

JEWISH THEOLOGY

CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF THEOLOGY

1. The name Theology, "the teaching concerning God," is taken from Greek philosophy. It was used by Plato and Aristotle to denote the knowledge concerning God and things godly, by which they meant the branch of Philosophy later called Metaphysics, after Aristotle. In the Christian Church the term gradually assumed the meaning of systematic exposition of the creed, a distinction being made between *Rational*, or *Natural Theology*, on the one hand, and *Dogmatic Theology*, on the other.¹ In common usage Theology is understood to be the presentation of one specific system of faith after some logical method, and a distinction is made between *Historical* and *Systematic Theology*. The former traces the various doctrines of the faith in question through the different epochs and stages of culture, showing their historical process of growth and development; the latter presents these same doctrines in comprehensive form as a fixed system, as they have finally been elaborated and accepted upon the basis of the sacred scriptures and their authoritative interpretation.

2. Theology and Philosophy of Religion differ widely in their character. Theology deals exclusively with a specific religion; in expounding one doctrinal system, it starts from

¹ Compare Heinrici: *Theologische Encyclopaedie*, p. 4; Enc. Brit. art. Theology.

a positive belief in a divine revelation and in the continued working of the divine spirit, affecting also the interpretation and further development of the sacred books. Philosophy of Religion, on the other hand, while dealing with the same subject matter as Theology, treats religion from a general point of view as a matter of experience, and, as every philosophy must, without any foregone conclusion. Consequently it submits the beliefs and doctrines of religion in general to an impartial investigation, recognizing neither a divine revelation nor the superior claims of any one religion above any other, its main object being to ascertain how far the universal laws of human reason agree or disagree with the assertions of faith.¹

3. It is therefore incorrect to speak of a Jewish religious philosophy. This has no better right to exist than has Jewish metaphysics or Jewish mathematics.² The Jewish thinkers of the Spanish-Arabic period who endeavored to harmonize revelation and reason, utilizing the Neo-Platonic philosophy or the Aristotelian with a Neo-Platonic coloring, betray by their very conceptions of revelation and prophecy the influence of Mohammedan theology; this was really a graft of metaphysics on theology and called itself the "divine science," a term corresponding exactly with the Greek "theology." The so-called Jewish religious philosophers adopted both the methods and terminology of the Mohammedan theologians, attempting to present the doctrines of the Jewish faith in the light of philosophy, as truth based on reason. Thus they claimed to construct a Jewish theology upon the foundation of a philosophy of religion.

¹ Heinrici, I. c., p. 14 f., 212; Hagenbach-Kautsch: *Encyc. d. theolog. Wiss.*, p. 28-30; Rauwenhoff: *Religionsphilosophie*, Einl., xiii; Margolis: "The Theological Aspect of Reformed Judaism," in Yearbook of C. C. A. R., 1903, p. 188-192. Lauterbach, J. E., art. Theology.

² See, however, Geiger: *Nachgel. Schriften*, II, 3-8; also Margolis, I. c., p. 192-196.

But neither they nor their Mohammedan predecessors succeeded in working out a complete system of theology. They left untouched essential elements of religion which do not come within the sphere of rational verities, and did not give proper appreciation to the rich treasures of faith deposited in the Biblical and Rabbinical literature. Nor does the comprehensive theological system of Maimonides, which for centuries largely shaped the intellectual life of the Jew, form an exception. Only the mystics, Bahya at their head, paid attention to the spiritual side of Judaism, dwelling at length on such themes as prayer and repentance, divine forgiveness and holiness.

4. Closer acquaintance with the religious and philosophical systems of modern times has created a new demand for a Jewish theology by which the Jew can comprehend his own religious truths in the light of modern thought, and at the same time defend them against the aggressive attitude of the ruling religious sects. Thus far, however, the attempts made in this direction are but feeble and sporadic; if the structure is not to stand altogether in the air, the necessary material must be brought together from its many sources with painstaking labor.¹ The special difficulty in the task lies in the radical difference which exists between our view of the past and that of the Biblical and medieval writers. All those things which have heretofore been taken as facts because related in the sacred books or other traditional sources, are viewed to-day with critical eyes, and are now regarded as more or less colored by human impression or conditioned by human judgment. In other words, we have learned to distinguish between *subjective* and *objective* truths,² whereas theology by

¹ A fine beginning in this direction has been made by Professor Schechter in *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, New York, 1909.

² See Joel: "D. Mosaismus u. d. Heidenthum," in *Jahrb. f. Jued. Gesch. und Lit.*, 1904, p. 70-73.

its very nature deals with truth as absolute. This makes it imperative for us to investigate historically the leading idea or fundamental principle underlying a doctrine, to note the different conceptions formed at various stages, and trace its process of growth. At times, indeed, we may find that the views of one age have rather taken a backward step and fallen below the original standard. The progress need not be uniform, but we must still trace its course.

5. We must recognize at the outset that Jewish theology cannot assume the character of *apologetics*, if it is to accomplish its great task of formulating religious truth as it exists in our consciousness to-day. It can no more afford to ignore the established results of modern linguistic, ethnological, and historical research, of Biblical criticism and comparative religion, than it can the undisputed facts of natural science, however much any of these may conflict with the Biblical view of the cosmos. Apologetics has its legitimate place to prove and defend the truths of Jewish theology against other systems of belief and thought, but cannot properly defend either Biblical or Talmudic statements by methods incompatible with scientific investigation. Judaism is a religion of *historical* growth, which, far from claiming to be the final truth, is ever regenerated anew at each turning point of history. The fall of the leaves at autumn requires no apology, for each successive spring testifies anew to nature's power of resurrection.

