

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתבות שלם • ירמיהו' שז

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MODERN Judaism is the religion of the oral law. The dogmas, rites, ceremonies, and prayers, all rest upon its authority. If, therefore, the oral law can be proved to be an invention of men, the whole fabric of modern Judaism crumbles into dust. It then follows that the Jews have been more than eighteen centuries the disciples of error, and that, if they now desire to believe and profess the true religion, revealed by God to their forefathers, they must renounce their present Talmudic system, and return to the law and the prophets. But the oral law is a human invention. It has been proved, on the authority of the Jewish Prayer-book, that it abounds with the most absurd fables, which cannot be the Word of God, but are evidently and obviously the invention of man. It appears, therefore, that the Jewish nation has been for centuries deluded by the traditions of the scribes and pharisees—that they have been utterly mistaken in their faith, taking the fictions of men for the truth of God—and have thereby sunk from the honourable position, in which God placed them as depositories of the truth, to the unenviable situation of the credulous and superstitious. Such is the result of an inquiry into the contents of prayers of the synagogue. An examination of the traditional commandments will show in like manner, that the oral law is every where inseparably mingled with fables, which throw discredit upon the whole. One of the most important parts of the oral law is that which relates to the constitution of the great tribunal called the Sanhedrin, for, as is asserted, that council fixed the authority of all traditions, and even examined into the claims, and decided upon the divine mission of the prophets. If it appear, therefore, that the oral law teaches what is manifestly fabulous with respect to that tribunal, the main pillar of tradition is taken away. Now without entering into the whole subject at present, the following specimen will show what degree of credit can be given to the traditional accounts respecting it:—

אמר רבי יוחנן אין מושיבין במדבריה אלא בעלי קומה ובעלי חכמה ובעלי מראה ובעלי זקנה ובעלי כשימים ויודעים בשבועים לשון שלא רחא סבדרי שומעת מס דתורבמן:

"Rabbi Johanna says, none were allowed

to sit in the Sanhedrin, who were not men of stature, men of wisdom, men of good appearance, aged, skilled in magic, and acquainted with the seventy languages, so that the Sanhedrin might not be obliged to hear through an interpreter." (Sanhedrin, fol. 17, col. 1.) In this short extract there are several fables—first, that all the members of the Sanhedrin should be skilled in magic, or magicians, is plainly contrary to the express command of God, who says, "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch כמסך—for all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord; and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee." (Deut. xviii. 10—12.) This command of God makes no exception in favour of the members of the Sanhedrin. It absolutely forbids any such in Israel for any purpose. The commentary indeed tells us, that this magical skill was required in self-defence.

להמית מכשפים הנומדים בכשפיהם להגבל מדי
בית דין:

"In order to kill the magicians who trusted in their magical arts to deliver them out of the hands of the tribunal." But this explanation does not mend the matter. Magic is a thing absolutely unlawful and expressly forbidden by God. It was therefore unlawful either to learn or to practise it, even for the purpose of killing a magician. If the plea of self-defence or necessity made it lawful for the Sanhedrin to learn magic, the same argument would justify it doubly in the case of the people, who were more likely to be the objects of the magicians' attacks; for surely these persons would be careful to avoid all contact with the members of the Sanhedrin, whom they knew to be more than a match for them in the black art. According to this method of arguing all Israel might have been skilled in magic, though the law requires that not one such person should be found among them. Either then this account is absolutely false, or the members of the Sanhedrin were bad men, who learned what was expressly forbidden by the law of God; and in either case, the Talmudic accounts of this tribunal are unworthy of credit.

But it may well be doubted whether the members of this great council confined their magical exertions to the killing of magicians. We find elsewhere, if the Talmud speak truth, that the rabbies at least made other magical experiments, and have even recorded the means which they employed, for the benefit of posterity.

אבא בנימין אומר אלמלא נהנה רשות לעין לאותא אין כל בריה יכלה לעמוד מפני המוֹקֵץ אמי אבי איהו מפשי מיין וקמי עלן כי כלא לאניא אמר רב דונא כל דד דוד מיין אלפא משמאליה ורבנתא מימיניה אמר רבא האי דחוקא דהוי בכלה מינייהו הוי הני בריי דשלי מינייהו הני מאני דרבנן דבלו מדוחפא דידו הני כרעי דמקסא מינייהו האי מאן דבעי למדע לזו ליהוי קישטא גדילא ונהדר אפורייה ובצטרא דוד כי כרעי דתרנגולא האי מאן דבעי למדוניהו ליהוי שלחא דשונרא אוכמא בת אוכמא בוסרא בת בוסרא ולקיה בנרא ולשוקיה ולמלי עיניה מינה דהוי לזו ולשריה בננבתא דשורלא ולחומי בנשטקא דשורלא דלמא נגבי מינה ולחורם סומיה כי הוי דלא ליתוק רב ביבי בר אבי עבד הכי ויתוק בעו רבנן רחמי עליה ואתחיי :

