

Brief Outline of Ancient Jewish Theological Literature

from Sketches of Jewish Social Life by Alfred Edersheim, 1876

The arrangements of the synagogue, as hitherto described, combined in a remarkable manner fixedness of order with liberty of the individual. Alike the seasons and the time of public services, their order, the prayers to be offered, and the portions of the law to be read were fixed. On the other hand, between the eighteen "benedictions" said on ordinary days, and the seven repeated on the Sabbaths, free prayer might be inserted; the selection from the prophets, with which the public reading concluded--the "Haphtarah" (from "patar," to "conclude")--seems to have been originally left to individual choice; while the determination who was to read, or to conduct the prayers, or to address the people, was in the hands of the "rulers of the synagogue" (Acts 13:15). The latter, who were probably also the members of the local Sanhedrin, had naturally charge of the conduct of public worship, as well as of the government and discipline of the synagogues. They were men learned in the law and of good repute, whom the popular voice designated, but who were regularly set apart by "the laying on of hands," or the "Semichah," which was done by at least three, who had themselves received ordination, upon which the candidate had the formal title of Rabbi bestowed on him, and was declared qualified to administer the law (Sanh. 13 b). The Divine Majesty was supposed to be in the midst of each Sanhedrin, on account of which even that consisting of only three members might be designated as "Elohim." Perhaps this may have been said in explanation and application of Psalm 82:6: "I have said, Ye are Elohim; and all of you children of the Most High."

The special qualifications for the office of Sanhedrist, mentioned in Rabbinical writings, are such as to remind us of the directions of St. Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 3:1-10). A member of the Sanhedrin must be wise, modest, God-fearing, truthful, not greedy of filthy lucre, given to hospitality, kindly, not a gambler, nor a usurer, nor one who traded in the produce of Sabbatical years, nor yet one who indulged in unlawful

games (Sanh. iii. 3). They were called "Sekenim," "elders" (Luke 7:3), "Memunim," "rulers" (Mark 5:22), "Parnasin," "feeders, overseers, shepherds of the flock" (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), and "Manhigei," "guides" (Heb 13:7). They were under the presidency and supreme rule of an "Archisynagogos," or "Rosh-ha-Cheneseth," "head of the synagogue" (Yom. vii. 1; Sot. vii. 7), who sometimes seems to have even exercised sole authority. The designation occurs frequently in the New Testament (Matt 9:18; Mark 5:35,36,38; Luke 8:41,49, 13:14; Acts 18:8,17). The inferior functions in the synagogue devolved on the "chassan," or "minister" (Luke 4:20). In course of time, however, the "chassanim" combined with their original duties the office of schoolmaster; and at present they lead both the singing and the devotions of the synagogue. This duty originally devolved not on any fixed person, but whoever was chosen might for the time being act as "Sheliach Zibbur," or "legate of the congregation." Most modern writers have imagined, that the expression "angel of the Church," in the epistles to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, was used in allusion to this ancient arrangement of the synagogue. But the fact that the "Sheliach Zibbur" represented not an office but a function, renders this view untenable. Besides, in that case, the corresponding Greek expression would rather have been "apostle" than "angel of the Church." Possibly, however, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews may refer to it, when he designates the Lord Jesus "the Apostle and High-Priest of our profession" (Heb 3:1). Besides these functionaries, we also read of "Gabaei Zedakah," or collectors of charity, to whom the Talmud (B. Bathra, 8 b) by a jeu de mots * applies the promise that they "shall be as the stars for ever and ever" (Dan 12:3), since they lead many to "righteousness."

* Zedakah means righteousness, but is also used for "charity."

Alms were collected at regular times every week, either in money or in victuals. At least two were employed in collecting, and three in distributing charity, so as to avoid the suspicion of dishonesty or partiality. These collectors of charity, who required to be "men of good repute, and faithful," are thought by many to have been the model for the institution of the Diaconate in the early

Church. But the analogy scarcely holds good; nor, indeed, were such collectors employed in every synagogue.

