

JEWISH LITERATURE

AND OTHER ESSAYS

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BY

GUSTAV KARPELES

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## PREFACE

The following essays were delivered during the last ten years, in the form of addresses, before the largest associations in the great cities of Germany. Each one is a dear and precious possession to me. As I once more pass them in review, reminiscences fill my mind of solemn occasions and impressive scenes, of excellent men and charming women. I feel as

though I were sending the best beloved children of my  
fancy out into the  
world, and sadness seizes me when I realize that they no  
longer belong  
to me alone--that they have become the property of  
strangers. The living  
word falling upon the ear of the listener is one thing;  
quite another  
the word staring from the cold, printed page. Will my  
thoughts be  
accorded the same friendly welcome that greeted them  
when first they  
were uttered?

I venture to hope that they may be kindly received; for  
these addresses  
were born of devoted love to Judaism. The consciousness  
that Israel is  
charged with a great historical mission, not yet  
accomplished, ushered  
them into existence. Truth and sincerity stood sponsor  
to every word. Is  
it presumptuous, then, to hope that they may find favor  
in the New  
World? Brethren of my faith live there as here; our  
ancient watchword,  
"Sh'ma Yisrael," resounds in their synagogues as in  
ours; the old  
blood-stained flag, with its sublime inscription, "The  
Lord is my  
banner!" floats over them; and Jewish hearts in America  
are loyal like  
ours, and sustained by steadfast faith in the Messianic  
time when our  
hopes and ideals, our aims and dreams, will be realized.  
There is but  
one Judaism the world over, by the Jordan and the Tagus  
as by the  
Vistula and the Mississippi. God bless and protect it,  
and lead it to  
the goal of its glorious future!

To all Jewish hearts beyond the ocean, in free America,  
fraternal  
greetings!

GUSTAV KARPELES

BERLIN, Pesach 5652/1892.

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A GLANCE AT JEWISH LITERATURE

In a well-known passage of the Romanzero, rebuking Jewish women for their ignorance of the magnificent golden age of their nation's poetry, Heine used unmeasured terms of condemnation. He was too severe, for the sources from which he drew his own information were of a purely scientific character, necessarily unintelligible to the ordinary reader. The first truly popular presentation of the whole of Jewish literature was made only a few years ago, and could not have existed in Heine's time, as the most valuable treasures of that literature, a veritable Hebrew Pompeii, have been unearthed from the mould and rubbish of the libraries within this century. Investigations of the history of Jewish literature have been possible, then, only during the last fifty years.

But in the course of this half-century, conscientious research has so actively been prosecuted that we can now gain at least a bird's-eye view of the whole course of our literature. Some stretches still lie in shadow, and it is not astonishing that eminent scholars continue to maintain that "there is no such thing as an organic history, a logical development, of the gigantic neo-Hebraic literature"; while such as are acquainted with the results of late research at best concede that Hebrew literature has been permitted to garner a "tender aftermath." Both verdicts are untrue and unfair. Jewish literature has developed organically, and in the course of its evolution it has had its spring-tide as well as its season of decay, this again followed by

vigorous rejuvenescence.

Such opinions are part and parcel of the vicissitudes of our literature, in themselves sufficient matter for an interesting book. Strange it certainly is that a people without a home, without a land, living under repression and persecution, could produce so great a literature; stranger still, that it should at first have been preserved and disseminated, then forgotten, or treated with the disdain of prejudice, and finally roused from torpid slumber into robust life by the breath of the modern era. In the neighborhood of twenty-two thousand works are known to us now. Fifty years ago bibliographers were ignorant of the existence of half of these, and in the libraries of Italy, England, and Germany an untold number awaits resurrection.

