

# נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתיבות עולם. ירמיהו טז

"THE OLD PATHS."—Jer. vi. 16.

NUMBER 20.

FRIDAY, MAY 27, 1836.

PRICE ONE-PENNY.

NEARLY eighteen centuries have now elapsed since a large proportion of the Jewish nation deliberately chose Rabbinism in preference to Christianity. The great question between Jews and Christians is, whether those persons made a right choice. The means of answering the question are within our reach. The oral law exists, diffused through the volumes of the Talmud, and compressed in the prayers of the synagogue. There we can look for it, and judge of its spirit and its intrinsic excellence and evidence. The Rabbinists say, that the oral law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and that the oral law, which they now possess, is identically the same as that then received; and they appeal in proof of this assertion to the continuity of its transmission from father to son down to the present day. The Christian objects that this oral law is full of fables. The Talmudist replies by making a distinction between the דינים the laws and the Agadah, or legendary part; and the Christian is satisfied or silenced until he opens the Jewish Prayer-book, and finds that the most absurd and improbable of all the Talmudic legends are there recognised as undoubted verities, and integral parts of modern Judaism. Many of these, and sufficient to annihilate all claims which the oral law can make to truth, have been examined, but as this part of the subject is important, two more must be considered before we can at present take leave of them. In the sentence immediately following our last extract from the Jewish prayers we read as follows:—

וכל דור ודור ומנהיגיהם אשר עמדו לפניכם והעמידים לעמדם אחריהם כלם העמידים בסיני עמדה להרעים כי דור דע נחשק מכלהם שוב שמע דעת השכילים וכל מום לא היה בהם כי שלמים ומושלמים היו כלהם:

Which D. Levi thus translates, "And every generation, and its governors that existed before them, and those that rose after them, were all placed at Mount Sinai with them, to let them know, that the intelligent generation was more acceptable than them; to make them understand good judgment and knowledge: there was no blemish in them, for they were entirely perfect." (Pentecost Prayer, p. 87.) The assembling of the living nation of Israel, to hear the voice of the Creator, was not grand

enough for the rabbies, they have therefore added that the souls of all the unborn generations were present to hear and receive the law. The comparison of this tradition with some already considered suggests several interesting topics for inquiry. For instance, whether these souls were under the mountain or not when it was turned over them—whether they performed the journey of two hundred and forty miles backwards and forwards at the giving of the ten commandments, &c.? But the authority, which this tradition confers on the oral law, demands our more immediate attention, and is particularly manifest, in that version of the story, which is found in Me-drash Rabba.

ודבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה לאמר א' ד' יצחק מה שהנביאים שתיים להנבואות בכל דור ודור קבלו מהר סיני שכן משה אומר את ישראל כי את אשר ישנו פה עמנו עומד היום ואת אשר איננו פה עמנו היום עמנו עומד היום אין כתוב כאן אלא איננו עמנו היום אלו הנשמות העתידות להבראות שאין בהם ממש שלא נאמרה בהם עמידה שא' ל' שלא היו באות' שעה כל אחד ואחד קבל את שלו וכן הוא אומר משה דבר יי אל ישראל בד מלאכי י כימי מלאכי לא נאמר אלא בד מלאכי שכבר היתה הנבואה בידו מהר סיני ועד אותה שעה לא נתנה לו רשות להנבואות וכן ישעיה אמר מצת הויהה שם אני אמר ישעיה מיום שנתנה תורה בסיני שם הייתי וקבלתי את הנבואה והוא אלא ועשה יי אלהים שלהני ורורו עד עכשיו לא נתן לו רשות להנבואות ולא כל הנביאים בלבד קבלו מסיני נבואתן אלא אף החכמים השומרים בכל דור ודור כל אחד ואחד קבל את שלו מסיני וכן הוא אומר את הדברים האלה דבר יי אל כל קהלכם:

