

CHAPTER X.

OPINIONS ON THE VALUE OF THE TALMUD BY GENTILES AND MODERN JEWISH SCHOLARS.

No literary monument of antiquity has ever been subject to so different and opposite views and opinions, as the Talmud. Its strict followers generally looked upon it as the very embodiment of wisdom and sagacity, and as a work whose authority was second only to that of the Bible. In the non-Jewish literature it was often decried as "one of the most repulsive

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books that exist," as "a confused medley of perverted logic, absurd subtilities, foolish tales and fables, and full of profanity, superstition, and even obscenity," or at the most, as "an immense heap of rubbish at the bottom of which some stray pearls of Eastern wisdom are hidden."

It is certain that any of those who thus assumed to pass a condemning judgment upon the gigantic work of the Talmud never read nor were able to read a single page of the same in the original, but were prompted by religious prejudice and antagonism, or they based their verdict merely on those disconnected and often distorted passages which Eisenmenger and his consorts and followers picked out from the Talmud for hostile purposes.

Christian scholars who had a deeper insight into the Talmudical literature, without being blinded by religious prejudices, expressed themselves quite differently on the character and the merits of that work, as may be seen from the following few quotations.

Johann Buxtorf, in the preface to his *Lexicon Chald. et Talmudicum*, says: "The Talmud contains many legal, medical, physical, ethical, political, astronomical, and other excellent documents of sciences, which admirably commend the history of that nation and time; it contains also luminous decisions of antiquity; excellent sayings; deep thoughts, full of grace and sense; and numerous expressions which make the reader not only better, but also more wise and learned, and which, like unto flashing jewels, grace the Hebrew speech not less than all those Greek and Roman phrases adorn their languages."

Other favorable opinions expressed by Christian scholars of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries are collected in Karl Fischer's "Gutmeinung über den Talmud der Hebräer." Vienna, 1883.

Of such scholars as belong to our time, the following may be quoted here:

The late Professor Delitzsch in his "*Jüdisches Handwerkerleben zur Zeit Jesu*," says:

"Those who have not in some degree accomplished the extremely difficult task of reading this work for themselves, will hardly be able to form a clear idea of this polynomical colossus. It is

an immense speaking-hall, in which thousands and tens of

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thousand of voices, of at least five centuries, are heard to commingle. A law, as we all know from experience, can never be so precisely formulated that there does not remain room for various interpretations; and question upon question constantly arises as to the application of it to the endless multiplicity of the existing relations of life. just imagine about ten thousand decrees concerning Jewish life classified according to the spheres of life, and in addition to these, about five hundred scribes and lawyers, mostly from Palestine and Babylon, taking up one after another of these decrees as the topic of examination and debate, and, discussing with hair-splitting acuteness every shade of meaning and practical application; and imagine, further, that the fine-spun thread of this interpretation of decrees is frequently lost in digressions, and that, after having traversed long distances of such desert-sand, you find, here and there, an oasis, consisting of sayings and accounts of more general interest. Then you may have some slight idea of this vast, and of its kind, unique, juridic codex, compared with whose compass all the law-books of other nations are but Lilliputians, and beside whose variegated, buzzing market din, they represent but quiet study-chambers."

7. Alexander, in his book on *The Jews; their Past, Present and Future* (London, 1870), says:

"The Talmud, as it now stands, is almost the whole literature of the Jews during a thousand years. Commentator followed upon commentator, till at last the whole became an immense bulk; the original Babylonian Talmud alone consists of 2,947 folio pages. Out of such literature it is easy to make quotations which may throw an odium over the whole. But fancy if the production of a thousand years of English literature, say, from the "History" of the Venerable Bede to Milton's "Paradise Lost," were thrown together into a number of uniform folios, and judged in like manner; if because some superstitious monks wrote silly "Lives of Saints," therefore the works of John Bunyan should also be considered worthless. The absurdity is too obvious to require another word from me, Such, however, is the continual treatment the Talmud receives both at the hand. of its friends and of its enemies. Both will find it easy to quote in behalf of their preconceived notions, but the earnest student will rather try to weigh the matter impartially,

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retain the good he can find even in the Talmud, and reject what will not stand the test of God's word."

The impartial view of the Talmud taken by modern Jewish scholars may be seen from the following opinion expressed by the late *Professor Graetz* in his "History of the Jews" (vol. IV., 309 sq.).

The Talmud must not be considered as an ordinary literary work consisting of twelve folios; it bears not the least internal resemblance to a single literary production; but forms a world of its own which must be judged according to its own laws. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to furnish a specific sketch of the Talmud, seeing that a familiar standard or analogy is wanting. And however thoroughly a man of consummate talent may have penetrated its spirit and become conversant with its peculiarities, he would scarcely succeed in such a task, It may, in some

respects, be compared with the Patristic literature, which sprang up simultaneously. But on closer inspection, this comparison will also fail. . . .

"The Talmud has at different times been variously judged on the most heterogeneous assumptions, it has been condemned and consigned to the flames; simply because it was presented in its unfavorable aspect without taking into consideration its actual merits. It cannot be denied that the Babylonian Talmud labors under some defects, like any other mental product, which pursues a single course with inexorable consistency and undeviating dogmatism. These defects may be classified under four heads: the Talmud contains some unessential and trival subjects, which it treats with much importance and a serious air; it has adopted from its Persian surroundings superstitious practices and views, which presuppose the agency of intermediate spiritual beings, witchcraft, exorcising formulas, magical cures and interpretations of dreams and, hence, are in conflict with the spirit of Judaism; it further contains several uncharitable utterances and provisions against members of other nations and creeds; lastly it favors a bad interpretation of Scripture, absurd, forced and frequently false commentations. For these faults the whole Talmud has been held responsible and been denounced as a work devoted to trifles, as a source of immorality and trickery, without taking into consideration that it is not a work of a single author who must be responsible

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for every word, and if it be so, then the whole Jewish people was its author. Over six centuries are crystallized in the Talmud with animated distinctness, in their peculiar costumes, modes of speech and of thought, so to say a literary Herculaneum and Pompeii, not weakened by artistic imitation, which transfers a colossal picture to the narrow limits of a miniature.

It is, therefore, no wonder, if in this world sublime and mean, great and small, serious and ridiculous, Jewish and heathen elements, the altar and the ashes, are found in motley mixture. Those odious dicta of which Jew-haters have taken hold were in most cases nothing else but the utterances of a momentary indignation, to which an individual had given vent and which were preserved and embodied in the Talmud by over-zealous disciples, who were unwilling to omit a single expression of the revered ancients. But these utterances are richly counterbalanced by the maxims of benevolence and philanthropy towards every man, regardless of creed and nationality, which are also preserved in the Talmud. As counterpoise to the rank superstition, there are found therein sharp warnings against superstitious, heathen practices (*Darke Emori*), to which subject a whole section, under the name of *Perek Emorai*, is devoted. [1](#)

"The Babylonian Talmud is especially characterized and distinguished from the Palestinian, by high-soaring contemplations, a keen understanding, and flashes of thought which fitfully dart through the mental horizon. An incalculable store of ideas and incentives to thinking is treasured in the Talmud, but not in the form of finished themes that may be appropriated in a semi-somnolent state, but with the fresh coloring of their inception. The Babylonian Talmud leads into the laboratory of thought, and its ideas may be traced from their embryonic motion up to a giddy height, whither they at times soar into the region of the incomprehensible. For this reason it became, more than the Jerusalemean, the national property, the vital breath, the soul of the Jewish people."

Footnotes

[79:1](#) Sabbath, 66a; Tosephta, Ch. VII., VIII.

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