FOREWORD

BY

THE VERY REV. THE CHIEF RABBI

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The Talmud is the product of Palestine, the land of the Bible, and of Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation. The beginnings of Talmudic literature date back to the time of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth pre-Christian century, before the Roman Republic had yet come into existence. When, a thousand years later, the Babylonian Talmud assumed final codified form in the year 500 after the Christian era, the Western Roman Empire had ceased to be. That millenium opens with the downfall of Babylon as a world-power; it covers the rise, decline and fall of Persia, Greece and Rome; and it witnesses the spread of Christianity and the disappearance of Paganism in Western and Near Eastern lands.

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ORIGINS

The Babylonian Exile is a momentous period in the history of humanity — and especially so in that of Israel. During that Exile, Israel found itself. It not only rediscovered the Torah and made it the rule of life, but under its influence new religious institutions, such as the synagogue, i.e., congregational worship without priest or ritual, came into existence — one of the most far-reaching spiritual achievements in the whole history of Religion.

ORAL LAW

At the re-establishment of the Jewish Commonwealth, Ezra the *Sofer,* or Scribe, in the year 444 B.C.E. formally proclaimed the Torah the civil and religious law of the new Commonwealth. He brought with him all the oral traditions that were taught in the Exile, and he dealt with the new issues that confronted the struggling community in that same spirit which had created the synagogue. His successors, called after him *Soferim* (Scribes'), otherwise

[page xiv] known as the 'Men of the Great Assembly', continued his work. Their teachings and ordinances received the sanction of popular practice, and came to be looked upon as *halachah,* literally, 'the trodden path', the clear religious guidance to the Israelite in the way he should go. When the Men of the Great

Assembly were no more, the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem took their place. The delight of all those generations was in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law did they meditate day and night. When their exposition followed the verses of Scripture, it was called *Midrash;* and when such exposition followed the various precepts, it was known as *Mishnah.* Academies arose for systematic cultivation of this New Learning, as well as for the assiduous gathering of the oral traditions current from times immemorial concerning the proper observance of the commandments of the Torah. This movement for the intensive study of Scripture did not pass unchallenged. The aristocratic and official element of the population — later known as the Sadducees — unhesitatingly declared every law that was not specifically written in the Torah to be a dangerous and reprehensible innovation. The opposition of the Sadducees only gave an additional impetus to the spread of the Oral Law by the Scribes, later known as the Pharisees. What they sought was the full and inexhaustible revelation which God had made. The knowledge of the contents of that revelation, they held, was to be found in the first Instance in the Written Text of the Pentateuch; but the revelation, the real Torah, was the *meaning* of that Written Text, the Divine thought therein disclosed, as unfolded in ever greater richness of detail by successive generations of devoted teachers. ‘Apart from the direct intercourse of prayer,’ says Herford, ‘the study of Torah was the way of closest approach to God; it might be called the Pharisaic form of the Beatific Vision. To study Torah was to think God’s thoughts after Him, as Kepler said.’

MISHNAH

The product of the feverish activity of the Pharisaic schools threatened to become too unwieldy to be retained by unassisted memory. For all this teaching was *oral,* and was not to be written down. The first effort at arrangement of the traditional material into a system, was made in the first pre-Christian century by [page xv]Hillel. He is the best known of all the rabbis, renowned for his enunciation of the Golden Rule, ‘Whatsoever is hateful unto thee, do it not to thy fellow; this is the whole Torah, the rest is but commentary.' He was the embodiment of meekness and humanity. ‘Love peace, and pursue peace, love thy fellow-creatures and bring them near to the Torah,’ was his motto. He popularised seven exegetical rules for the interpretation of the Torah — e.g., the rules of inference, and analogy — by which the immanent meaning of Scripture might better be brought out; and he divided the mass of traditions that in his day constituted the Oral Law into the six main Orders, which division was accepted by all his successors.

AUTHORSHIP

Of the 150 *Tannaim,* or ‘teachers’, who may be called the architects of the spiritual edifice which in its completed form is known as the Mishnah, it is necessary to mention three more

besides Hillel. These are Johanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Akiba, and Rabbi Judah the Prince. Johanan ben Zakkai was the youngest of Hillel's disciples. By his Academy at Jabneh, he rescued Judaism from the shipwreck of the Roman destruction that overwhelmed the Jewish nation in the year 70. Jabneh became the rallying-ground of Jewish Learning and the centre of Jewish spiritual life. Like nearly every one of the rabbis, he earned his bread by manual labour. Judaism, he held, could outlive its political organism; and charity and love of men replaced the Sacrificial Service. 'A good heart', he declared, was the most important thing in life.

In the following generation, Akiba was the author of a collection of traditional laws out of which the Mishnah actually grew. He was the greatest among the rabbis of his own and of succeeding times, the man of whom — as the legend says — even Moses was for a moment jealous when in a vision he was given a glimpse of the distant future. His keen and penetrating intellect enabled him to find a Biblical basis for every provision of the Oral Law. Romance illumines the early life of this great rabbi and mystic. In 132 he died a martyr's death for his God and People. On the day that Akiba died was born R. Judah the Prince, also called simply 'Rabbi' — He was a descendant of Hillel in the seventh generation, and a man of uncommon ability, wide culture and lofty virtue. As Patriarch — [page xvi] spiritual ruler of his generation — he made it his aim to ensure unity of religious observance by the establishment of one Code of undisputed authority. He, therefore, surveyed anew the whole aggregation of ordinances that had accumulated with the centuries, sifting and arranging, abridging and amplifying; and often incorporating the opinions of earlier teachers in exactly the form in which he had received them. Thus the Mishnah is not cast in a single mould. It is a composite work. Perhaps for this reason also it displaced all rival collections of traditional law, and soon attained to canonical authority.

DIVISIONS

We do not know the precise year in which Rabbi applied the finishing touches to his work. Late in life he undertook a complete revision of his Mishnah, probably in the year 220 A.C.E. In this, its final form, the Mishnah consists of six Orders:

1. Zera'im, agricultural laws, has eleven tractates, the first of which (Berakoth) deals with Prayer;
2. Mo'ed, laws concerning the festivals and fasts, has twelve tractates;
3. Nashim, seven tractates dealing with laws relating to woman and family life;
4. Nezikin, the tractates on civil and criminal jurisprudence (including the Pirke Aboth);