

CHAPTER X.

THE SPANISH WRITERS. A BRIEF SURVEY OF THEIR WRITINGS RELATING TO THE TALMUD.

Although the aim of this, our work, is to give a history of the Talmud alone, not of the whole Jewish literature of that period (to which is devoted a work by Dr. Karpeles and others), we can not, however, skip over the writers of Spain and France of that time, who extended the literature according to the fundamental principles of the Talmud, and shine in history, the admiration of succeeding generations. We will not, however, speak at length of their work or examine it minutely, but merely mention the names; only those whose main work was elevated to Talmudic subjects we except from this rule of brevity, and shall speak about their work as far as is necessary for the purpose of this work.

The first of the distinguished men of Spain, whom the Babylonians honored with the title of "Resh Kalah" (synonymous with "Head of College"), was R. Hisdai b. Itzhak Ebn Spurt (915-970), who was counsellor and physician to the Caliph Abdul Rahman III., and he was the one who helped his co-religionists to rise from their degradation. Besides his diligence in other sciences, as the translation of the botanical books of Disscoridus, the Greek, for his sovereign, the Caliph, he carried on a correspondence with the Gaonim. of the colleges of Sura and Pumbeditha, and through them succeeded in bringing scholars and books to his own country, and to found a college for Talmudical studies. He wrote the well known letter to the king of the Chosars, in which his love for his co-religionists and his Zeal for their welfare are manifested. Menahem b. S'ruk and Duns b. Labrat, the grammarians known through their polemics about the roots and the grammar of the Hebrew language, were invited by R. Hisdai to come to popularize the study of Hebrew. Jehud b. David Chilveg, Isaac b. Kapron and Isaac Giktalia were the disciples of Menahem, and Jehudah b. Shesheth was the disciple of Dun. These men by their controversies about the grammar carried it further and perfected the study. Jonah Ebn Ganah (1000-1050) surpassed even those,

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for he composed seven books about grammar in Arabic and Hebrew which are preserved to the present time.

Samuel Hanagid (and the Nasi Ebn Nagdilah, 993-1055) was a patron of Jewish learning in Spain, as Ebn Spurt had been before him. He was the author of twenty-two books, but not even one of them survives completely. Even from his great book "Introduction to the Talmud" only a small portion is preserved, but this testifies to the greatness of his knowledge and the acuteness of his intellect. With all his adherence to the traditions and to the cardinal principles of the Talmud, he did not exclude the use of common sense and human judgment. He says: "Every comment in the Talmud on passages of Scriptures other than commandments we have to admit only so far as seems to be rational, but as for the rest, it is not authoritative." From this we see that in his ideas about the Hagadah of the Talmud, he went a step in advance of the Gaonim,

Saadiyah, and Hai. His poems and prayers in his works "Ben Thilim" and "Ben Mishle" are based on the tradition of the Talmud. But of his "Ben Koheleth" nothing was preserved by us. He was held in great esteem by the contemporary learned men. Many wrote poems in his praise, among them is the "Orphan" (Jethoma), by R. Joseph b. Hisdai. The poets at that time used to say, "In the days of R. Hisdai, the Nasi, they began to twitter (in poetry) and in the days of Samuel the Nagid, they lifted their voice." (See App. No. 11.)

He was succeeded by the lofty poet Solomon b. Gabirol, 1012-1070. (We need not here dwell on his biography and work, as Messrs. Senor Sachs and Salomon Munk wrote whole books about him.) In his time, Jekuthiel Ebn Hassau, who was high in the court of King Jahia Ibu Mundhir at Saragossa, was also a patron of all Jewish learning, especially of ben Gabirol. The latter's poem, "Kether Malchuth" (Crown of Royalty), was very favorably received by all who bore the banners of the Talmudic and Kabbaldic studies, and also by Christian priests, so that it was translated into Latin by the priest Dominicus Gondizallo (1150) and also into Hebrew by him, with the assistance of Johannis Abudalu (an apostate Jew). The fact that his name "Ebn Gabirol" was altered to Abizatrol or Abizabran has been illuminated by Salomon Munk.