In describing the conduct of public worship in the synagogues, reference was made to the "meturgeman," who translated into the vernacular dialect what was read out of the Hebrew Scriptures, and also to the "darshan," who expounded the Scriptures or else the traditional law in an address, delivered after the reading of the "Haphtarah," or section from the prophets. These two terms will have suggested names which often occur in writings on Jewish subjects, and may fitly lead to some remarks on Jewish theology at the time of our Lord. Now the work of the "meturgeman" * was perpetuated in the Targum, and that of the "darshan" in the Midrash.

* Hence also the term "dragoman."

Primarily the Targum, then, was intended as a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into the vernacular Aramaean. Of course, such translations might be either literal, or else more or less paraphrastic. Every Targum would also naturally represent the special views of the translator, and be interesting as affording an insight into the ideas prevalent at the time, and the manner in which Scripture was understood. But some Targumim are much more paraphrastic than others, and indeed become a kind of commentary, showing us the popular theology of the time. Strictly speaking, we have really no Targum dating from the time of our Lord, nor even from the first century of our era. There can be no doubt, however, that such a Targum did exist, although it has been lost. Still, the Targumim preserved to us, although collated, and having received their present form at later periods, contain very much that dates from the Temple-period, and even before that. Mentioning them in the order of their comparative antiquity, we have the Targum of Onkelos, on the five books of Moses; the Targum of Jonathan, on the prophets (inclusive of Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel and of the Kings); the so-called (or pseudo) Jonathan on the Pentateuch; and the Jerusalem Targum, which is but a fragment. Probably the latter two were intended to be supplemental to the Targum Onkelos. Late criticism has thrown doubt even on the existence of such a person as Onkelos. Whoever may have

been the author, this Targum, in its present form, dates probably from the third, that of Jonathan on the prophets from the fourth century.

In some respects more interesting than the Targumim are the Midrashim, of which we possess three, dating probably, in their present form, from the first or second century of our era, but embodying many parts much older. These are--mentioning them again in the order of their antiquity--"Siphra" (the book), a commentary on Leviticus; "Siphri," a commentary on Numbers and Deuteronomy; and "Mechilta," a commentary on certain portions of Exodus. But we have even a monument more interesting than these, of the views of the ancient Pharisees, and of their Scriptural interpretations. Some of the fathers referred to a work called "Lesser Genesis," or the "Book of Jubilees." This had been lost to theological literature, till again discovered within the present century, although not in the original Hebrew, nor even in its first or Greek translation, but in an Ethiopic rendering from the latter. The work, which no doubt dates from the era of our Lord, covers the same ground as the first book of Moses, whence the name of "Lesser Genesis." It gives the Biblical narrative from the creation of the world to the institution of the Passover, in the spirit in which the Judaism of that period would view it. The legendary additions, the Rabbinical ideas expressed, the interpretations furnished, are just such as one would expect to find in such a work. One of the main objects of the writer seems to have been the chronology of the book of Genesis, which it is attempted to settle. All events are recorded according to Jubilee-periods of forty-nine years, whence the name "Book of Jubilees," given to the work. These "Jubilees" are again arranged into "weeks," each of seven years (a day for a year); and events are classified as having taken place in a certain month of a certain year, of a certain "week" of years, of a certain "Jubilee"-period. Another tendency of the book, which, however, it has in common with all similar productions, is to trace up all later institutions to the patriarchal period. *

* Although the "Book of Jubilees" seems most likely of Pharisaic authorship, the views expressed in it are not always those of the Pharisees. Thus the resurrection is denied, although the

immortality of the soul is maintained.