"And God spake all these words, saying." (Exod. xx. 1.) R. Isaac says, that all those things, which the prophets were to prophesy in every generation, they received from Mount Sinai, for so Moses says to Israel, "But with him that standeth here with us this day, and also with him that is not here with us this day." (Deut. xxix. 15.) Here in the latter clause, it is not said, 'That standeth with us this day,' but 'With him that is not here with us this day.' These are the souls that were to be created, who had no corporeal existence, and of whom therefore it could not be said that they stood there. But although they did not exist in that hour, every one of them received his own, and so it is written, 'The

burden of the Word of the Lord to Israel in the hand of Malachi.' (Mal. i. 1.) Here it is not said in the days of Malachi, but in the hand of Malachi, for this prophecy had been long since in his hand, even from Mount Sinai; but up to that time permission had not been given him to prophesy. In like manner Isaiah says, 'From the time that it was, there am I.' (Isaiah xlvi. 16.) Isaiah means to say, From the day that the law was given there was I, and I received this prophecy, only 'Now the Lord God and His Spirit hath sent me;' that is, until then permission had not been given him to prophesy. But it was not the prophets only who received their prophecy from Sinai, but also the wise men in every generation, each one of them received his own from Sinai, and so it is said, 'These words the Lord spake unto all your congregation.' (Deut. v. 22.)" Shemoth Rabba Parashah 28.) The object of this fable is very plain, it is to clothe the rabbies with infallible authority. It is here asserted that the rabbies of every generation were all present at the giving of the law, and each received immediately from Sinai those legal decisions and doctrines which he was to communicate to the world, and consequently every thing, that a rabbi teaches, is infallibly right and true, and as authoritative as the words of Moses and the prophets, for "God spake all these words," as this legend interprets this verse. The rabbies of every generation are included, so that according to this tradition the wise men of Israel, even in this degenerate time, still deliver infallible instructions, which they received more than three thousand years ago from the mouth of God himself. But this fable avers too much. If all Israel was present at Sinai, and each individual, whether prophet, or rabbi, or layman, received the law at that time, what use was there in the transmission from father to son, from the time of Moses down to us? Nay, more, what use is there in teaching at all, for every man then received his own? Nay, further, what use is the written law, for if every man was taught at Sinai, there is no need for him to read and learn now? But this is a matter, which every Israelite can decide for himself. Let him ask himself, how much he remembers of this wonderful event in his existence, his presentation at Sinai, and his reception of the law from the Lord himself. The Scripture proofs which are here given are evidently nothing to the purpose. The first proof is, "God spake all these words, saying." (Exod. xx. 1.) But every one who will take the trouble of reading the chapter will see, that "all these words" cannot apply to the prophecies nor to the decisions of the rabbies, but to the ten commandments and to them only. So far from delivering all the decisions

and comments since taught by the rabbies, God spake only the ten commandments to the people, and when they heard these, "they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." (Verse 19.) To say, therefore, that God's speaking "all these words" includes the whole oral law and all the rabbinical comments, is gross perversion of the text, and direct contradiction of Moses' account.

The next and most usual verse adduced to prove this fable is Deut. xxix. 14, 15, where it is said, "Neither with you only do I make this covenant and oath; but with him that standeth here with us this day, before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day." But this verse plainly proves the contrary, that the other generations of Israel were there in no sense whatever. The Hebrew words are as strong as they can be.

אמת אשר איננו פה עמו ימים :

Those with whom the covenant is made are divided into two classes, "Him that standeth here," and "Him that is not here." If the word standeth had been repeated, if the verse said, "With him that standeth here, and with him that standeth not here," there might have been some colour for this fable; the rabbies might have urged that though the unborn generations did not stand there, they stood somewhere else; but the present wording of the verse utterly excludes all possibility of existence, either corporeal or incorporeal. "With Him that is not here, איננו" shows that they were there in no sense.