The object of a systematic theology of Judaism, accordingly, is to single out the essential forces of the faith. It then will become evident how these fundamental doctrines possess a vitality, a strength of conviction, as well as an adaptability to varying conditions, which make them potent factors amidst all changes of time and circumstance. According to Rabbinical tradition, the broken tablets of the covenant were deposited in the ark beside the new. In like

manner the truths held sacred by the past, but found inadequate in their expression for a new generation, must be placed side by side with the deeper and more clarified truths of an advanced age, that they may appear together as the *one* divine truth reflected in different rays of light.

6. Jewish theology differs radically from Christian theology in the following three points:

A. The theology of Christianity deals with articles of faith formulated by the founders and heads of the Church as conditions of *salvation*, so that any alteration in favor of free thought threatens to undermine the very plan of salvation upon which the Church was founded. Judaism recognizes only such articles of faith as were adopted by the people voluntarily as expressions of their religious consciousness, both without external compulsion and without doing violence to the dictates of reason. Judaism does not know salvation by faith in the sense of Paul, the real founder of the Church, who declared the blind acceptance of belief to be in itself meritorious. It denies the existence of any irreconcilable opposition between faith and reason.

B. Christian theology rests upon a *formula of confession*, the so-called Symbolum of the Apostolic Church,¹ which alone makes one a Christian. Judaism has no such formula of confession which renders a Jew a Jew. No ecclesiastical authority ever dictated or regulated the belief of the Jew; his faith has been voiced in the solemn liturgical form of prayer, and has ever retained its freshness and vigor of thought in the consciousness of the people. This partly accounts for the antipathy toward any kind of dogma or creed among Jews.

C. The creed is a *conditio sine qua non* of the Christian Church. To disbelieve its dogmas is to cut oneself loose from membership. Judaism is quite different. The Jew is

¹ See Schaff-Herzog's Encycl., art. Apostles' Creed and Symbol.

born into it and cannot extricate himself from it even by the renunciation of his faith, which would but render him an apostate Jew. This condition exists, because the racial community formed, and still forms, the basis of the religious community. It is birth, not confession, that imposes on the Jew the obligation to work and strive for the eternal verities of Israel, for the preservation and propagation of which he has been chosen by the God of history.

7. The truth of the matter is that the aim and end of Judaism is not so much the salvation of the soul in the hereafter as the salvation of humanity in history. Its theology, therefore, must recognize the history of human progress, with which it is so closely interwoven. It does not, therefore, claim to offer the final or absolute truth, as does Christian theology, whether orthodox or liberal. It simply points out the way leading to the highest obtainable truth. Final and perfect truth is held forth as the ideal of all human searching and striving, together with perfect justice, righteousness, and peace, to be attained as the very end of history.

A systematic theology of Judaism must, accordingly, content itself with presenting Jewish doctrine and belief in relation to the most advanced scientific and philosophical ideas of the age, so as to offer a comprehensive view of life and the world ("Lebens- und Weltanschauung"); but it by no means claims for them the character of finality. The unfolding of Judaism's truths will be completed only when all mankind has attained the heights of Zion's mount of vision, as beheld by the prophets of Israel.¹

¹ See Schechter: *Studies in Judaism*, Intr., XXI-XXII; p. 147, 198 f.; Foster: *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago, 1906; Friedr. Delitzsch: *Zur Weiterentwicklung der Religion*, 1908; and comp. Orelli: *Religionsgeschichte*, 276 f., and Dorner: *Beitr. z. Weiterentwicklung d. christl. Religion*, 173.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS JUDAISM?

1. It is very difficult to give an exact definition of Judaism because of its peculiarly complex character.¹ It combines two widely differing elements, and when they are brought out separately, the aspect of the whole is not taken sufficiently into account. Religion and race form an inseparable whole in Judaism. The Jewish people stand in the same relation to Judaism as the *body* to the *soul*. The national or racial body of Judaism consists of the remnant of the tribe of Judah which succeeded in establishing a new commonwealth in Judæa in place of the ancient Israelitish kingdom, and which survived the downfall of state and temple to continue its existence as a separate people during a dispersion over the globe for thousands of years, forming ever a cosmopolitan element among all the nations in whose lands it dwelt. Judaism, on the other hand, is the religious system itself, the vital element which united the Jewish people, preserving it and regenerating it ever anew. It is the spirit which endowed the handful of Jews with a power of resistance and a fervor of faith unparalleled in history, enabling them to persevere

¹ For the origin of the name Judaism, see Esther VIII, 17. Compare *Yahduth*, Esther Rabbah III, 7; II Macc. II, 21; VIII, 1, 14, 38; Graetz: *G. d. J.*, II, 174 f.; Jost: *G. d. Jud.*, I, 1-12; *J. E.*, art. Judaism. Regarding the unfairness of Christian authors in their estimate of Judaism, see Schechter, l. c., 232-251; M. Schreiner: *D. juengst. Urtheile u. d. Judenthum*, p. 48-58. Dubnow, Asher Ginzberg and the rest of the nationalists underrate the religious power of the Jew's soul, which forms the essence of his character and the motive power of all his aspirations and hopes, as well as of all his achievements in history.