over the people of Israel like a tub, and compelled them to receive the law against their will; and yet that, for their ready obedience, six hundred thousand angels were sent down to crown each man with two crowns. You are taught to believe that when the commandments were given, Israel walked backwards and forwards two hundred and forty miles. And that the voice of God was so loud that it was heard by all the nations of the world, who all went to Balaam, and all knew and quoted the Psalms and the prophets, centuries before they were written. This is what you have got by following the oral law. It is in vain for you to say that you do not believe these things—there they stand in your Prayer-book. If you do not believe them, why do you leave them there? But whatever individuals may say, it is evident that the compilers of the Jewish Liturgy heartily believed every word of them, and therefore introduced them into their prayers. And it is equally certain that, wherever the Talmud maintains its authority, these fables form a part of the faith of Israel. But some will say, We do not believe them. Why not; Do you disbelieve them because they are true? No, but because they are false. Then you confess that the oral law contains downright palpable falsehoods, and that in many of its narrations it is not worthy of credence. Of what value, then, is the oral law, and what credit can we give to the authors of it, who did not scruple to invent these foolish stories?

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