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Bahayi b. Joseph Ebn Pekira, judge in Saragossa, his contemporary, is the author of the wonderful book "The Duty of Hearts" (Chobath Halbaboth) in Arabic, which has been translated by Samuel Ebn Tabun into Hebrew, and accepted as a guide in life by Israel everywhere they were found. (It has been translated also into German by Herr Baumgarten of Vienna.) This teacher Behayi absorbed himself wholly in the Talmud and gave it the preference to Arabic or Grecian philosophy. His object in this, his wonderful work, is the following: to conciliate morals with commandments and the duties of the heart with those of the other members of the body. The duty of the heart is purity of thought, that of the other members to carry out the commandments. (See App. No. 12.)

Five sages bearing the name Isaac lived at that time, viz.: 1. Isaac b. Reuben of Barcelona (1043), great in knowledge of the Talmud and an expert at translating. He translated the decisions of R. Hai Gaon, about buying and selling, from Arabic to Hebrew. 2. Isaac b. Jehudah Ebn Giath (1089), who composed prayers and ritual poems considered remarkable at that time. 3. Isaac b. Moses Sochni, who emigrated from Spain to the East, where he was qualified as Gaon and became the successor of R. Hai. Only his fame survives, his writings, however, are all lost. 4. Isaac b. Baruch Abudaly (1035-1094), who was a sage and astrologer to Caliph Al Mahmed. The latter made him Nasi over the Israelite communities in his domain, Seville. He wrote a commentary to difficult Halakhas in his book "Kupath Haruchim" (Book of Spices), which, however, he did not complete. 5. The greatest of all, Isaac b. Jacob Alphassi (1013-1103), who came from North Africa to Lucina (Alisa) and there founded a college for the study of the Talmud, in which he surpassed all his colleagues in Spain. Alphassi was the first to abridge the Talmud, compiling only the necessary Halakhas, transcribed textually. Sometimes he appended his opinions, and by this work is immortalized among all Israel in exile. In times of misfortune, when it was difficult to procure the Talmud, students occupied themselves with his work, called after him "Alphassi," to which they wrote many commentaries. His decisions, called "Questions and Replies of Hariph," have been accepted for all times. It is true that he wrote in Arabic and that it was translated into Hebrew. He also wrote

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three great Halakhas with an extensive commentary in Arabic, which was also translated into Hebrew, as well as 320 of his decisions above mentioned. (One was recently published with a new translation from the Arabic.)

The spirit of deep research, distinguishing this Spanish period, is also found in his works. The most difficult subjects in the Talmud and all intricate questions he explains easily. He strove in his books to smooth the contradictions between the Torah and Wisdom, reconciling them. His decisions extend over all provinces of the Torah in all questions concerning law and judgment; to all laws, both written and traditional laws, his reasons, based upon sound logic, were stated in a concise and ingenious manner. In the same way, he also explains the Hagada, to bring it in conformity with reason. He, Alphassi, did not devote himself to theological philosophy and criticism of the Scriptures, like his contemporaries, but to Talmudical studies, thus giving an example to those thinkers not to presume to give their religion a philosophic garb. At his death, all Jewish scholars, wheresoever found, lamented him. R. Jehudah Halevi, whose muse began then to shine, mourned for him thus:

Mountains on the day of Sinai for thee quaked,
For angels of the Lord met thee
And inscribed the Torah on the tablets of thy heart.
The glorious crown was placed around thee.
The wise had not power to stand
If they did not from thee wisdom beg.

