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THE TALMUD IN HISTORY.

THESE are days when from buried mound and hidden rock the distant past is steadily revealing its secrets, and the history of once powerful, but now extinct, nations is successfully deciphered. The cultured lands of our time are interested in the quest, and send their scholars to speed research. Thus Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Persia, are reconstructed from the library and the museum of antiquities.

While the literature of nations that have passed away is again read and studied with an ease that grows with every fresh discovery, one old book remains as mysterious and indecipherable as the sphinx, although subjected for over a thousand years to the merciless assaults of foes and rapt adoration of worshippers. One by one the sacred books of the East are brought to the attention of the cultured of every creed, and interpreted by modern scholarship. This book—this series of volumes rather, the date of whose authorship and composition extends over seven hundred years—the Talmud preserves its remoteness and maintains its air of solitude. It defies the critic, it baffles the investigator, it allures, yet eludes, the student. Its age, its language, its contents, its atmosphere, its character, render useless the ordinary tools of literary analysis and interpretation; and its mountains of dialectic and discussion are practically insurmountable. Here and there, it is true, the process of decipherment has begun. A few trusty explorers have been at work, and many a gem has been brought to light, with outlines of dim, subterranean palaces of thought. But although the study of the Talmud as a modern discipline, and its elucidation in the

light of the latest historical and philological researches, have made some progress, the Talmud remains the Talmud. We may abridge, translate, paraphrase, as has already been done in French, German, and English; we may publish introductions and gather a thousand extracts—the Talmud is a sealed work save to the initiated, the genuine Talmudist, who has devoted long stretches of his youth and manhood to its earnest and all-engrossing study. The dilettante may scale its outer wall, but can never gain the inner citadel.

The story of the Talmud, the rise and development of Jewish tradition, the codification of the laws and sayings of the rabbis—with their twin-streams of *halakah* or practical principle and *hagadah* or parable—this has been told at greater or less length in recent decades; and how it became the intellectual Temple of the Jew when the Temple at Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, need not be repeated here. But the Talmud in history, not the history of the Talmud, is a less familiar topic, and one which has a fascination of its own. What has been its fate in the centuries? Has it shared the varying fortunes of the Jewish people? Has it been raised to a pedestal or fastened to a stake? Has it, too, aroused calumny, suffering, torture? Many are the instances in history when rude hands have been laid on a book to destroy it. It might have been a version of Scripture, a scientific treatise, a whole library which must be burnt to satisfy the adversary's wrath or piety. Such examples of "slaying an immortality rather than a life," belong to all ages and creeds. The peculiarity of the Talmud's fate, however, is the continuous persecution which it has encountered—as if principalities and powers wished to expiate their own transgressions on this literary scapegoat, this enigmatical work, "without form or comeliness," and despised as cunning sorcery that led men to perdition. Thou art not a book, one of its mediaeval critics all but exclaims; thou art a rabbi. Beware of the spell!

While earlier centuries show a scattering fire of fulmina-

tions against the Talmud and its study from the era of Justinian, the Middle Ages are richest in such incidents that illustrate the temper of the times. France furnishes the first chapter in the mediaeval record of the Talmud's fate. In the thirteenth century, the French rabbis, with more courage than prudence, excommunicated Nicholas Donin. Rabbis are human after all, and learn sometimes too well from their neighbours. They are more impressionable than is generally believed, and can be taught readily by their surroundings. The quality of imitativeness has usually been a costly one to the Jew. In the case of Donin, they simply adopted the mediaeval method of silencing heresy; the result was distinctly disagreeable. To avenge their judgment on his opinions, he became a convert; and, quick to convince his new brethren of his zeal, he assailed the Talmud before Pope Gregory IX and St. Louis of France. He accused it of blasphemy and abuse of the Christian religion, in a long list of charges to which the Pope gave willing ear. A transcript was promptly sent by Gregory to the heads of the Church in various lands, and a letter was written to the monarchs of these countries, to demand their support. Apparently, there was more rattle than fang in papal decrees in that era, for only in France was the Talmud really confiscated. In 1240 the Jews were compelled by law to surrender their copies, and the work was put on trial. A public disputation was held, and four prominent rabbis of North France were summoned to appear each in turn, and refute, if possible, Donin's charges. The scene took place at the royal court on June 25, 1240, in the presence of the Queen-mother Blanche, the Bishops of Paris and Senlis, and of many Dominicans. After a three days' discussion in Latin, the Talmud was ordered to be burnt. For a time the sentence was not executed, owing to the intercession of the Archbishop of Sens. On his sudden death, however, copies of the Talmud and similar writings were seized by order of Louis, and twenty-four cartloads of them

were burnt in Paris in June, 1242. Gregory's successor, Innocent IV, in 1243, promptly rescinded the edict of destruction. This burning of the Talmud was not forgotten by the Jews. The anniversary was kept as a fast, and elegies were written on the event.

