

## ARTICLE VIII.

## WHAT IS JEWISH LITERATURE?

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If you would ask the average man or woman, What is Jewish literature? you would receive probably the one answer, It is the Old Testament; and perhaps there would be a further reply, It is the Hebrew prayer-book. That it is a fairly comprehensive term, which includes the rise and development of a vast, all-embracing literature, extending over two or three thousand years, on every conceivable topic, and touched by the spirit of each century, the varied currents of changing civilizations, is a view of the subject which might arouse defiant doubt. And yet it is the truth, without a shred of romance or exaggeration.

The reason for such skepticism is not far to seek. It is largely due to the fact that all literatures but Jewish are studied in the schools. Jewish literature remains an unknown realm, and what the rabbis thought and wrote, what the sages in all epochs planned and accomplished, are regarded as antiquarian—material for your literary fossil, or dry-as-dust, but not for the rest of us. Some people have a vague idea that the rabbis were mere pedants and theologians and that their work is utterly out of touch with the present age, as much as the curious messages which cuneiform tablets bear from buried cities of primitive times.

There could be no greater error. Theology is by no means the only note in Jewish literature, which includes ethics, history, folk-lore, science—medical, physical, mathematical,—poetry, philosophy, with plentiful humor to relieve soberness

and pathos. Such was the buoyancy of the rabbis, such their receptiveness and plastic character, despite a natural conservative bias, that their literature clearly reflects the movements of every age, of whose culture and progress they were far from being passive spectators. And just as their constant migrations over so long a period insured their physical vitality, as they overcame obstacles and unfavorable conditions, so their continuous contact with new epochs of culture, now in Persia, now Arabia, now Spain, now Central Europe, here in Italy and there in Poland; whether it was the Renaissance or the Reformation, the age of feudalism or the age of steam, this continuity of impressions and influences gave freshness and vigor to their intellects. Their view-point had to be broadened, if unconsciously, and if the rabbis in a measure influenced their times, they were no less unconsciously influenced in turn. The exchange was well-maintained.

What, then, is Jewish Literature? What are its distinctive elements and epochs? There is but little to help the general reader to form an opinion. Let us compare it to a building of imposing proportions. Its foundation is the Old Testament; upon that, undoubtedly, the entire structure is reared, although the subject-matter from story to story is exceedingly varied and includes all lines of thought. The study of the Hebrew law and prophets, so intimately connected with the life and institutions of the people, gave rise to the beginnings of a literature out of which was evolved the earliest rabbinical era, after the return from Babylonian captivity under Ezra. It was the era of the scribes, who, with their successors, strove to compete with changes in language and condition, and sought to preserve the Jew's solidarity by increased study of the law and the traditions in all their minute ramifications. So with the gradual dawn of Roman supremacy, there ensued a closer in-

terpretation of doctrine and usage. Thus arose the Mishna, which was a code of decisions embodying the oral law, and later its complement or commentary, the Gemara, which together formed the Talmud, as the schools of the rabbis spread in Palestine and Babylonia and the need of an authoritative codex became more and more felt in the centuries after Jerusalem's fall. The Talmud is essentially a legal code, a digest, a concise compilation of debates and discussions, in which the traditional rule is illustrated from many diverse points of view. The work contains, besides abstract law principles, legends in abundance, philosophy, history, archæology, medicine, hygiene, and the rest, with light and shade peculiar to such a collection which is no man's creation, but that of hundreds of sages stretching over seven hundred years. A colossal literature has been developed from the Talmud, to which additions are steadily made in different languages.

A second phase of Jewish literature began just as foreign influences were producing a new epoch in Palestine, and for several centuries developed as the Jewish Hellenic. Springing from the Greek translation of the Old Testament—the Septuagint, Alexandria formed the center of Jewish intellectual life, and men like Philo, Aristéas, Aristobulus, Ezekielos, Eupolemos, philosophers, dramatists, historians, illustrated the versatility of the Jewish brain when wrestling with new conditions and Greek culture.

Side by side with the literature of the Talmud there developed the literature of the Midrash, vast in extent and distinctive in character. This was homiletic in style, and proves the early familiarity of the rabbis with the art of preaching. Extending over practically the entire Old Testament, the Midrash is part parable, part ethics, now revealing exquisite poetical beauty and now deep philosophical insight. It is commentary,

illustration, often fantastic and strained, yet the wildest hyperbole can be made to yield some positive truth. That, in centuries of national disaster and unsettled political conditions, the rabbis could have produced such marvelous material, is at least a proof of their versatility. The compilations of these Midrashim date from about 700, not long after the Talmud closed.