Moses b. Samuel Ebn Giktali and Jehudah Ebn Bilan (1070) were free thinkers in his age and his opponents, but many of those scholars who explained the Talmud by simple logic were his disciples. Among these was also Isaac b. Baruch Albalia, mentioned above. The greatest of his disciples, however, was Joseph Ebn Migash b. Mair (1076-1141), who succeeded to his position in his college and inherited his greatness in Talmudic wisdom. His new contributions to Talmudic study, called by him "Megilath Setharim" (The Revelation of Hidden Scrolls) and the queries and answers collected into one book under the title of "Questions and Replies of Ebn Migash," bear testimony to his ingenuity, loftiness of spirit and gentleness. (These books were reprinted the second time by us in 1870, in Warsaw,

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with our preface and some remarks, but even this edition is already nearly out and scattered.) Most of his answers and questions were written in Arabic and translated later into Hebrew; only his explanations were written in Hebrew and in the Talmudic idiom. Particularly wondrous is his manner of examining all sides of a subject, so that not one possibility remains unconsidered.

As Ebn Migash was the greatest Rabbi after the death of his master, Alphassi, questions were addressed to him from all sides, and he, always following his disposition, answered them according to his inclinations, leniently. Let us cite one of his answers as an example:

A question was addressed to him by one who had vowed to abstain from meat and wine till he shall have reached the Holy Land, and found the project too difficult to carry out, but could find no ground for repenting. Ebn Migash found for him a ground for repentance, that, while he vowed he undoubtedly was ignorant of a saying in the Talmud: Whoever afflicts himself is

guilty against a life.

Many were the disciples who trod in Ebn Migash's footsteps and carried on their activity in his spirit. Among these was his son who succeeded him also in his college. Of his contemporaries, who distinguished themselves as philosophers or poets, it is proper to mention Rabbi Joseph Ebn Zadok of Cordova (1070-1149), author of "Olam Katan" (Microcosm), a religious philosophy in which he is of the opinion (see App. No. 11) that man must know himself in order to attain to the knowledge of Divinity. The rabbi who was his predecessor at Cordova, Joseph b. Jacob Ebn Sahl (1103), was a poet and ritual author. (See App. No. 12.) In the north of Spain were also then found scholars and poets; Abraham b. Hyya, a minister in a Mahometan ruler's court, was a great astronomer and mathematician, who wrote four books on astronomy, three of which were printed, viz.: "The Form of the Earth" (T'urath Hoaretz), "The Book of Leap-Years" (Sepher Haibur), of the third, only the latter part, treating of mathematics, optics, and astronomy was printed. Next to him is Jehudah b. Barzilar, author of the book "Hoetim." (The Times).

We have reached to the three great poets, who enjoy a world-wide renown, Moses b. Ezra, Abraham b. Meir Ebn Ezra,

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and Jehudah Halevi, all of whom were bearers of the banner of the Talmud, and contributed to diffusing its ideas and morals among the nation. We think it, however, superfluous to expatiate on them, as they are well-known to every cultured person, and, as many books have been written about them at different epochs, we cannot refrain, however, from giving briefly their biographies, as far as they bear on no subject of this work.

The dates of the birth and death of the first of these, Moses b. Ezra, are unknown to us: it is known only to us that he lived later than ben Gabirol. His opinions in his poems and other works vacillate. He composed ritual poems and lamentations, which have a place in the prayer-books of the Spanish Jews; also the "Arugath Habossem" (Bed of Spices), on theological philosophy, and the "Sepher Hassichoth V'hazichronoth" (Book of Discourses and Reminiscences), about the poems of ben Gabirol and his character.

The second, Abraham Ebn Ezra, was one of the most wonderful phenomena of his age. His commentaries on the Bible, his poems and ritual poems, are known to everyone; but the contemporary scholars found it impossible to know his real opinions, nor can modern scholars fathom them.