“Abba Benjamin says, if permission had been given to see them, no creature could stand before the hurtful demons. Abbai says, They are more than we, and stand against us like the trench round the garden-bed. Rav Huna says, Every one of us has a thousand on his left hand, and ten thousand on his right hand. Rabba says, The want of room at the sermon is caused by them—the wearing out of the rabbies' clothes is caused by their rubbing against them—the bruised legs are caused by them. Whosoever wishes to ascertain their existence, let him take ashes that have been passed through a sieve, and let him strew his bed, and in the morning he will see the marks of a cock's claws. Whosoever wishes to see them, let him take the interior covering of a black cat, the daughter of a first-born black cat, which is also the daughter of a first-born, and let him burn it in the fire, and pulverise it, and let him then fill his eyes with it, and he will see them. But let him pour the powder into an iron tube, and seal it with an iron signet, lest they should steal any of it, and let him also seal up the mouth thereof, that no injury may arise. Rav Bibi bar Abbai did thus, and received an injury. But the rabbies prayed for mercy upon him, and he was cured.” (Berachoth, fol. 6, col. 1.) Here, then, is magic for the people, and all Israel is instructed in the means to see demons. It is not for us to decide whether those, who might use these means, would ever see men again, but this is certain, that the oral law here gives a magical recipe to those who are not members of the Sanhedrin, sets before us one of the Talmudic doctors as an example, and moreover encourages to do as he did, by holding out the possi-

bility of a miraculous cure, if any injury should arise. If, then, this story be true, the oral law permits magic, which the law of God forbids; if it be false, then the oral law is convicted of another monstrous falsehood, and is altogether unworthy of credit. How long will the people of Israel suffer themselves to be deluded by a system, of which the striking characteristic is, that it has no regard for truth? The Jews object against Jesus of Nazareth, that He leads them away from the law of Moses, but where does he, or his disciples, inculcate the study of magic, or prescribe rules for facilitating intercourse with demons, contrary to the express command of God? Just suppose that this whole extract, instead of being found in the Talmud, had formed a portion of the New Testament, how would the Jews have laughed at its recipe for its folly, and argued against its wickedness, how triumphantly would they have shown that a law that teaches and encourages magic could not have been given by God? The existence of one such passage would have been sufficient, in their eyes, to condemn the whole Christian system. Let, then, the Jews deal with the oral law in the same way. Let them judge it and its fables by an appeal to Moses and the prophets. But let them remember that in this, as in many other instances, the New Testament agrees with the law of Moses, whilst the oral law differs from both. The New Testament classes witchcraft along with idolatry, and other sins which exclude from the joys of eternal life. “The works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, *witchcraft*, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like; of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in times past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Galat. v. 19—21.) In this case, then, where the oral law leads you away from the doctrine of Moses, the religion of Jesus of Nazareth brings you back again.

This is, however, not the only fable contained in that short law concerning the members of the Sanhedrin. We are told, besides, that no one was allowed to sit in that council “unless he understood the seventy tongues.” Now we would ask every disciple of the oral law calmly to consider this statement, and then say what he thinks of its veracity. Did he ever hear or know of any scholar in the present times acquainted with seventy languages, and that so perfectly as to be able to converse with and examine witnesses, and form a judgment upon their evidence, without the aid of an interpreter? Surely, the study of languages is as much cultivated in the present

day as it was then, and there are at least as many facilities for their acquisition. The system of grammar is now fully developed. The art of printing has made it easy to obtain foreign books. Lexicons and other apparatus may be procured, and yet, with all these facilities, we much doubt whether there be, in the whole world, one single person possessing that knowledge of languages here ascribed to every individual member of the Sanhedrin. According to the oral law, there always had been, in Israel, seventy-one such persons at least, but probably more; for as a member died, or became superannuated, another was found ready to succeed him. But the wonder is here made still more wonderful, for there were not only seventy-one persons acquainted with seventy languages, but those persons were also acquainted, as Rambam tells us, with medicine, astronomy, and all the existing systems of idolatry, and moreover skilled in magic. And, besides all this, all these persons were fine handsome fellows, "Men of stature, men of good appearance." Is this credible—can all Israel, or all the world, furnish one such person at present, handsome or ugly, tall or short? or can there be found amongst that intelligent people the Jews, one man, woman, or child, so silly as to believe so manifest a falsehood? We can tell them, that their great rabbi, Rambam, did not believe it, and therefore in his Compendium took the liberty of altering this Talmudic statement. Instead of seventy languages, he says simply—

וידעו ברוב הלשונות:

"And that they should be acquainted with most languages." It was too much for him. Being a learned man himself, he knew the impossibility of such universal knowledge; and he therefore softened down the Talmudic hyperbole to the limits of what he considered possibility. This is not merely our conclusion from Rambam's alteration, the commentator has expressly said the same.

וכתב רבינו יצחק ברוב הלשונות משום דבר וזו להמצא מי שידע בכל מ' לשון:

"Our rabbi has written, 'Acquainted with most languages,' because it is a rarity to find a person acquainted with all the seventy languages." (Hilchoth Sanhedrin, c. 2.) Rambam himself, then, is here a witness against the fabulous exaggerations of the Talmud.

