

CHAPTER XV.

POLEMICS WITH MUSSULMANS AND THE DISPUTES WITH THE FRANKISTS

The Jews were not exempt from disputes with scholars of Islam also during the first years of the latter's history, but these disputes differed from those with the Christians in that they did not involve the Jews in calamities. In addition to the oral disputes, many controversial books appeared between the ninth and the sixteenth centuries, among which were the books of Saadiah the Gaon against the Karaites, which the Karaites answered, not with arguments, but with scoffing. A great quantity of books were issued by the Karaites in which they ridiculed the Rabbis, in particular Saadiah the Gaon, who exposed their weaknesses. Like service was performed by the book of Samuel ben Chaphni Hakohen, entitled "To Exalt the Value of Theological Studies," against whom the Karaite Samuel ben Jehudah Eben Agia wrote a pamphlet under the title "Strenuous Denial." R. Jehudah Halevi's "Hakusri" and Maimonides' controversial letters also had for their aim the strengthening of the foundations of the creed.

But the strife raged with the greatest intensity in Spain in the middle of the twelfth century. First appeared the book on "Sepher Habrith" by R. Joseph Kimchi. Following this came controversial works by R. Jacob b. Reuben, R. Moses b.

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[paragraph continues] Tikun, and R. Moses b. Solomon, of Saliri, the title of the latter's book being "A Word of Faith," in which he records disputes with Christians; by R. Jechiel b. Joseph, of Paris, R. Nathan, of Upsala, R. Joseph, and R. Meir b. Simeon, in his book "The Battle of Merit," in which are related his disputes with the Archbishop of Narbonne; and by R. Mordecai b. Tehosaph in his book, "The Strengtheners of Faith," written against the Christian, Paul Christianus, who had held many controversies with Ramban and others.

In reply to the book of Abner of Burgos, who adopted the name of Alphonse of Valladolid, and who wrote much that was hostile to Judaism, appeared works by R. Isaac Ebn Palkara, as well as by R. Joseph Shalom, under the title of "A Reply to Alfonso's Writings." How great a degree of tolerance the Jews manifested in this controversy may be seen from what Moses of Narbonne wrote of Abner, his former friend--namely, that he was intelligent and virtuous, but despairing; unable to endure the calamities heaped upon the Jewish people; not content with the peace to his soul, but seeking also worldly happiness; and, reading in the stars that the Jews destiny was to suffer and bear trials, he fell into the error of thinking that they would never again be strong as a nation, and counselled them as he himself had done, to accept Christianity, not submit to their fate. R. Moses de Torsilla, also wrote a book entitled "Aid to Faith" (1374), consisting of seventeen chapters, in the form of a dialogue between professors of the two religions. In all these books it is declared that the Hagadas of the Talmud are not authoritative but are to be regarded barely as fiction, and as devoid of any sacredness. In Germany also appeared in defense of Judaism the work "Book of Victory" (Sepher Nitzachon), by the excellent writer, R. Lipman of Muelhausen, which appears to have made so deep an impression that the Bishop of

Brandenburg, Stephen Batekei, felt it necessary to reply to it.

Lastly may be mentioned the two disputes which took place between the Rabbis and the Frankists in 1756-1757, at the command of Bishops Dembovsky and Micholsky, in Kamenitz, Podolsk and Lemberg, cities of Poland. These terminated the disputes which the Jews were compelled to hold with their opponents in the presence of the people and dignitaries. They

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were distinguished by the fact that the Frankists impeached the authority of the Talmud on the strength of the Midrash of R. Simeon b. Jochai, termed "Zohar," which they considered sacred, while they regarded the Talmud as profane. These disputes were further distinguished by the circumstance that the founder of the Hasidismus, R. Israel baal Shem Tob, was elected as the chief disputant to represent the Rabbis, forced to dispute with the Frankists in Micholsky's presence. The Frankists were an offshoot of the sect of the false Messiah, Shabbatai Zvi, who produced a storm throughout the whole world in the year 1654. One Jacob Frank, a Polish Jew, accepted Islamism at Salonica, where he joined the sect of Shabbatai Zvi, who were seeming Mohammedans and were called Dauma. In 1754 he arrived in Poland and set to work, with the assistance of two Rabbis, Moses and Nachman, who accompanied him, to revive the creed of Shabbatai Zvi. The followers of Shabbatai Zvi, who still remained in Poland, received him with open arms, and entered upon an open propagation of the mischievous teachings. The Jews thereupon informed the ecclesiastical authorities of the country of their activity, which so alarmed them that they hastened to the Bishop and asserted their belief in the Trinity, and that they were not Talmudic Jews, but followers of the Zohar--"Zoharites." They petitioned Bishop Dembovsky of Kamenitz to force the Jews to dispute with them and thus afford them opportunity to prove that the only true belief is in one God in three persons, incarnate in the flesh, and the teaching of the Talmud all vanity, etc., a rehabilitation of all the old slanderous charges. The Bishop ordered the dispute to begin in May, 1754; and the Jews, not appearing at the appointed time, incurred a heavy fine therefor. In June of that year there assembled at Kamenitz thirty Rabbis, from whom were chosen as disputants R. Leib Meziboz, R. Bar Jozelovitz, R. Mendel Satanow, and R. Joseph Kremenetz; and about the same number of Frankists, headed by Leib Krim of Nadvarna, Soloman Shur of Rahatin and Nachman of Bushk. The pleading of the Rabbis that in the Zohar and in all the books of Israel there is no hint of a Trinity, which was purely an invention of the Frankists themselves, was of no avail, for Dembovsky decided against the Jews and fined them 5,000 gold guldens, to be paid to the Frankists, and also directed the

