

**WOMAN IN THE TALMUD:  
A SKETCH OF THE  
POSITION HELD BY WOMEN  
IN THE OLD JEWISH DAYS**

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Woman in the Talmud: a sketch of the position held by women in the old Jewish days by Alfred T. Story

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## WOMAN IN THE TALMUD.

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No book probably has been the subject of so many and such diverse opinions as the Talmud. By some it has been appraised as a perfect storehouse of wisdom ; by others as a jumble of folly and nonsense, without any redeeming quality. The latter is certainly an unjust judgment, and one that hardly anyone could be found at the present day to endorse. The wise, witty, and noble sayings of the Talmud far outnumber anything of the reverse nature, and are enough to redeem it from the wholesale condemnation with which it was the fashion in times past to visit it. That it contains a great deal that the world could well afford to lose is unquestionable. This could hardly have been otherwise, considering its origin. It is a collection of early Biblical discussions, with the comments of generations of teachers who devoted their lives to the study of the Scriptures, and has been described as an encyclopedia of law, civil and penal, ecclesi-

astical and international, human and divine. But it is more than this—it is a record of the thoughts, traditions, legends, proverbs, and saws of a thousand years of the life of the Jewish people, preserved with the most devoted love and fidelity. Coëval in origin with the return from the Babylonish captivity, it henceforth became “the centre of their lives, their actions, their thoughts, their very dreams,” and was regarded with a love only less intense than that they entertained for the Bible itself, of which the Talmud says: “Turn it, and turn it again; for everything is in it.” As it was originally compiled, so it has been transmitted to us, and may be likened to a literary wilderness, in which “Halachah” (rule, *norm*), a term applied both to the process of evolving legal enactments and the enactments themselves, is indiscriminately mixed up with “Haggadah,” which signifies legend, *saga*, not so much, perhaps, in our modern sense of the word, though a considerable part of its contents come under that head, but because it was only a “saying”—something without authority, an allegory, a parable or a tale, a flower of the fancy, to point a moral or illustrate an idea.

The Talmud, composed of these two parts—the legal and the legendary—is divided into the *Mishna* and the *Gamara* (two words of uncertain meaning), whose contents represent the labours of successive Rabbis for upwards of three centuries. They consist of the precepts of the Pentateuch,

with long and wearisome commentaries upon them; Biblical incidents extensively amplified; biographical particulars relating to its editors; fables, traditions, and proverbs. The Mishna, together with the Gamarah, was called the oral or unwritten law, in contradistinction to the Pentateuch, which remained under all circumstances the "immutable, divinely-given constitution—the unwritten law," to add to or take from which was fraught with terrible penalties. The Talmudic proverb: "They plunged into an ocean and brought up a potsherd," will often apply with peculiar appropriateness to the one who dives into these twelve folio volumes. When the subject is the most serious, and the western mind would naturally look for a severe treatment befitting the theme, the reader is surprised by a witty turn of thought, a quaint story, or an apologue. Not unfrequently there is a descent to absolute puerilities, and he is treated to such quibbles as whether it were proper to eat an egg that had been laid on a fast day, whether a man might pray riding on an ass, and the like. Still such follies are but as the occasional chaff amid much wholesome wheat.

A better illustration could scarcely be given of the mixture of reverence and affection lavished on the Talmud by the descendants of those who wrote it than are furnished by that most witty, whimsical, and cynical of German poets, Heine, who speaks of its contents as comprising—



Beautiful old stories,  
 Tales of angels—fairy legends,  
 Simple histories of the martyrs,  
 Festal songs and words of wisdom,  
 Hyperboles, most quaint it may be, yet replete  
 with strength, and fire, and faith. How they  
 gleam, and glow, and glitter!

The nature of the Talmud could not be better exemplified than in its treatment of woman. A little work has just been published on this subject by a German Rabbi, which gives us an interesting glimpse into the position occupied by the weaker sex in the old Jewish days. From it the present sketch has been largely, though not entirely, compiled.

If it be true, says Rabbi Stern,\* that the culture of certain times and lands mirrors itself in the relation it bears to the flower of creation—woman, it cannot be denied that the honour which is accorded to her in the Talmud betokens a high degree of ethical culture. We meet, indeed, in the Talmud with expressions in regard to woman, which, considering the period and the country to which they belong, are not a little surprising, so tender are they—so strikingly in contrast with the low estimation put upon woman in the East even to the present day, and so thoroughly are its authors alive to the dignity and worth of woman, and to the noble and ennobling nature of true and

\* "Die Frau im Talmud."

pure womanhood. Of that woman-worship which obtained in the Middle Ages; of that half-sensual, half-fanatical romanticism which transformed woman into a semi-divinity, and, to cite an example, drove the obedient knight into the arena, in order, with frivolous foolhardiness, to rescue from wild beasts the glove of the adored one—no trace is to be found in the Talmud. So also we may seek therein in vain for any trace of that erotic poesy which glorifies mere physical loveliness. The very nature of the Talmud excludes all such matter, even in the form of a simple maxim. Yet, though it is plain beyond doubt that the wise men of the Talmud were blind to the charms of feminine beauty, we find therein many a quaint anecdote of the merry pranks which the mischievous Cupid played the sedate Rabbins.

Once, for instance, we are told, the pious Rabbi Amram had redeemed a beautiful maiden out of captivity, and brought her to his house, in order the next day to convey her to her parents. For his better protection from temptation, he showed the maiden to a room at the top of the house, and had the ladder which led thereto taken away. The girl's beauty, however, had greatly excited the Rabbi's imagination, which kindled a tender flame in his bosom. The more he strove to overcome his passion the deeper Cupid's dart entered his breast; and, carried away by the warmth of his emotion, Amram about midnight found himself on the lad-

der, which he had seized and put in its place. He had but ascended a few steps, however, when his better nature made a determined effort to get the mastery, and he cried out, with a loud voice: "Fire! fire! In Amram's house there is fire!" The neighbours, awakened out of sleep by this terrible cry, hastened to his house with buckets and hose. But there was no fire to be seen—only the Rabbi, with wild looks and shamefaced countenance, and above, the trembling maiden, wondering what the disturbance meant. At length the state of affairs began to dawn upon the people, and they started to laugh and jeer at Amram for having compromised himself so much. He, however, answered them by saying, with downcast eyes and trembling voice: "Better that I stand ashamed before your eyes now, than stand later ashamed before God and my conscience."\*

Not the æsthetic, but the ethic power and im-

\* A story is told of another Rabbi who did not display so much moral strength. He was learned in the Cabala (Jewish magic), and becoming one day tired of Rabbinical casuistry, he bethought to dissipate his mind a bit by conjuring up from the nether world the form of the Queen of Sheba, who, in Hebrew legend, holds a place similar to that of Helen, Cleopatra, and the Venus of the Knight Tannhäuser, in later fable. When the enchanting form of this female Sphinx stood before him, the poor Rabbi's courage quite failed him. Her dazzling beauty filled him with dread, and in his anxiety he called in one of his scholars, whose help he implored to conjure the august form back to the shades of night.