

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TALMUD AND THE MIDRASH *

* See chapter on “Literature.”

After the great calamities which befell the Jewish people by the destruction of Jerusalem, A.D. 70, Jewish learning found two places of retreat. One was on the shores of the Euphrates in Babylon, the other in the little town of Jamnia, or Yavneh in Palestine. This Jamnia school was in a subsequent period removed to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

About the year A.D. 230, Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi compiled the *Mishna* (Instruction); a collection of Jewish laws and usages up to that time. This book served later as basis for the Talmud. Just as the Mishna was supposed to be an explanation of the Mosaic Laws (the Bible) so the Mishna itself had to be explained. The explanatory remarks and opinions of the later Rabbis were compiled about a century afterward by Rabbi Yehochanan who was then the Principal of the Tiberias College. This new compilation was called *Gemara* (“Completion”). This Mishna and Gemara together was denominated *The Jerusalem Talmud*.

While this compilation of laws and their exposition was going on in downtrodden Judea, the more prosperous Jews of Mesopotamia produced their own Gemara. This compilation which was completed about A.D. 512 is called *Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian Talmud). Although the Jerusalem Talmud was the simpler and clearer, it did not appeal to the Jewish mind in Diaspora as did the more difficult and complex Babel Talmud. It is this Talmud that became dominant in Jewish life and changed it radically.

This Babel Talmud is veritably a Babel (mixture) of laws and customs, of facts and fiction, of science and superstitions. You may start out with a simple discussion of a certain law and soon find yourself in a fairy-land. It is hard to discern where reality ends and imagination begins: where begins the *Halacha*, the study of the law, and where ends the *Agada* (or Haggadah), the imaginative or homiletic portion.

The language of the Talmud (mostly Aramaic), the style, the method, the sequence of things, in short, everything seems tangled, confused, chaotic, so that only years of instruction and practice and a “Jewish head” may make one understand it

In the course of time, the text of the Talmud became wedged in various commentaries, chiefly that of RASHI (short for Rabbi SHlomo Izchaki, who was also the best known commentator on the Bible) printed side by side with the text. These commentaries, glosses and annotations help the student to unravel the obscure and entangled arguments of the Talmudical discussions.

Let us take, as example, the Sabbath.

The Bible forbids all work on that day. Now one may ask, what is “work”? Is sweeping the floor, or cooking a meal, or washing the dishes, etc., called “work,” and thus should not be done on the Sabbath? If the Rabbis had acted in the spirit of our Lord, who said that the Sabbath was for man and not man for the Sabbath, they might have answered that question with a page or two.

Instead, they wrote a voluminous book called *Shabath*, wherein various kinds of human actions are discussed and disputed, before it is finally decided as to whether they are to be considered “work” or not. Thus hundreds of laws concerning the Sabbath rest were evolved. A great many of these laws involved the penalty of death if broken. Now, in between the discussion of the various laws there are interspersed moral precepts, exegeses of certain verses in the Bible, legends, some medicine, some astrology, ghost stories and many other things which are entirely irrelevant. Some of the stories may have some hidden secret truth, perhaps something which could only be hinted but not plainly expressed. But all of them, even the most absurd, have been considered by observant Jews as sacred and infallible and obligatory.

During the Middle Ages, the Church held the Talmud responsible for Jewish stubbornness in refusing to accept the predominant religion. They accused the Talmud of depraving the Jewish intellect and undermining their moral principles. Heavy fines and imprisonment were imposed on those who kept the Talmud in their house. Sometimes, these books were hunted out and burned at the stake, in the hope that they would totally disappear and be no more a stumbling block to anyone. But the cruelty and stupidity of the church-leaders had the reverse effect.

The more the Talmud was calumniated, the more the Jews loved it, preserved it and studied it, until it became the real “Torah” for the Jewish people. The *Bible*, by which name the Pentateuch is generally known, is considered, indeed, a most sacred book which ought to be recited periodically, but it is the *Talmud* which guides and directs Jewish life because only the Rabbis are authorized to interpret the Bible.

In their great zeal for the preservation of the Holy Book, in their care that no harm befall it, the Rabbis have built around their beloved books, hedges and fences, and locked it with several keys, so that the Bible — especially the Spirit of it — has become inaccessible. The Talmud is an impenetrable wall encircling and concealing the Bible. So the wall without has become sacred while the Holy Scriptures within have become obscure, forgotten, a “sealed book.”

Jesus said: **“Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick,”** so that it gives light to all around it. The Rabbis did just the reverse: they put the light of the Word of God under a bushel, probably to keep it safe there, forgetting that the purpose of light is not to be kept safe, but to shine and keep the people safe and enlightened.

There are other books of ancient date which are considered as in line with the Talmud. Such is the *Midrash* (“exposition”). It is mostly *Haggadah*, homiletic interpretation of the Pentateuch. It also contains various stories, fables, allegories — sometimes to expound a passage in the Bible, sometimes just to inculcate some moral lesson. The various *Midrashim* form quite a large set of books in haggadic literature.

Then there are Apocryphal Appendices to the Talmud, such as: *Avoth d’Rabbi Nathan*, *Derech Eretz*, *Kalla* and others. Parables, stories, maxims, proverbs, folk-lore, fables, etc., find untrammelled expression in this vast collection, which has enjoyed great popularity among the Jews.

For the missionary to the Jews, it is interesting to know that the *Midrashim* reveal that various passages of the Old Testament which the New Testament applies to the Messiah were also applied to the Messiah by the Jews of old — for example, Isaiah 52:12-Isaiah 53, which later Jewish commentators applied to the Jewish people. The Midrash, like the New Testament, referred it to the suffering Messiah.

According to the New Testament (Matthew 22:44 and in other parts of the New Testament) Psalm 110:1 is applied to the Messiah. Later modern rabbis made various efforts to suppress the old Jewish exegesis of passages which were favorable to the claims of Christianity but the Midrash on the Psalms interprets Psalm 18:36 thus: “Rabbi Judah in the name of Rabbi Chama says: that in the time to come, the Holy One — blessed be He! — will make King Messiah sit at His right hand, as it is said (Psalm 110:1), ‘*The Lord said unto my lord sit thou on my right hand,*’ etc.”

The Talmud being so voluminous, so difficult, it could not become the heritage of the mass of the Jewish people, especially not for the Jews who settled in European countries, and the Aramaic language, in which most of the Talmud was written, became foreign and difficult to study. Thus there arose the new danger that the laws and usages of the Talmud would be forgotten. To meet this exigency, new compilations of the laws came into being. These compilations were written in plain Hebrew, systematically arranged, leaving out all the legends, etc., of the Talmud, so that all Jews could more easily read them.

On these compilations read chapter on Literature, Section: “Codification.”

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