

RABBI JESHUA. AN EASTERN STORY

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Rabbi Jeshua. An eastern story by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

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M. Peter

RABBI JESHUA.

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AN EASTERN STORY

"Write me as one that loves his fellow-men."

LONDON

C. KEGAN PAUL & CO., 1, PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1881

INTRODUCTION.

THE present volume is intended to present, as clearly as may be possible, considering the scantiness of the original materials, the history of a brief but of an eventful career.

It is true that rabbinical literature presents attractions only to the few. One of our popular writers has confessed that even when undertaking so serious a task as the compilation of a Life of Christ, he did not consider it necessary to master the three stout folios which comprise the Mishna, or text of the Talmud ; and in common with others he has condemned the study of this early Jewish work—the epitome of law, custom, and belief among the Hebrews—as belonging to a literature

which is quite unworthy the notice of a serious scholar.

Yet in spite of these dicta of modern authorities there are few stories more fascinating or pathetic than that of the loving, passionate, devoted life which it is here proposed to describe ; and it may perhaps prove capable, when shorn of the quaint conceits of the original Hebrew chronicle, and when illustrated by contemporary literature, of attracting a wider circle of readers than that composed of rabbinical students. It is a narrative so intensely human, so independent of merely local colour, so noble and true in spite of the prejudices and ignorance of the chronicler, that wherever the love of truth exists it must surely find an attentive audience.

There are many sources whence information may be drawn. The apochryphal accounts of Rabbi Jeshua's life written in the Middle Ages have however no value or interest ; and although about a dozen lives of the Rabbi were composed by his followers within a century after his death, the spirit of the writer, rather than that of the master himself, is, as a rule, reflected in each. The views

which are ascribed to Rabbi Jeshua in these works are so diametrically opposed to one another, and so self-contradictory, as to make it clear to the critical reader that the disciples mingled their own teaching with that of their master, and ranked their own views as of equal importance with his; that they placed their own words in his mouth, and their own construction on his actions.

One chronicle is often attributed to Rabbi Saul, pupil of Gamaliel, and a native of Asia Minor. A second breathes the spirit of the narrow Pharisaic sect of Shammai. A third, written by an Alexandrine Jew, is full of Cabbalistic lore and of Egyptian mysticism. Rabbi Jeshua cannot have belonged to all these schools at once, and when we find the various accounts of his actions to be equally contrary in the various versions, we are led to suppose that but little remains on which we can safely rely.

Most of these works may perhaps be best regarded as originally written for controversial purposes. The object of the Jerusalem version is clearly that of showing how Rabbi Jeshua fulfilled

in every respect the Pharisaic expectations of a Messiah. The book of Rabbi Saul, on the other hand, breathes the liberal spirit of the opposite party of Hillel and Gamaliel, and introduces many latitudinarian views probably held by the writer himself rather than by the master to whom he attributes them. Our appreciation of the poetic beauties and truths of this composition, as well as of those which may be discovered hidden among the repulsive mysticisms of the Alexandrine version, is a sentiment entirely distinct from the question of authorship. To us in the nineteenth century it perhaps matters little whether the thoughts expressed owe their origin to Rabbi Jeshua, or to one of his followers; but with regard to the incidents of his career, it is at least necessary to sift the evidence, and to endeavour to discover the true facts of his life.

It is for this reason that the following pages are principally based on a short and succinct account of the life of Rabbi Jeshua, which was written by the companion of one of his first disciples, Simeon has Saddik. Simeon himself was an illiterate peasant, a man probably older

than Rabbi Jeshua, but who survived him more than forty years, and retired before the fall of Jerusalem to the neighbourhood of Gadara, east of Jordan.

The recollections of this aged puritan were recorded by one of his companions. The historical sequence of the events appears to have been carefully followed, and many of the maxims of Rabbi Jeshua are preserved, interspersed among descriptions of the main events of his short career. Thus, though scanty and imperfect, the information contained in this work appears to be genuine; and it has evidently served as the original basis of the other accounts, for this reason, that in no case do they agree in any statement which contradicts one made by Simeon has Saddik. All the versions are in agreement when they follow that which may be considered to be the original, and on the other hand no two of the later versions are in accord concerning facts not noticed by Simeon. Thus we have the indication of genuineness in the one case and of fanciful elaboration in all the others, and our attention should be confined to those statements which have the best right to be considered