The disputation at Paris was not without influence on other lands. On July 20, 1263, Barcelona witnessed a similar trial which lasted four days. Here there were only two disputants—Nachmanides, the most famous rabbi in Spain, and Pablo Christiani, a converted Jew of the Dominican order. Both were men of controversial ability, and the tournament possessed more intellectual merit than its predecessor. After protracted parleying on both sides, Nachmanides won warm praise from the King of Aragon for his skilful defence. The Dominicans sought to renew the discussion a week later in the Synagogue, but here they had such little success that, when Nachmanides left Barcelona, the King gave him 300 maravedis as a token of respect.

The Talmud was not to enjoy any long respite from attack. A year later, in 1264, at the request of Pablo Christiani, Pope Clement IX issued a bull to the Bishop of Taragona, commanding him to confiscate copies of the Talmud, and submit them to the Dominicans and Franciscans for examination, and, if found blasphemous, to be burnt. The King of Aragon having received this bull from Pablo, ordered the Talmud to be examined, and all apparently abusive and blasphemous passages to be struck out. The Dominicans, with Pablo, became thus official censors of the Talmud—which was a less radical method to employ than wholesale condemnation to the flames.

The third public trial of the Talmud was remarkable for its duration. It took place in Tortosa, Aragon, from Feb, 1413, until Nov. 12, 1414. Sixty-eight sessions were held, certainly sufficient in number to exhaust the subject and the spectators. A Jewish convert again appeared as accuser, Geronimo de Santa Fé. In defence of the Talmud

over twenty of the most prominent Aragonese Jews were summoned to appear, including poets, physicians, philosophers, translators; but none had the courage and capacity of Nachmanides. Perhaps they felt the uselessness of further vindication, and realized how insecure their right of domicile in the shadow of the Inquisition. Pope Benedict XIII, who had been deposed from the papacy, but retained the mask of authority in Spain, presided at the disputation, and sought to regain his power and prestige by the conversion of the Jews which was to follow their abandonment of the Talmud. For a time, the discussion was calm and friendly; but when Benedict found that his hopes were vain, and the Jews continued in their obstinacy, threat followed cajolery, and he threw aside all dissimulation. He condemned the Talmud to the flames, and prohibited its further study; but his decree had no effect. His bull of eleven clauses issued May 11, 1415, never came into active operation; for while he was engaged in his vindictive measures the Council of Constance deposed him. Not only was he abandoned by his Spanish protectors, and his mere shadow of authority ridiculed, but he was denounced as "unfrocked and spurious" by his favourite, the flagellant priest, Vincent Ferrer, who had so powerfully aided him in his plans against the Talmud.

For a century the Talmud was allowed a brief spell of repose, and then it became once more the cause of an agitation which was to be wider reaching than its foes and friends ever imagined to be possible. When in the beginning of the sixteenth century, Pfefferkorn, a Jewish convert, who had been imprisoned for theft, sought to destroy the Talmud, he would have hesitated and abandoned his plan, if he had for a moment thought that his hue and cry was to influence the Protestant Reformation, and pave the way for a Hebrew Renaissance. Pfefferkorn, with a coterie of Dominicans of Cologne, prevailed upon the sister of Emperor Maximilian, who after her husband's death entered a convent at Munich and became abbess, to further their designs.

On Aug. 19, 1509, Maximilian gave Pfefferkorn full power over the Talmud and kindred books. Frankfort was the first scene of conflict, when the censor demanded the surrender of the Talmud and other works at the Emperor's request. But the Jews of that city were not to submit so readily as their brethren in Spain and France. They appealed to the Archbishop of Mayence, and checked temporarily the Dominicans. How Reuchlin, the head of the Humanists, was drawn into the strife, to decide as to the character of the Talmud; how, despite the Emperor's vacillation, the Talmud was vindicated; how Hoogstraten and the Dominicans were lampooned by Hutten and the author of *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*; how, one by one, the cause of the Talmud gained new adherents, including Erasmus and Franz von Sickingen; how the Universities were appealed to for their opinion, and the University of Paris condemned the Talmud; how, finally, the subject was brought before the Lateran Council, and the Dominicans were compelled to pay the costs of their suit against Reuchlin, while Pope Leo X permitted the Talmud to be printed by Daniel Bomberg at Venice;—all this belongs to the history of Humanism, and forms a fascinating chapter in the story of intellectual progress. It was not accidental that in the very year of the *editio princeps* of the Talmud, 1520, Luther at Wittenberg burnt the Pope's bull.