A new epoch was now to arise—that of the Spanish-Arabic, exactly as ages before the Greek era had spurred on Jewish thought. With avidity the Jews seized hold of Arabic culture and did their share as intermediaries between the learning of the Orient and Occident. A host of scholars in varied lines— theology, ethics, history, law, medicine, exegesis, astronomy, etc.—now arose. As Arabic became the dominant type, the Jew rapidly acquired fluency in his new vernacular. A particularly important branch of Jewish-Arabic literature is that of philosophy, works of permanent value being produced. When Spain became the seat of Arabic civilization, a golden age of Jewish literature developed—with names like Gabirol, Judah Halleivi, Moses ibn Ezra, and Alcharisi. If the models in most cases were Arabic, the spirit was Jewish to the core, and their poems have become classic. The themes were not always religious—satire, romance, and fable formed the subject-matter of many productions. Santob de Carrion and Suskind von Trimberg were Spanish songster and German minnesinger respectively, while Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome, Dante's friend, wrote a Hebrew travesty of the "Divina Commedia." Of the philosophic intellects of this period, Maimonides is the chief. His "Guide to the Perplexed" had its influence on Spinoza, while medieval scholasticism must acknowledge its debt to Jewish thinkers. In the same period was a long list of famous biblical interpreters, like Rashi in France, and Abraham ibn Ezra in Spain.

A further branch of Jewish literature in this era was devoted to chronicles and travels. The writers were not always veracious, it must be confessed, but some are sufficiently authentic for their purpose, and none was as unreliable as Sir John Mandeville. Of these authors, the name of Benjamin of Tudela is, perhaps, the best known to the general reader. Often amid scenes of bloodshed they penned their records, while their travels were undergone with pathetic uncertainty, which made impossible any great literary charm.

With the close of the fifteenth century, when the Spanish-Arabic period ended in exile and death for the Jews of Spain, an epoch of decline followed, relieved here and there by names of eminence, but lasting for fully three centuries. The art of printing, the dawn of humanism, and the Reformation, were full of significance for Jewish literature, while the speculations of the Cabala fascinated many Jewish thinkers. One literary work of general interest has come down to us from this era—Penini's "Contemplation of the World," which received, in German translation, praise from Lessing and Goethe. Further writers worthy of mention were Crescas and Albo, philosophers; Isaac Abarbanel, biblical commentator; Abraham Zaccuto, literary historian and astronomer; Nagara, the versatile poet, to name only a few. Italy became prominent in Hebrew learning, with Elias Levita and Elias del Medigo among the leaders, while Joseph Cohen writes "The Vale of Weeping"—a chronicle of troublous times, and Deborah Ascarelli and Sara Copia Sullam head the list of literary Jewesses. Other Italian Jewish writers are Azariah de Rossi, whose researches are still of value; Leo de Modena, Azariah Figo, whose sermons are models in their way; Moses Chaim Luzzatto, who imitated in Hebrew Guarini's pastorals and became a hapless mystic. His Hebrew poems and dramas are

classic and show how flexible a language is Hebrew when genius wields the pen.

Other names, probably of less interest, could be mentioned of scholars in Poland, in Holland (with Spinoza and Manasseh ben Israel), and in Germany, from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. It remains to glance briefly at the latest though not the last period in Jewish literature, from the era of Mendelssohn in Germany, towards the end of the eighteenth century, to our time. Apart from a revival of Hebrew literature, which was long maintained, the new period opened with a German translation of the Old Testament—ushering in a renaissance in the world of German thought for the Jew. Zunz, Rapoport, Graetz, Frankel, Geiger, Steinschneider, are names of international fame, who have vindicated the claims of Jewish literature, history, and research to the attention of scholars. A brilliant era followed, with illustrious writers in different lines—poetry, philosophy, history, romance, science, journalism; and the productions of authors like Mosenthal, L. A. Frankel, L. Kompert, K. E. Franzos, and A. Bernstein have attained permanent value. Nor must Heine be omitted from the list, while Berthold Auerbach, Max Ring, Moritz Lazarus, and H. Steinthal are to be added.

A notable development of Jewish literature was witnessed in Russia, where a school of writers arose in the early part of the nineteenth century. These made Hebrew the vehicle of their prose and verse. Günzburg, A. B. and M. J. Lebensohn, Kalman Schulman, Abraham Mapu (who created the Hebrew novel), Leon Gordon, with journalists like S. J. Fuenn, Słonimsky, and Zederbaum, and a long list of younger men, have shown the adaptability of Hebrew as the language of poetic and philosophic thought, science, the novel, and the newspaper. Among noted works that have been translated into Hebrew are

“The Mysteries of Paris,” plays of Shakespeare, poems of Schiller and Goethe, and choice productions from Longfellow, Mark Twain, Zola, and De Maupassant.

Thus Jewish literature is universal in scope and extent. From the scribes, through the sages of the Talmud, from the Hellenistic authors to the scholars of the Babylonian academies, from the writers who shone in the Arabic-Spanish period to the poets and thinkers of Italy and the East, to the dawn and development of the modern epoch which has witnessed such a remarkable renaissance in Europe, Jewish literature is well worthy of study, if only in outline. It adopts all languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Rabbinic, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, every modern tongue. It is so catholic as to be found in even popular jargons, and has reached a special development in Yiddish. It echoes not only the feelings of Israel, but the inspirations of humanity. It has caught the tones of all races and climes for several thousand years and has the elements of perpetual youth. Why, then, should it not be given some attention in our colleges and seminaries?