

*THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN THE TALMUD : A
CRITICISM.*

PROFESSOR RENDEL HARRIS has done well to draw attention to the curious passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Chagiga*, 77*d*, which is supposed to contain a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The passage has been quoted so often in discussions and commentaries on the genealogy in St. Luke¹ that it is worth while to examine it with some care. The commentators have no doubt derived their knowledge of the passage from Lightfoot's *Horæ Hebraicæ*, on St. Luke iii. 23, which seems to be the first book of the kind to quote it; one and all they have taken his rendering on trust, and handed down the application he makes of it. The text of the passage is וחמא מרים ברת עלי בצלים; and Lightfoot renders: "And he saw Miriam, the daughter of Eli, among the shades," vocalising the last two words, עֲלֵי בְצָלִים. Here, he says, we have a key to the puzzling *Heli* in the genealogy; and the revolting words in the sequel of the passage show how Jewish hostility regarded the Mother of our Lord. But the rendering which Lightfoot gives is quite impossible, as any Hebraist will see at once. The word צל is used by Jewish writers, as it is in the Old Testament, for a *shadow*, e.g., of a wall, a tree, an animal, a rock,² etc., but the plural צלים never means *shades*, in the sense of "inhabitants of the under-world." The proper word for the latter in the Old Testament is, of course, הרפאים, *the Refaim*,³ a word which does not occur in the Talmud in this sense. Lightfoot's rendering, then, upon which the application of the passage depends, cannot be permitted.

¹ To mention only two popular commentaries on St. Luke, Godet, *Saint Luc*, i., p. 251, Engl. edn., i., p. 202; Farrar, *St. Luke*, Camb. Bible, p. 373.

² *Aboda Zara*, 48*b*; *Pesachim*, 50*a*; Isa. xxxii. 2, etc.

³ E.g. Isa. xiv. 9, xxvi. 14; Job xxvi. 5, etc.

How are the words to be understood? Ask any competent Talmudist, and without hesitation he will pronounce them *עֲלֵי בְצָלִים*, and translate *Miriam, the daughter of Alê-Betzalim*, i.e., *Leaves-of-Onions*.¹ This is no doubt a mock name, such as is often found in the Talmud, given to some individual on account of his peculiar tastes or characteristics. It is just possible that the name of Miriam's father was thus disguised in view of the offensive things said about her in the story; but even this is hardly likely. There is, then, nothing whatever in the name to do with the *Helî* of St. Luke iii. 23; and there is no doubt about the meaning of the word *betzalim*, which occurs frequently in the Talmud, as it does also in the Old Testament (Num. xi. 5), meaning *onions*. It is significant that Wünsche, the best modern authority on Talmudic illustrations of the Gospels, makes no mention of *Chagiga 77d* in his notes on St. Luke iii.²

Now comes Professor Rendel Harris with an ingenious suggestion: "The perplexing Betzalim is only a disguise (perhaps to avoid the censor of the Inquisition) of the words *Im tzalib, the mother of the Crucified*."³ But, unfortunately, the anagram, ingenious as it is, cannot be supported by Talmudic or Rabbinic usage. The word *tzalûb* is not found in the Talmud for the Crucified in the Christian sense; the Rabbinic writers use quite a different word of our Lord, viz. *talûy, תלוּי, the suspended, hanged*.⁴ Hence

¹ So the Jewish commentators, e.g. David Fraenkel, Rabbi of Dessau (A.D. 1743), in his *קרבן העדה*; he says on the passage, *בת אדם אחד ששמו עלי בצלים*, *the daughter of a man whose name was Alê Betzalim*; given in the Žitomir edn. of Talm. Jerus., *Chagiga*, p. 17 (1866).

² In his *Neue Beiträge zur Erläuterung der Evangelien aus Talm. u. Midr.* (1878).

³ The form *tzalib* if it = *צָלִיב* is hardly correct; it should be *tzalûb, צָלִיב, e.g. Jebamoth, 120b*. The form *צָלִיב* is only found as a feminine, in the sense of *gallows*, e.g. Deut. xxi. 22 f. in Targ., or in Talm. *the act of hanging or crucifying*. Thus one of the letters of the anagram will not stand.

⁴ Buxtorf (*Lex. Chald. Talm. et Rabb.*, s.v. *תלוּה*) quotes Aben Ezra on Gen.

the explanation of the passage which Professor Rendel Harris offers—*Miriam, the daughter of Eli, the mother of the crucified*—will not bear examination; the words עלי בצלים make up a fanciful proper name: Onion-Leaves.