The Talmud's triumph was to receive a temporary check. While the printing-presses were beginning to supply large orders for the work, and interest in Hebrew and rabbinical literature had received marked development, Pope Julius III signed the decree laid before him by the Inquisitor General, Aug. 12, 1553, condemning to confiscation and the flames throughout Italy copies of the Talmud and Hebrew books. Pope Paul IV continued in this hostile spirit, and gave the Talmud no mercy. Under his successor, Pius IV, the harsh laws of his immediate predecessors were somewhat modified. He issued a bull (March 24, 1564), as the decision of the Council of Trent, that while the Talmud was a prohibited

work, it could be printed if its name were omitted, and if it were submitted before publication to the censor, for the omission of any inimical references to the Church and the Christian religion. The mutilation of the Talmud, the various expurgations and new readings instituted by papal commissions—this forms an interesting chapter in itself. Gross ignorance and prejudice revel here at their worst, and originate laughable emendations. That the word “heathen” can now refer to a non-Christian, that the Rome of the Talmud was not the Rome of the papacy, apparently did not dawn upon the learned inquisitors; and the verbal changes in consequence that are preserved in extant editions, would surprise indeed the olden rabbis.

There followed now a brighter era for the Talmud. The revival in Hebrew and rabbinical learning made triumphant progress. In Holland, England, and Switzerland, Talmudic studies attracted a host of scholars. The Buxtorfs, L’Empereur, Sheringam, Selden, Surenhuys, were among the men who strove to popularize rabbinical lore; and they were to be succeeded by other illustrious names in the learned world down to our own day—translators and interpreters in varied fashion. It is true there were attempts now and then to subject the Talmud to reproach and condemnation, and as recently as 1757 a large number of copies of the work were burnt in Poland to satisfy the cravings of fanaticism. The anti-Semitic wave which has about spent its force in Germany was marked, too, by the revival of old-time accusations. But the spirit of our age is not the spirit of mediaevalism. When Franz Delitzsch can write in vindication of the Talmud; when August Wünsche can devote years to the translation of its *haggadah*, and the fairy land of rabbinical *midrash*; when W. H. Lowe, one of a number of Christian scholars in England, can exclaim in editing a fragment of the Talmud: “The Talmud is a closed book to those who are content to skim the scum which rises to the surface of its troubled water. Closed, doubly closed, is it to those who come

with a blind hatred of Judaism, and whose chief delight it is to cry, 'impious Jew! foolish rabbi!'"—when its importance for philology, archaeology, and the elucidation of problems of the early centuries, has become recognized—and Pope Clement's proposal, in 1307, to found Talmudical chairs at the universities has been adopted in more than one instance in Europe and America—might not one assume that history has now a kindlier and juster fate for the maligned, misinterpreted, misunderstood Talmud?

But surely it is no spotless work, the intelligent reader may assert. Has it not blemishes, does it not contain errors, frivolities, statements that are at variance with its claims to wisdom? Yes, there are blemishes in the Talmud—that repository of rabbinical opinion, grave and gay, stretching over seven centuries. How could it be otherwise under the circumstances, seeing that the work records the mood and temper of a thousand minds, their after-dinner talk as well as judicial decisions, philosophy, folk-lore, and theosophy. Every varying breath, every tone, discordant or harmonious, is distinctly phonographed. It preserves too faithfully each utterance, but it gives no hint as to background and motive: this must be read between the lines. Its hyperboles and orientalisms seem ugly distortions or shameless perversions to our cooler temperaments—some topics and allusions incongruous, if not offensive. This is frankly admitted by so staunch a Jewish historian as Graetz. But a thought from Browning—who liked to cull texts from rabbinical fancy—will perhaps best express a fair estimate of the Talmud, although the English poet never had that work in view when he penned the lines:—

It were to be wished the flaws were fewer
 In the earthen vessel, holding treasure,
 Which lies as safe in a golden ewer;
 But the main thing is, does it hold good measure?
 Heaven soon sets right all other matters.

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