In fact, our literature has not yet been given a name that recommends itself to universal acceptance. Some have called it "Rabbinical Literature," because during the middle ages every Jew of learning bore the title Rabbi; others, "Neo-Hebraic"; and a third party considers it purely theological. These names are all inadequate. Perhaps the only one sufficiently comprehensive is "Jewish Literature." That embraces, as it should, the aggregate of writings produced by Jews from the earliest days of their history up to the present time, regardless of form, of language, and, in the middle ages at least, of subject-matter.

With this definition in mind, we are able to sketch the whole course of

our literature, though in the frame of an essay only in outline. We shall learn, as Leopold Zunz, the Humboldt of Jewish science, well says, that it is "intimately bound up with the culture of the ancient world, with the origin and development of Christianity, and with the scientific endeavors of the middle ages. Inasmuch as it shares the intellectual aspirations of the past and the present, their conflicts and their reverses, it is supplementary to general literature. Its peculiar features, themselves falling under universal laws, are in turn helpful in the interpretation of general characteristics. If the aggregate results of mankind's intellectual activity can be likened unto a sea, Jewish literature is one of the tributaries that feed it. Like other literatures and like literature in general, it reveals to the student what noble ideals the soul of man has cherished, and striven to realize, and discloses the varied achievements of man's intellectual powers. If we of to-day are the witnesses and the offspring of an eternal, creative principle, then, in turn, the present is but the beginning of a future, that is, the translation of knowledge into life. Spiritual ideals consciously held by any portion of mankind lend freedom to thought, grace to feeling, and by sailing up this one stream we may reach the fountain-head whence have emanated all spiritual forces, and about which, as a fixed pole, all spiritual currents eddy." [1]

The cornerstone of this Jewish literature is the Bible, or what we call Old Testament literature--the oldest and at the same

time the most important of Jewish writings. It extends over the period ending with the second century before the common era; is written, for the most part, in Hebrew, and is the clearest and the most faithful reflection of the original characteristics of the Jewish people. This biblical literature has engaged the closest attention of all nations and every age. Until the seventeenth century, biblical science was purely dogmatic, and only since Herder pointed the way have its æsthetic elements been dwelt upon along with, often in defiance of, dogmatic considerations. Up to this time, Ernest Meier and Theodor Nöldeke have been the only ones to treat of the Old Testament with reference to its place in the history of literature.

Despite the dogmatic air clinging to the critical introductions to the study of the Old Testament, their authors have not shrunk from treating the book sacred to two religions with childish arbitrariness. Since the days of Spinoza's essay at rationalistic explanation, Bible criticism has been the wrestling-ground of the most extravagant exegesis, of bold hypotheses, and hazardous conjectures. No Latin or Greek classic has been so ruthlessly attacked and dissected; no mediæval poetry so arbitrarily interpreted. As a natural consequence, the æsthetic elements were more and more pushed into the background. Only recently have we begun to ridicule this craze for hypotheses, and returned to more sober methods of inquiry. Bible criticism reached the climax of

absurdity, and the scorn was just which greeted one of the most important works of the critical school, Hitzig's "Explanation of the Psalms." A reviewer said: "We may entertain the fond hope that, in a second edition of this clever writer's commentary, he will be in the enviable position to tell us the day and the hour when each psalm was composed."

The reaction began a few years ago with the recognition of the inadequacy of Astruc's document hypothesis, until then the creed of all Bible critics. Astruc, a celebrated French physician, in 1753 advanced the theory that the Pentateuch--the five books of Moses--consists of two parallel documents, called respectively Yahvistic and Elohist, from the name applied to God in each. On this basis, German science after him raised a superstructure. No date was deemed too late to be assigned to the composition of the Pentateuch. If the historian Flavius Josephus had not existed, and if Jesus had not spoken of "the Law" and "the prophets," and of the things "which were written in the Law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms," critics would have been disposed to transfer the redaction of the Bible to some period of the Christian era. So wide is the divergence of opinions on the subject that two learned critics, Ewald and Hitzig, differ in the date assigned to a certain biblical passage by no less than a thousand years!