But perhaps some one will say, that seventy is only a round number to signify many, that we must not, therefore, be too strict in its exposition. This subterfuge, however, will not serve here. The authors of the Talmud said seventy, because they believed that, by giving this number, they included all the languages in the world. They believed that

there were seventy nations, and therefore they said seventy languages. This article of Jewish faith is found everywhere in the Talmud, and in the commentaries, as for instance—

א"ר יוחנן מאי דכתבי יתן אומר המבשרות צבא רב לה דיבור היגור שיצא מפי הגבורה נחלק לשבעים לשונות:

"R. Johanan says, what is the meaning of that Scripture, 'The Lord gave the Word: great was the company of those that published it?' It teaches, that as each commandment proceeded from the mouth of God, it was divided into seventy languages." (Shabbath, fol. 88, col. 2.) The foundation of this opinion is an arbitrary interpretation of a verse in the song of Moses. "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel." (Deut. xxxii. 8.) Upon which Rashi thus comments:—

בשבל מספר בני ישראל ששחרין לצאת מני שם להמסר שבעים נפש של בני ישראל שידרו למצרים הדיב גולות עמים שבעים לשון:

"On account of the number of the children of Israel who were to proceed from the sons of Shem, and according to the number of the seventy souls of the children of Israel who descended into Egypt, he set the bounds of the people, that is, the seventy languages." That this latter clause is altogether arbitrary, and a mere gratuitous addition, is plain from an inspection of the text, where not one syllable is said about the seventy souls, nor about the number of the nations, but about the fixing the bounds of their habitations. Rashi himself did not trust in this exposition, and he has therefore given another:—"On account of the number of the children of Israel who were to proceed from the children of Shem." Aben Esra also passes by the seventy nations altogether, and says that, "according to the number of the children of Israel," means, that the bounds of the nations were so set as to leave sufficient room for the Israelites. His words are—

אמרו המספרים על דור הולגה שנשגה כל הארץ כי אן גור השם להיות ארץ ו' גרים לישראל והיא שתמסר למספרם על כן למספר בני ישראל:

"The commentators have interpreted this of the generation of the dispersion, when all the earth was scattered, for then God decreed that Israel should have the land of the seven nations, which would be sufficient for them, therefore it is said, 'according to the number of the children of Israel.'" This verse, then, gives no colour to the opinion that there are only seventy nations and seventy languages. Fact proves that the number is much greater, for the Bible exists already in twice

that number of languages, and the work of translation is not yet accomplished. The oral law, therefore, fails altogether in attaining the object which it had in view in telling this extraordinary story. It wished to say, that in the Sanhedrin there never was need of an interpreter, for that every member understood every language in the world, and believing that there were only seventy languages, it stated this number. But now we know that even if each member understood seventy languages, yet to be able to decide cases for all the nations of the earth, they would have required to know as many more. The oral law, then, betrays here an utter ignorance of the state of the world, which shows that it is not from that God who confounded the languages of the earth, and therefore knows how many there are; but from men who desired to magnify the acquirements of the nation far beyond the sober truth. The men who could deliberately say, that the Sanhedrin was composed of seventy-one persons, all handsome, all men of stature, all skilled in magic, and all so perfectly acquainted with seventy languages, as to need no interpreter, would have said seven hundred or seven thousand, or any thing else that suited their purpose. They are evidently wilful exaggerators, whose word is therefore not to be trusted. The motive here is vain-glory. The object simply to give all the honour to men, to the learned Rabbies whose learning and genius were so marvellous. There is no intimation that God gave the members of the Sanhedrin this knowledge, which far exceeds the power or the life of man to attain by ordinary means. No, all the glory of these marvellous acquirements is ascribed to man alone. This forms a striking contrast to a narrative recorded in the New

Testament. We are there told that on a certain occasion the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth addressed in their own language, "Parthians, and Medes, and Edomites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Lybia about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians," that is, the inhabitants of sixteen countries. Now, the small number here stated is a presumptive evidence of the truth of the fact. If an impostor, a Rabbinist who wished to make a good story, had written this account, he would, beyond all doubt, instead of sixteen, have specified all the seventy languages. To his countrymen, who believed in the acquirements of the Sanhedrin, this would have appeared no wise incredible. Indeed, if a man of that time had wished to invent a miracle, the number seventy would have been absolutely necessary for his purpose. For if every member of the Sanhedrin could speak seventy languages, to say that other men spoke sixteen would have been no miracle at all. The small number, therefore, here given, shows that the authors of the narrative had no wish to invent a miracle, but to state the sober truth. But then consider the entire absence of vain-glory. The praise and the power of speaking even this small number of languages is given altogether to God. The men were Galileans, and had not acquired this by their own labour and genius. "They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts ii. 1—11.) Here then is a striking difference between the narratives of the Talmud and those of the New Testament. The former exalts men. The latter gives glory to God.

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