

**A SHORT HISTORY OF JEWISH
LITERATURE FROM THE FALL OF
THE TEMPLE (70 C.E.) TO THE ERA
OF EMANCIPATION (1786 C.E)**

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A short history of Jewish literature from the fall of the temple (70 C.E.) to the era of emancipation (1786 C.E) by Israel Abrahams

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JEWISH LITERATURE

FROM THE FALL OF THE TEMPLE (70 C.E.)
TO THE ERA OF EMANCIPATION (1786 C.E.)

BY

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PREFACE

THIS Short History of Jewish Literature opens with the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Christian era, and ends with the death of Moses Mendelssohn in 1786. Thus the period covered extends over more than seventeen centuries. Yet, long as this period is, it is too brief. To do justice to the literature of Judaism, it is clearly necessary to include the Bible, the greatest and most abiding expression of the Jewish genius.

But several considerations induced the writer to exclude from this outline the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha, the writings of Alexandrian Jews such as Philo, and the whole of the New Testament. Within the limits of space available it was not possible to do justice to these subjects. Nor was it necessary. In a larger work which the writer has in preparation, the "Literary History of the Jewish People" will be told more completely, and the branches of Jewish literature passed over here will there receive due attention. Moreover, the object of this smaller book is perhaps more likely

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to be fulfilled by the limitation alluded to above. It is designed to encourage the elementary study of a much neglected section of Jewish literature. It was strongly urged upon the writer by the late F. D. Mocatta that a small text-book might be found useful for the purpose both for Christian and Jewish readers. He thought that it might be at once a school-book and a book for general reading. When the first edition of this book appeared in Philadelphia in 1899 (under the title "Chapters on Jewish Literature"), it was received with a favour which surprised the author, and induced him to believe that Mr. Mocatta's view was correct. Since 1899 it has become clear to the author, however, that the book needed revision. Especially in the earlier chapters the treatment was inadequate, and the book now reissued bears a new title, for it is to a large extent a new book. It is dedicated to the memory of the man at whose suggestion the book was originally written.

But though much revised, the plan of the volume is unchanged. In presenting an outline of Jewish literature three plans are possible. One can divide the subject according to *Periods*. Starting with the Rabbinic Age and closing with the activity of the earlier Geonim or Persian Rabbis, the First Period would carry us to the eighth or the ninth century. A well-marked Second Period is that of the Arabic-Spanish writers, a period which would

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extend from the ninth to the fifteenth century. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century forms a Third Period with distinct characteristics. Finally, the career of Mendelssohn marks the definite beginning of the Modern Period. Such a grouping of the facts presents many advantages, but it somewhat obscures the varying conditions prevalent at one and the same time in different countries where the Jews were settled. Hence some writers have preferred to arrange the material under the different *Countries*. It is quite possible to draw a map of the world's civilisation by merely marking the successive places in which Jewish literature has fixed its headquarters. But, on the other hand, such a method of classification has the disadvantage that it leads to much overlapping. For long intervals together, it is impossible to separate Italy from Spain, France from Germany, Persia from Egypt, Constantinople from Amsterdam. This has induced other writers to propose a third method and to trace *Influences*, to indicate that, whereas Rabbinism may be termed the native product of the Jewish genius, the scientific, poetical, and philosophical tendencies of Jewish writers in the Middle Ages were due to the interaction of external and internal forces. Further, in this arrangement the Ghetto period would have a place assigned to it as such, for it would again mark the almost complete sway of purely Jewish forces in Jewish literature.

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Adopting this classification, we should have a wave of Jewish impulse, swollen by the accretion of foreign waters, once more breaking on a Jewish strand, with its contents in something like the same condition in which they left the original spring. All these three methods are true, and this has impelled me to refuse to follow any one of them to the exclusion of the other two. I have tried to trace *influences*, to observe *periods*, to distinguish *countries*. I have also tried to derive colour and vividness by selecting prominent personalities round which to group whole cycles of facts. Thus, some of the chapters bear the names of famous men, others are entitled from periods, others from countries, and yet others are named from the general currents of European thought. In all this my aim has been very modest. I have done little in the way of literary criticism, but I felt that a dry collection of names and dates was the very thing I had to avoid. I need not say that I have done my best to ensure accuracy in my statements by referring to the best authorities known to me on each division of the subject. To name the works to which I am indebted would need a list of many of the best-known products of recent Continental and American scholarship. At the end of every chapter I have, however, given references to some English works and essays.

Of one thing I am confident. No presentation

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of the facts, however bald and inadequate it be, can obscure the truth that this little book deals with a great and an inspiring literature. It is possible to question whether the books of great Jews always belonged to the great books of the world. There may have been, and there were, greater legalists than Rashi, greater poets than Jehuda Halevi, greater philosophers than Maimonides, greater moralists than Bachya. But there has been no greater literature than that which these and numerous other Jews represent.

Rabbinism was a sequel to the Bible, and if like all sequels it was unequal to its original, it nevertheless shared its greatness. The works of all Jews up to the modern period were the sequel to this sequel. Through them all may be detected the unifying principle that literature in its truest sense includes life itself; that intellect is the handmaid to conscience; and that the best books are those which best teach men how to live. This underlying unity gave more harmony to Jewish literature than is possessed by many literatures more distinctively national. The maxim, "Righteousness delivers from death," applies to books as well as to men. A literature whose consistent theme is Righteousness is immortal. On the very day on which Jerusalem fell, this theory of the interconnection between literature and life became the fixed principle of Jewish thought, and it ceased

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to hold undisputed sway only in the age of Mendelssohn. It was in the "Vineyard" of Jamnia that the theory received its firm foundation. A starting-point for this volume will therefore be sought in the meeting-place in which the Rabbis, exiled from the Holy City, found a new fatherland in the Book of books.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHIES.

At the end of each chapter there is appended a Bibliography. The only works cited are those written in the English language. Graetz' "History of the Jews" is cited in the English translation. The reference is to the *chapters* in Graetz unless the letter *p.* (=page) precedes the figure. The figures in brackets refer to the edition published in London; the other figures to the American edition. The two editions agree as to chapters but differ in pagination. The American and the English editions of S. Schechter's "Studies in Judaism" are similarly referred to. The abbreviation *J.E.* stands for *Jewish Encyclopedia*; *J.Q.R.* means *Jewish Quarterly Review*.