Bible archæology, Bible exegesis, and discussions of grammatical

niceties, were confounded with the history of biblical literature, and naturally it was the latter that suffered by the lack of differentiation. Orthodoxy assumed a purely divine origin for the Bible, while sceptics treated the holy book with greater levity than they would dare display in criticising a modern novel. The one party raised a hue and cry when Moses was spoken of as the first author; the other discovered "obscene, rude, even cannibalistic traits"[2] in the sublime narratives of the Bible. It should be the task of coming generations, successors by one remove of credulous Bible lovers, and immediate heirs of thorough-going rationalists, to reconcile and fuse in a higher conception of the Bible the two divergent theories of its purely divine and its purely human origin. Unfortunately, it must be admitted that Ernest Meier is right, when he says, in his "History of the National Poetry of the Hebrews," that this task wholly belongs to the future; at present it is an unsolved problem.

The æsthetic is the only proper point of view for a full recognition of the value of biblical literature. It certainly does not rob the sacred Scriptures, the perennial source of spiritual comfort, of their exalted character and divine worth to assume that legend, myth, and history have combined to produce the perfect harmony which is their imperishable distinction. The peasant dwelling on inaccessible mountain-heights, next to the record of Abraham's shepherd life, inscribes the main events of his own career, the anniversary dates sacred to his family. The young

count among their first impressions that of "the brown folio," and more vividly than all else remember

"The maidens fair and true,  
The sages and the heroes bold,  
Whose tale by seers inspired  
In our Book of books is told.

The simple life and faith  
Of patriarchs of ancient day  
Like angels hover near,  
And guard, and lead them on the way." [3]

Above all, a whole nation has for centuries been living with, and only by virtue of, this book. Surely this is abundant testimony to the undying value of the great work, in which the simplest shepherd tales and the naïvest legends, profound moral saws and magnificent images, the ideals of a Messianic future and the purest, the most humane conception of life, alternate with sublime descriptions of nature and the sweet strains of love-poems, with national songs breathing hope, or trembling with anguish, and with the dull tones of despairing pessimism and the divinely inspired hymns of an exalted theodicy--all blending to form what the reverential love of men has named the Book of books.

It was natural that a book of this kind should become the basis of a great literature. Whatever was produced in later times had to submit to be judged by its exalted standard. It became the rule of conduct, the prophetic mirror reflecting the future work of a nation whose fate was inextricably bound up with its own. It is not known how and when the

biblical scriptures were welded into one book, a holy canon, but it is probably correct to assume that it was done by the Soferim, the Scribes, between 200 and 150 B.C.E. At all events, it is certain that the three divisions of the Bible--the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the miscellaneous writings--were contained in the Greek version, the Septuagint, so called from the seventy or seventy-two Alexandrians supposed to have done the work of translation under Ptolemy Philadelphus.

The Greek translation of the Bible marks the beginning of the second period of Jewish literature, the Judæo-Hellenic. Hebrew ceased to be the language of the people; it was thenceforth used only by scholars and in divine worship. Jewish for the first time met Greek intellect. Shem and Japheth embraced fraternally. "But even while the teachings of Hellas were pushing their way into subjugated Palestine, seducing Jewish philosophy to apostasy, and seeking, by main force, to introduce paganism, the Greek philosophers themselves stood awed by the majesty and power of the Jewish prophets. Swords and words entered the lists as champions of Judaism. The vernacular Aramæan, having suffered the Greek to put its impress upon many of its substantives, refused to yield to the influence of the Greek verb, and, in the end, Hebrew truth, in the guise of the teachings of Jesus, undermined the proud structure of the heathen." This is a most excellent characterization of that literary period, which lasted about three centuries, ending