Besides these works, another class of theological literature has been preserved to us, around which of late much and most serious controversy has gathered. Most readers, of course, know about the Apocrypha; but these works are called the "pseudo-epigraphic writings." Their subject-matter may be described as mainly dealing with unfulfilled prophecy; and they are couched in language and figures borrowed, among others, from the book of Daniel. In fact, they read like attempts at imitating certain portions of that prophecy--only that their scope is sometimes wider. This class of literature is larger than those not acquainted with the period might have expected. Yet when remembering the troubles of the time, the feverish expectations of a coming deliverance, and the peculiar cast of mind and training of those who wrote them, they scarcely seem more numerous, nor perhaps even more extravagant, than a certain kind of prophetic literature, abundant among us not long ago, which the fear of Napoleon or other political events from time to time called forth. To that kind of production, they seem, at least to us, to bear an essential likeness--only that, unlike the Western, the Oriental expounder of unfulfilled prophecy assumes rather the language of the prophet than that of the commentator, and clothes his views in mystic emblematic language. In general, this kind of literature may be arranged into Greek and Hebrew--according as the writers were either Egyptian (Hellenistic) or Palestinian Jews. Considerable difficulty exists as to the precise date of some of these writings--whether previous or subsequent to the time of Christ. These difficulties are, of course, increased when it is sought to fix the precise period when each of them was composed. Still, late historical investigations have led to much accord on general points. Without referring to the use which opponents of Christianity have of late attempted to make of these books, it may be safely asserted that their proper study and interpretation will yet be made very helpful, not only in casting light upon the period, but in showing the essential difference between the teaching of the men of that age and that of the New Testament. For each branch and department of sacred study, the more carefully,

diligently, and impartially it is pursued, affords only fresh testimony to that truth which is most certainly, and on the best and surest grounds, believed among us.

It were, however, a mistake to suppose that the Rabbinical views, extravagant as they so often are, were propounded quite independently of Scripture. On the contrary, every traditional ordinance, every Rabbinical institution, nay, every legend and saying, is somehow foisted upon the text of the Old Testament. To explain this, even in the briefest manner, it is necessary to state that, in general, Jewish traditionalism is distinguished into the "Halakhah" and the "Haggadah." The "Halakhah" (from "halach," to "walk") indicates the settled legal determinations, which constituted the "oral law," or "Thorah shebeal peh." Nothing could here be altered, nor was any freedom left to the individual teacher, save that of explanation and illustration. The object of the "Halakhah" was to state in detail, and to apply to all possible cases, the principles laid down in the law of Moses; as also to surround it, as it were, with "a hedge," in order to render every unwitting transgression impossible. The "Halakhah" enjoyed not only the same authority with the law of Moses, but, as being explanatory, in some respects was even more highly esteemed. Indeed, strictly speaking, it was regarded as equally with the Pentateuch the revelation of God to Moses; only the form or manner of revelation was regarded as different--the one being committed to writing, the other handed down by word of mouth. According to tradition, Moses explained the traditional law successively to Aaron, to his sons, to the seventy elders, and to the people--care being taken that each class heard it four times (Maimonides' Preface to Seraim, 1 a). The Talmud itself attempts to prove that the whole traditional law, as well as the writings of the prophets and the Hagiographa, had been communicated to Moses, by quoting Exodus 24:12: "I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them." "The 'tables of stone,'" argues Rabbi Levi (Ber. 5 1), "are the ten commandments; the 'law' is the written law (in the Pentateuch); the 'commandments' are the Mishnah; 'which I have written,' refers to the prophets and the Hagiographa; while the words,

'that thou mayest teach them,' point to the Gemara. From this we learn, that all this was given to Moses on Sinai."

If such was the "Halakhah," it is not so easy to define the limits of the "Haggadah." The term, which is derived from the verb "higgid," to "discuss," or "tell about," covers all that possessed not the authority of strict legal determinations. It was legend, or story, or moral, or exposition, or discussion, or application--in short, whatever the fancy or predilections of a teacher might choose to make it, so that he could somehow connect it either with Scripture or with a "Halakhah." For this purpose some definite rules were necessary to preserve, if not from extravagance, at least from utter absurdity. Originally there were four such canons for connecting the "Haggadah" with Scripture. Contracting, after the favorite manner of the Jews, the initial letters, these four canons were designated by the word "Pardes" (Paradise). They were--1. To ascertain the plain meaning of a passage (the "Peshat"); 2. To take the single letters of a word as an indication or hint ("Remes") of other words, or even of whole sentences; 3. The "Derush," or practical exposition of a passage; and 4. To find out the "Sod" (mystery), or mystical meaning of a verse or word. These four canons were gradually enlarged into thirty-two rules, which gave free vent to every kind of fancifulness. Thus one of these rules--the "Gematria" (geometry, calculation)--allowed the interpreter to find out the numerical value of the letters in a word--the Hebrew letters, like the Roman, being also numerals--and to substitute for a word one or more which had the same numerical value. Thus, if in Numbers 12:1 we read that Moses was married to an "Ethiopian woman" (in the original, "Cushith"), Onkelos substitutes instead of this, by "gematria," the words, "of fair appearance"--the numerical value both of Cushith and of the words "of fair appearance" being equally 736. By this substitution the objectionable idea of Moses' marrying an Ethiopian was at the same time removed. Similarly, the Mishnah maintains that those who loved God were to inherit each 310 worlds, the numerical value of the word "substance" ("Yesh") in Proverbs 8:21 being 310. On the other hand, the canons for the deduction of a "Halakhah" from the text of Scripture were much