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Jews to dispute with the latter whenever called upon; one hundred and fifty gold guldens were likewise to be paid by the Jews for the repair of the Christian Cathedral at Kamenitz. All copies of the Talmud were to be burned, although the Jews appealed to the King, August III., against this decree of Dembovsky, claiming that they possessed the right, accorded to them by previous rulers, to print the Talmud; and although they were sustained in this contention by many princes of the kingdom, yet, owing to the political and religious turmoil then existing throughout the kingdom, the king or his minister, could give no heed to the matter, and the Jews were forced to submit to the decree of the bishop. Shortly thereafter, however, Dembovsky died a sudden death (the result of an injury received, it is related, from a fire which consumed the Talmud), and was succeeded by Labinsky, who showed no favor to the Frankists. The Jews, with the help of the

government officials and an expenditure of money, effected the expulsion of the Frankists from their residence near Kamenitz, for being neither Jews nor Christians, and they suffered persecutions. They were compelled to shave part of their heads and half of their beard; insults and indignities were heaped upon them, and many fled to Turkey. But even there they found no rest; they were relentlessly persecuted, and Elisha Ratin, one of their leaders, was beaten to death. They therefore betook themselves to the frontiers between Poland and Turkey, in constant peril of their lives from the people of both nations. When their condition became unbearable, they turned again to the king, and begged him to restore to them the freedom granted by Dembovsky. In this they succeeded; the king permitted them in May, 1757, to settle undisturbed in the province of Podalia. And thus they returned to Poland, in poverty and rags. In this state of degradation Frank advised them, in order to better their condition, to embrace Christianity. They therefore, in January, 1758, sent a petition to the Bishop Labinsky by six of their leaders, asking that they be received into the Catholic Church and be granted permission to dispute with the Talmudic Jews, who drink the blood of Christian infants, etc. Labinsky replied that it was not in his power to improve their material condition; their acceptance of Christianity could affect only their spiritual welfare. They again addressed themselves to the king, in May

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of the same year, but their petition was not answered. Labinsky suddenly resigned his office and Micholsky was chosen his successor. The latter exhibited a great zeal for proselyting, and the Frankists hastened to present their petition to him, requesting permission, before being baptized, to dispute again with the Jews. Perhaps, they urged, they might succeed in convincing the Jews of their great error and madness and in inducing them to accept Christianity too. Micholsky acceded to this request, and ordered the Jewish Rabbis to assemble at Lemberg on a day appointed by him.

At the time set for the dispute there came in sorrow to Lemberg, forty of the chief Rabbis of Poland, at their head Israel Besht of Mezibuz, and chose as disputants three of them--Besht, the Rabbi of the district, Haim Rapoport, and R. Bär Jozelovitz. The disputants for the Frankists were Frank himself, Leib Krim, and Solomon Shur.

The dispute lasted three days, beginning June 23, 1758, and the hopes of the Frankists for a victory were shattered. Though Micholsky and many Polish nobles sided with them, they failed to prove that the Zohar contained anything that favored their religion. The judges, even, utterly disagreed with the distortions to which they subjected the passages of the Zohar and Kabbalistic books. The Jewish Rabbis departed in peace, without being fined, and the petition of their adversaries, that a district in Poland be set apart for their dwelling, was refused, and they were invited to receive baptism. Thus ended favorably for the Jews the last of these peculiar disputes. The Jews made efforts to induce the Frankists to become Christians as soon as possible, that there might in future be no relationship, between them. In this they succeeded, and since that time, between the Frankists, as Christians, and the Jews there has been nothing in common in either religious or secular matters.

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