between 100 and 150

C. E. Its influence upon Jewish literature can scarcely be said to have been enduring. To it belong all the apocryphal writings which, originally composed in the Greek language, were for that reason not incorporated into the Holy Canon. The centre of intellectual life was no longer in Palestine, but at Alexandria in Egypt, where three hundred thousand Jews were then living, and thus this literature came to be called Judæo-Alexandrian. It includes among its writers the last of the Neoplatonists, particularly Philo, the originator of the allegorical interpretation of the Bible and of a Jewish philosophy of religion; Aristéas, and pseudo-Phokylides. There were also Jewish littérateurs: the dramatist Ezekielos; Jason; Philo the Elder; Aristobulus, the popularizer of the Aristotelian philosophy; Eupolemos, the historian; and probably the Jewish Sybil, who had to have recourse to the oracular manner of the pagans to proclaim the truths of Judaism, and to Greek figures of speech for her apocalyptic visions, which foretold, in biblical phrase and with prophetic ardor, the future of Israel and of the nations in contact with it.

Meanwhile the word of the Bible was steadily gaining importance in Palestine. To search into and expound the sacred text had become the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob, of those that had not lent ear to the siren notes of Hellenism. Midrash, as the investigations of the commentators were called, by and by divided into two streams--Halacha,

which establishes and systematizes the statutes of the Law, and Haggada, which uses the sacred texts for homiletic, historical, ethical, and pedagogic discussions. The latter is the poetic, the former, the legislative, element in the Talmudic writings, whose composition, extending over a thousand years, constitutes the third, the most momentous, period of Jewish literature. Of course, none of these periods can be so sharply defined as a rapid survey might lead one to suppose. For instance, on the threshold of this third epoch stands the figure of Flavius Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, who, at once an enthusiastic Jew and a friend of the Romans, writes the story of his nation in the Greek language--a character as peculiar as his age, which, listening to the mocking laughter of a Lucian, saw Olympus overthrown and its gods dethroned, the Temple at Jerusalem pass away in flame and smoke, and the new doctrine of the son of the carpenter at Nazareth begin its victorious course.

By the side of this Janus-faced historian, the heroes of the Talmud stand enveloped in glory. We meet with men like Hillel and Shammaï, Jochanan ben Zakkai, Gamaliel, Joshua ben Chananya, the famous Akiba, and later on Yehuda the Prince, friend of the imperial philosopher Marcus Aurelius, and compiler of the Mishna, the authoritative code of laws superseding all other collections. Then there are the fabulist Meïr; Simon ben Yochaï, falsely accused of the authorship of the mystical Kabbala; Chiya; Rab; Samuel, equally famous as

a physician and  
a rabbi; Jochanan, the supposed compiler of the  
Jerusalem Talmud; and  
Ashi and Abina, the former probably the arranger of the  
Babylonian  
Talmud. This latter Talmud, the one invested with  
authority among Jews,  
by reason of its varying fortunes, is the most  
marvellous literary  
monument extant. Never has book been so hated and so  
persecuted, so  
misjudged and so despised, on the other hand, so prized  
and so honored,  
and, above all, so imperfectly understood, as this very  
Talmud.

For the Jews and their literature it has had untold  
significance. That  
the Talmud has been the conservator of Judaism is an  
irrefutable  
statement. It is true that the study of the Talmud  
unduly absorbed the  
great intellectual force of its adherents, and brought  
about a somewhat  
one-sided mental development in the Jews; but it also is  
true, as a  
writer says,[4] that "whenever in troublous times  
scientific inquiry was  
laid low; whenever, for any reason, the Jew was excluded  
from  
participation in public life, the study of the Talmud  
maintained the  
elasticity and the vigor of the Jewish mind, and rescued  
the Jew from  
sterile mysticism and spiritual apathy. The Talmud, as a  
rule, has been  
inimical to mysticism, and the most brilliant  
Talmudists, in propitious  
days, have achieved distinguished success in secular  
science. The Jew  
survived ages of bitterness, all the while clinging  
loyally to his faith  
in the midst of hostility, and the first ray of light  
that penetrated  
the walls of the Ghetto found him ready to take part in

the intellectual  
work of his time. This admirable elasticity of mind he  
owes, first and  
foremost, to the study of the Talmud."