more strict and logical. Seven such rules are ascribed to Hillel, which were afterwards enlarged to thirteen. *

* It would be beyond the scope of this volume to explain these "middoth," or "measurements," and to illustrate them by examples. Those who are interested in the matter are referred to the very full discussion on Rabbinical exegesis in my History of the Jewish Nation, pp. 570-580.

Little objection can be taken to them; but unfortunately their practical application was generally almost as fanciful, and certainly as erroneous, as in the case of the "Haggadah."

Probably most readers would wish to know something more of those "traditions" to which our Lord so often referred in His teaching. We have here to distinguish, in the first place, between the Mishnah and the Gemara. The former was, so to speak, the text, the latter its extended commentary. At the same time, the Mishnah contains also a good deal of commentary, and much that is not either legal determination or the discussion thereof; while the Gemara, on the other hand, also contains what we would call "text." The word Mishna (from the verb "shanah") means "repetition"--the term referring to the supposed repetition of the traditional law, which has been above described. The Gemara, as the very word shows, means "discussion," and embodies the discussions, opinions, and saying of the Rabbis upon, or a propos of, the Mishnah. Accordingly, the text of the Mishnah is always given in the pages of the Talmud, which reproduce those discussions thereon of the Jewish Theological parliament or academy, which constitute the Gemara. The authorities introduced in the Mishnah and the Gemara range from about the year 180 BC to 430 AD (in the Babylon Talmud). The Mishnah is, of course, the oldest work, and dates, in its present form and as a written compilation, from the close of the second century of our era. Its contents are chiefly "Halakhah," there being only one Tractate (Aboth) in which there is no "Halakhah" at all, and another (on the measurements of the Temple) in which it but very rarely occurs. Yet these two Tractates are of the greatest historical value and interest. On the other hand, there are thirteen whole Tractates in the Mishnah which have no "Haggadah" at all, and

other twenty-two in which it is but of rare occurrence. Very much of the Mishnah must be looked upon as dating before, and especially from the time of Christ, and its importance for the elucidation of the New Testament is very great, though it requires to be most judiciously used. The Gemara, or book of discussions on the Mishnah, forms the two Talmuds--the Jerusalem and the Babylon Talmud. The former is so called because it is the product of the Palestinian academies; the latter is that of the Babylonian school. The completion of the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud ("Talmud" = doctrine, lore) dates from the middle of the fourth, that of the Babylonian from the middle of the sixth century of our era. It need scarcely be said that the former is of much greater historical value than the latter. Neither of these two Gemaras, as we now possess them, is quite complete--that is, there are Tractates in the Mishnah for which we have no Gemara, either in the Jerusalem or in the Babylon Talmud. Lastly, the Babylon Talmud is more than four times the size of that of Jerusalem. Obviously this is not the place for giving even the briefest outline of the contents of the Mishnah. *

* In Appendix 1 we give as a specimen a translation of one of the Mishnic Tractates; and in Appendix 2 translations of extracts from the Babylon Talmud.

Suffice it here to state that it consists of six books ("sedarim," "orders"), which are subdivided into Tractates ("Massichthoth"), and these again into chapters ("Perakim"), and single determinations or traditions ("Mishnaioth"). In quoting the Mishnah it is customary to mention not the Book (or "Seder") but the special Tractate, the Perek (or chapter), and the Mishnah. The names of these Tractates (not those of the books) give a sufficient idea of their contents, which cover every conceivable, and well-nigh every inconceivable case, with full discussions thereon. Altogether the Mishnah contains sixty-three Tractates, consisting of 525 chapters, and 4,187 "Mishnaioth."