The third, Jehudah Halevi, the father of poets, before whom none lived equal to him, and who knows whether after him any one like him will live. Besides inspiring with a very exalted national spirit every reader of his poems and lamentations, he powerfully defended the Talmud in his book the "Chosar," where the eloquent defender of the Talmud is represented by the disputant arguing with the King of the Chosars, and which to the present time is a shining example of compositions of this kind. (A lengthy account the reader can find in the works of Karpeles.)

After them is distinguished Abraham b. David Halevi (Ebn Daud) who died as a martyr (1180). He defended the Talmud in his book "Emuna Rama" (Exalted Faith) and in his great work

"Hakabala" (The Tradition), in which he powerfully argues against all the deniers of tradition, and shows them in the wrong; supporting his logical arguments by historical facts, proving the continuance of tradition from the time of Moses to that time. In his polemics against the Karaites, he is so irritated that he styles them "dumb dogs."

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With Moses b. Maimon, the Spaniard, called by all "Maimonides" or "Rambam" (1135-1204), the Spanish period concludes. With him died the mental activity in Spain, after having flourished there for three centuries. About this great man we have nothing to add to what the historians who have preceded us have written about his life, and disputed about his opinions. (The reader desiring minute information is referred to the *Life of the Rambam*, "Taldoth Horambam," by I. H. Weiss, and also Karpeles' work.) But we do not think it superfluous to remark on two points, viz.: 1. That the opinions of Maimonides are found to differ in the three different periods of his life: thus, in his commentary on the Mishnayoth, they are not the same as in his work "Yad Hachazaka," nor are they similar to that of his last work, "More Nebuchim," which he wrote in the evening of his life. For in all of them we see a development of his ideas according to the increase of his studies and knowledge; it is not true as some affirm that there is no change in his opinions. We have made it evident, long ago, in our book "Phylacterien-Ritus," that his decisions in his "Yad Hachazaka" or "Mishna Torah," do not accord with those in his commentary on the Mishnayoth; and, it is needless to say, that his statements in the "More" are at variance with things said in all his former works. And in truth, this is the case with all great thinkers, that they can not remain at a stand still from their youth to their old age, and to this we may apply [Job, xxxii. 7]. "Multitude of years shall make wisdom known."

2. That Maimonides has omitted all references in the Talmud which treats of witchcraft, demons, interpretation of dreams, etc., not only because they were considered by him as vain superstitions and follies, for this reason alone he would not have ventured to omit them, in spite of the Talmud, for he left all that is found in the Talmud of Halakhas and moral Hagadas, even with which he himself could not agree; but his motive was, that, in his opinion, they had originally not been found in the Talmud, and that only the later men inserted them, according to their own ideas, for whatever purpose it might have been. (I. H. Weiss has insinuated this long ago, and it seems that the probability tends that way.)

So also, about the apology advanced by many for the words

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of Maimonides at the head of his work "Mishna Torah," that he had chosen this title, because if a man first read the Pentateuch, and then this work, he will know the entire Oral Law, and need read no intermediate book--that by these words he did not mean that his work should be a substitute for the Talmud, etc., etc.; we do not think this apology needful, even if he meant this. For as Maimonides had observed that much had been superadded to the Talmud, also things opposed to his general opinions--no wonder if he wished to prevent those who could not distinguish between the good and the evil, from reading the spurious passages, to which they would attach as great importance as to the Talmud itself. After he had sifted it, and arranged all that is found in that sea, the Talmud, in fourteen volumes, of his "Mishna Torah," there is no pre-emption or oddity in these words, whereby he merely sought the real good of the students.

To enumerate in detail all his books, writings, epistles, polemics and apologies, we think superfluous here; as all biographical and critical facts have already been given in detail in the above-mentioned works. We will only remark, that after all the great things which Maimonides had done and accomplished, he did not attain his object. As the study of the Talmud did not cease in any of the colleges, and, on the contrary, they who desired to criticize Maimonides, brought the rabbis to study yet more profoundly and attentively the Talmud, and to add new commentaries, decisions of Halakhas, etc., etc.

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