The proof taken from Malachi, "The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel in the hand of Malachi," is nonsense. Every one, that knows any thing of Hebrew, knows that רבי signifies "by," "by means of." But even taken literally, it will not prove that Malachi was at Sinai; there is nothing in the words to inform us when Malachi received the prophecy. The proof from Isaiah is more unhappy still. The whole context shows that it is God who speaks in that verse, and not the prophet. Indeed we might ask, if Isaiah had already received all his prophecies at Sinai, what was the use of the vision of the Lord sitting upon his throne, and the commission which is there given? (Isai. vi.) And so we might ask concerning most of the prophets. The case of Samuel is here particularly worthy of consideration. According to the above tradition cited in the Jewish prayers, Samuel had been at Sinai, and there received all that he was to deliver during his sublunary existence. And yet when the word of the Lord came to him, he did not recognise the Divine call, and three times went to Eli, and it was Eli who at last told him that it was God. Now how is this

written history to be reconciled with the above tradition? The tradition says that Samuel had heard the voice of God at Sinai, that there all the prophetic words which he was ever to deliver were made known to him, and yet the Bible says, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him." (1 Sam. iii. 7.)

The last proof, taken from Deut. v. 22, if considered in its context, also proves the contrary. The tradition quotes only a part of the verse, "These words the Lord spake unto all your congregation;" but if you read on you will find, "And he added no more," which words plainly limit the first sentence to the ten commandments. This tradition, then, as being contrary to Scripture, to the law of Moses, is a falsehood, and is therefore unworthy of a place in the prayers of that people, whom God selected from all the nations of the earth to be his witnesses, and the depositories of his truth. But this tradition is objectionable not only as a fable, though that is a very strong objection to any thing proposed as an article of faith, but on account of the purpose which it was intended to serve. It was invented for the purpose of strengthening the spiritual tyranny of the Scribes and Pharisees over the minds of the people. It is not therefore merely an erroneous interpretation of Scripture, nor the dream of a fanatic imagination, but the deliberate invention of men who knew what they were about, and had an object which they were endeavouring to compass, and for the attainment of which they did not stick at deliberate falsehood. They were, however, too wise to confine all the advantages of this appearance at Sinai to themselves; they asserted that the whole people of Israel obtained an advantage which makes them superior to all other nations. The prayer which we have quoted above alludes to this, when it says, "There was no blemish in them, for they were all entirely perfect." This sentence rather puzzles an ordinary reader of the Bible, who thinks of the conduct and character of Israel as there described; the Talmud, however, helps us to understand this eulogy.

ממני מה גרים מוזהבין שלא עמדו על דר סיני שבשעה שבא הנחש על הזה היסל בה וזדמא ישראל שעמדו על דר סיני ססקה וזדמכן גרים שלא עמדו על דר סיני לא ססקה וזדמכן אמר ליה רב אחא בריה דרבא לרב אחי גרים מאי אמר ליה איצ' דאינורו לא הוו מולידו דזה דכתב את אשר שנו פה עמנו עומד היום לפני ד' אלקינו ואת אשר איננו דר גרי :

"Why are the Gentiles defiled? Because they did not stand upon mount Sinai, for in the hour that the serpent came to Eve, he communicated a defilement, which was taken away from Israel when they stood on mount Sinai: but the defilement of the Gentiles was

not removed, as they did not stand on Sinai. Rav Acha, the son of Rabba, said to Rav Ashai, how, then, does it fare with proselytes? He replied, although they were not there, their good fortune (or star) was there, as it is written, 'With him that standeth here with us this day, before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day.' (Deut. xxix. 15.)" (Shabbath, fol. 145, col. 2, at the bottom of the page.) The commentary on this passage quotes still further particulars from Siphri, and says—

כל שעמדו על דר סיני נתקשו ונמדדו ונתרפאו מכל כום ואין שרים ומסכים שדיו בשראל כדבנא בסמי :