There is yet another branch of Jewish theology, which in some respects is the most interesting to the Christian student. There can be no doubt, that so early as the time of our Lord a series of doctrines and speculations prevailed which were kept secret from the multitude, and even from

ordinary students, probably from fear of leading them into heresy. This class of study bears the general name of the "Kabbalah," and, as even the term (from "kabal," to "receive," or "hand down") implies, represents the spiritual traditions handed down from earliest times, although mixed up, in course of time, with many foreign and spurious elements. The "Kabbalah" grouped itself chiefly around the history of the creation, and the mystery of God's Presence and Kingdom in the world, as symbolised in the vision of the chariot and of the wheels (Eze 1). Much that is found in Cabalistic writings approximates so closely to the higher truths of Christianity, that, despite the errors, superstitions, and follies that mingle with it, we cannot fail to recognize the continuance and the remains of those deeper facts of Divine revelation, which must have formed the substance of prophetic teaching under the Old Testament, and have been understood, or at least hoped for, by those who were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If now, at the close of these sketches of Jewish life, we ask ourselves, what might have been expected as to the relation between Christ and the men and the religion of His period, the answer will not be difficult. Assuredly, in one respect Christ could not have been a stranger to His period, or else His teaching would have found no response, and, indeed, have been wholly unintelligible to His contemporaries. Nor did He address them as strangers to the covenant, like the heathen. His was in every respect the continuation, the development, and the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Only, He removed the superincumbent load of traditionalism; He discarded the externalism, the formalism, and the work-righteousness, which had well-nigh obliterated the spiritual truths of the Old Testament, and substituted in their place the worship of the letter. The grand spiritual facts, which it embodied, He brought forward in all their brightness and meaning; the typical teaching of that dispensation He came to show forth and to fulfil; and its prophecies He accomplished, alike for Israel and the world. And so in Him all that was in the Old Testament--of truth, way, and life--became "Yea and Amen." Thus we can understand how, on the one hand, the Lord could avail Himself of every

spiritual element around, and adopt the sayings, parables, ideas, and customs of that period--indeed, must have done so, in order to be a true man of the period,--and yet be so wholly not of that time as to be despised, rejected, and delivered up unto death by the blind guides of His blinded fellow-countrymen. Had He entirely discarded the period in which He lived, had He not availed Himself of all in it that was true or might be useful, He would not have been of it--not the true man Christ Jesus. Had He followed it, identified Himself with its views and hopes, or headed its movements, He would not have been the Christ, the Son of the living God, the promised Deliverer from sin and guilt.

And so we can also perceive the reason of the essential enmity to Christ on the part of the Pharisees and Scribes. It was not that He was a new and a strange Teacher; it was, that He came as the Christ. Theirs was not an opposition of teaching to His; it was a contrariety of fundamental life-principles. "Light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light." Closely related as the two were, the Pharisaical Judaism of that and of the present period is at the opposite pole from the religion of Christ--alike as regards the need of man, the purposes of God's love, and the privileges of His children. There was one truth which, we are reluctantly obliged to admit, found, alas! scarcely any parallel in the teaching of Rabbinism: it was that of a suffering Messiah. Hints indeed there were, as certain passages in the prophecies of Isaiah could not be wholly ignored or misrepresented, even by Rabbinical ingenuity, just as the doctrine of vicarious suffering and substitution could not be eliminated from the practical teaching of the confession of sins over the sacrifices, when the worshipper day by day laid his hands upon, and transferred to them his guilt. Yet Judaism, except in the case of the few, saw not in all this that to which alone it could point as its real meaning: "The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

And now, as century after century has passed, and the gladsome Gospel message has been carried from nation to nation, while Israel is still left in the darkness of its unbelief and the misery of its mistaken hope, we seem to realize with ever

increasing force that "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." Yes: "unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:2,6). For assuredly, "God hath not cast away His people which He foreknew." But "all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom 11:2,26). "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night" (Isa 21:11,12).