There is one more point to be noticed. The passage is supposed to refer to "various punishments in hell." It cannot be said that this is distinctly stated, nor is it clearly borne out by the general drift of the context. The only mention of hell is in the saying of R. Jose ben Chanina (see the translation given, THE EXPOSITOR, p. 197), "The hinge of the gate of Gehenna was fixed in her ear"; and the tale goes on to say that Miriam will continue to be thus punished until Simeon b. Shetach comes, when "we shall take it out of her ear and fix it in his ear," because Simeon, being Nasi or Prince, did not fulfil his promise to put to death the eighty witches of Askelon. But nothing is said about this happening to the Nasi in Gehenna; it is merely a dream, not a Purgatorio.

Though it is well known that in these Talmudic stories one thing follows another without any real connection, but merely because a word or a name in one tale suggests something like it in another, yet it may throw light on the Miriam story to give the setting in which it occurs, a good deal compressed: "Talking of Simeon b. Shetach and Askelon reminds one of the two pious men who lived in that city. They were very intimate friends. In the course of time one of them died; but there was no fuss made over his death, whereas when Ben Maon, the tax-collector, died, the whole town stopped business to mourn for him. The

xxvii. 39, who says that a Christian priest told him that "the Emperor Constantine bore on his standard the figure of the Hanged" (צורת תלוי). The word תלוי here, it is interesting to notice, is not found in the ordinary printed texts: it has been expunged by the censors, as a reference to the MSS. of Aben Ezra proves; e.g. MSS. Pococke, 108 in the Bodleian Library. R. Bechai in his חשן התלויה בי כן הם, ch. i., commenting on Ps. lxxx. 14, says, שובדי התלוי

survivor was lamenting the loss of his friend, when the dead man appeared to him in a dream, and astonished him by declaring, 'I committed one bad deed, for which I have been pardoned; Ben Maon, the tax-collector, committed one good deed, for which he has been rewarded,' etc., etc. Some time after this the pious survivor saw his dead comrade walking in gardens and parks and by springs of water, while he saw the tax-collector trying to drink by the bank of a river without being able to reach the water; and at the same time he saw Miriam, the daughter of Alê-Betzalim. R. Eliezer b. Jose says, 'suspended by the paps of her breasts,' . . ." and so on, as in the translation quoted by Professor Rendel Harris. This is not exactly a vision of Gehenna; it is rather a dream, in which certain dead persons appear in various circumstances.

Professor Rendel Harris makes the comment that "it is extremely improbable that the Talmud should make mention of special torments assigned to a woman who had made some error in the matter of fasting"; but it is a bold thing to say that any marvel is "extremely improbable" in these Haggadic stories. One is always coming across just what is least expected.

The other Talmudic passage which Professor Rendel Harris quotes is Talm. Bab., *Shabbath* 104b.¹ He gives some valuable illustrations from the Syrian commentators, and even from Ephrem Syrus himself, which show that Mary Magdalene was explained as the *plaiting woman*, and that she was confused with the Blessed Virgin. The best authorities seem to be agreed that this confusion is to be found in the Talmud, and in the passage from *Shabbath*.² Dr. Neubauer, for example, in *La Géographie*

¹ The reference is incorrectly quoted in EXPOSITOR, p. 193

² So Levy in *Neuhebr. u. Chald. Wörterbuch*, s.v. שָׁבַת: The Tosefta on the passage rightly distinguishes the Miriam here from the other hair-plaiting Miriam who lived in the time of R. Bibi.

du Talmud (p. 14), believes that מרים מגדלא נשיא is the mother of Jesus, and that the name has arisen by confusion with Mary Magdalene. The name *Miriam Migdala Nasi* might mean Mary of the Tower of the Prince—*i.e.* Mary of Cæsarea; but Dr. Neubauer prefers to render it *Mary of Magdala*.¹ There is another passage, Talm. Bab. *Chagiga 4b*, where מרים מגדלא שער נשיא can only mean *Miriam, the plaiter of women's hair*.² According to Laible's theory, this must be the same Miriam as in *Shabbath 104b*; but it is by no means clear that an intentional degradation of the mother of Jesus to the trade of a *coiffeuse* is to be found in either or both of these passages.

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¹ Dr. Neubauer's caution, *ib.*, note 4, is worth quoting with reference to the whole discussion: "The Talmudic passages which directly concern Jesus should only be used with great reserve."

² In this same passage another מרים מגדלא is mentioned, and the name means *rearer of children* (דרדקי), מגדלא being used in its other sense.