"All that stood on mount Sinai were sanctified and purified, and were healed from every blemish, even the blind and the lame that then happened to be in Israel, as is taught in Siphri." In this part of the fable the inventors of the oral law endeavour to flatter the vanity of the Israelites, and thus to engage their affections in behalf of that tradition which was to secure their own power. The Scribes understood well the deceitfulness of the human heart, and knew that men love to hear and are ready to believe any thing that tends to their own personal aggrandisement. But in thus flattering the people, they were turning their backs upon that example which Moses set them, and contradicting the whole current of Scripture testimony. Moses and the prophets, as the servants of God, told the people of their sins and their evil deeds, that they might repent and be saved. Their object was not to secure popular favour, nor to advance their own selfish purposes: they therefore could afford to be honest and to speak truth. The inventors of the oral law, on the contrary, were endeavouring to erect a fabric of personal honour and power; they were therefore obliged to address themselves to the weak side of the human heart; and in doing so, were obliged to run counter to the plainest declarations of God's Word. All men and every nation like to be told that they are superior to the rest of the world, and are distinguished by moral endowments from the mass of mankind. The inventors of the oral law, therefore, told Israel that they were far elevated above all other nations, for they had been cleansed at Sinai from that innate defilement which still contaminates all the rest of the children of men. But is this true—is this what Moses and the prophets say? Moses says, "Understand, therefore, that the Lord thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness: for thou art a stiffnecked people." "Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you." (Deut. ix. 6, 24.) Isaiah says of Israel, "From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it,

but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores." "Ah! sinful nation!—a people laden with iniquity; a seed of evil-doers—children that are corrupters." (Isaiah i. 4—6.) And again he says, "Woe is me, for I am undone: because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." (Isaiah vi. 5.) Jeremiah says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin and the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil." (Jer. xiii. 23.) And again, "All these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart." (Jer. ix. 26.) The Lord himself says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. For they are impudent children and stiff-hearted." (Ezek. ii. 3, 4.) And again, "Thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel: not to many people of a strange speech and of an hard language, whose words thou canst not understand; surely had I sent thee to them, they would have hearkened unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee: for they will not hearken unto me; for all the house of Israel are impudent and hard-hearted." (Ezek. iii. 4—7, &c.) We do not quote these passages to show that the Gentiles have a more favoured constitution of moral nature. Far from it; in reading these accounts given by the prophets, we recognise the features of our own picture. Far be it from us to glory; we quote these passages to show you how miserably your oral law endeavours to blind and delude you by flattering your vanity. It tells you that you have been purged from every stain; Moses and the prophets teach you the truth—that you are just like the other sons of men, and have no moral superiority or advantage whatever. We wish to point out to you how the system of rabbinism is diametrically opposed to Moses and the prophets, and above all, to impress upon you that the authors of this oral law are not worthy of your confidence, for they have, for their own private interests, invented narratives and doctrines which contra-

dict that Word of God, which ought to be Israel's glory. We wish to show you how certain principles of evil pervade every part of that system, not even excepting those prayers which are offered up in the public worship of God. There these fables also occur, and we ask every Israelite who loves the law of Moses or hopes in the promises of God by the prophets, how he can conscientiously stand by in the synagogue and hear the words of Moses and the prophets openly contradicted? How can he remain silent when the reader declares of Israel that there is no blemish in them, for they are all entirely perfect, when he knows and feels that he and all his brethren are just as frail, as sinful, and as imperfect as the other sons of men? How can they expect the return of God's favour to their nation so long as these fictions are made a part of public worship? Moses teaches very different doctrine. He says, "If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they have trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me. And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies: if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land." (Levit. xxvi. 40—42.) Here Moses makes a conviction and acknowledgment of guilt, an indispensable preliminary to the return of God's favour to the nation. Israel must feel that, so far from being cleansed from all impurity, their heart is uncircumcised, and this uncircumcised heart must be humbled; but how is this possible, so long as the oral law and the prayers of the synagogue teach that the Israelites are the most righteous of mankind, because they received the law, which the other nations rejected—and the most pure, or rather the only pure, of mankind, inasmuch as they were cleansed from every taint at Sinai? These doctrines harden the heart against true humility, prevent true repentance, and thereby retard the happiness and the glory of Israel.

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London:—Sold at the London Society's Office, 16, Exeter-hall, Strand; by James Duncan, Paternoster-row; and B. Wertheim, 57, Aldersgate-street. This publication may be had by applying at No. 5, No. 7, or No. 13, Palestine-place, Bethnal-green.

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Macintosh, Printer, Great New-street, London.