From this much abused Talmud, as from its contemporary  
the Midrash in  
the restricted sense, sprouted forth the blossoms of the  
Haggada--that  
Haggada

"Where the beauteous, ancient sagas,  
Angel legends fraught with meaning,  
Martyrs' silent sacrifices,  
Festal songs and wisdom's sayings,

Trope and allegoric fancies--  
All, howe'er by faith's triumphant  
Glow pervaded--where they gleaming,  
Glist'ning, well in strength exhaustless.

And the boyish heart responsive  
Drinks the wild, fantastic sweetness,  
Greets the woful, wondrous anguish,  
Yields to grewsome charm of myst'ry,

Hid in blessed worlds of fable.  
Overawed it hearkens solemn  
To that sacred revelation  
Mortal man hath poetry called."[5]

A story from the Midrash charmingly characterizes the  
relation between  
Halacha and Haggada. Two rabbis, Chiya bar Abba, a  
Halachist, and  
Abbahu, a Haggadist, happened to be lecturing in the  
same town. Abbahu,  
the Haggadist, was always listened to by great crowds,  
while Chiya, with  
his Halacha, stood practically deserted. The Haggadist  
comforted the  
disappointed teacher with a parable. "Let us suppose two  
merchants," he  
said, "to come to town, and offer wares for sale. The  
one has pearls and

precious gems to display, the other, cheap finery, gilt chains, rings, and gaudy ribbons. About whose booth, think you, does the crowd press?--Formerly, when the struggle for existence was not fierce and inevitable, men had leisure and desire for the profound teachings of the Law; now they need the cheering words of consolation and hope."

For more than a thousand years this nameless spirit of national poesy was abroad, and produced manifold works, which, in the course of time, were gathered together into comprehensive collections, variously named Midrash Rabba, Pesikta, Tanchuma, etc. Their compilation was begun in about 700 C. E., that is, soon after the close of the Talmud, in the transition period from the third epoch of Jewish literature to the fourth, the golden age, which lasted from the ninth to the fifteenth century, and, according to the law of human products, shows a season of growth, blossom, and decay.

The scene of action during this period was western Asia, northern Africa, sometimes Italy and France, but chiefly Spain, where Arabic culture, destined to influence Jewish thought to an incalculable degree, was at that time at its zenith. "A second time the Jews were drawn into the vortex of a foreign civilization, and two hundred years after Mohammed, Jews in Kairwan and Bagdad were speaking the same language, Arabic. A language once again became the mediatrix between Jewish and general literature, and the best minds of the two races, by means of the

language, reciprocally influenced each other. Jews, as they once had written Greek for their brethren, now wrote Arabic; and, as in Hellenistic times, the civilization of the dominant race, both in its original features and in its adaptations from foreign sources, was reflected in that of the Jews." It would be interesting to analyze this important process of assimilation, but we can concern ourselves only with the works of the Jewish intellect. Again we meet, at the threshold of the period, a characteristic figure, the thinker Sa'adia, ranking high as author and religious philosopher, known also as a grammarian and a poet. He is followed by Sherira, to whom we owe the beginnings of a history of Talmudic literature, and his son Haï Gaon, a strictly orthodox teacher of the Law. In their wake come troops of physicians, theologians, lexicographers, Talmudists, and grammarians. Great is the circle of our national literature: it embraces theology, philosophy, exegesis, grammar, poetry, and jurisprudence, yea, even astronomy and chronology, mathematics and medicine. But these widely varying subjects constitute only one class, inasmuch as they all are infused with the spirit of Judaism, and subordinate themselves to its demands. A mention of the prominent actors would turn this whole essay into a dry list of names. Therefore it is better for us merely to sketch the period in outline, dwelling only on its greatest poets and philosophers, the moulders of its character.

The opinion is current that the Semitic race lacks the

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