

JEWISH THEOLOGY

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Jewish theology by S. Levy

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S. LEVY

**JEWISH
THEOLOGY**

JEWISH THEOLOGY

BY THE

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PREFATORY NOTE.

This essay originally appeared in *The Jewish Chronicle* as a review of K. Kohler's "Jewish Theology." I am indebted to that journal for permission to reprint it in its present form.

This booklet is issued for two reasons. In the first place, I venture to think that the plan of treatment presents some novel features in methods of inquiry into the whole subject. In the second place, in the absence of any small handbook of Jewish Theology, this essay may, perhaps, serve as a useful introduction to the study of the larger works of S. Schechter, "Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology," and K. Kohler, "Jewish Theology."

S. L.

LONDON, *July*, 1920.

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JEWISH THEOLOGY.

I.—INTRODUCTION.

§ 1. "Jewish Theology," by Dr. K. Kohler, is the first attempt published in English to present with any degree of completeness the contents of Judaism as a system of faith. The author states that he had no work before him to serve as a pattern or guide. He points out that 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. Dr. Kohler is of opinion that hitherto the attempts made in this direction have been but feeble and sporadic, and that if the structure is not to stand altogether in the air, the necessary material must be brought together from its many sources with painstaking labour. He writes from the view-point of historical research, instead of a mere dogmatic or doctrinal system. He claims that the Jewish religion has never been static, fixed for all time by an ecclesiastical authority, but has ever been and still is the result of a dynamic process of growth and development. At the same time he felt that he could not omit the mystical element which pervades the Jewish religion in common with all others. He maintains that as our prophets were seers and not philosophers or moralists, so divine inspiration in varying degrees constitutes a factor of Synagoga as well as Scriptural Judaism.

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Revelation, therefore, is considered by Dr. Kohler as a continuous force in shaping and re-shaping the Jewish faith. He regards the religious genius of the Jew as falling within the domain of ethnic psychology, concerning which science is still groping in the dark, but which progressive Judaism is bound to recognise in its effects throughout the ages. At the same time he holds that he has endeavoured to be just and fair to Conservative Judaism, which he frankly acknowledges must ever claim the reverence we owe to our cherished past, the mother that raised and nurtured us. Dr. Kohler says that the present age of historical research imposes the necessity upon us of re-statement of the fundamental doctrines of Judaism, if Judaism is to retain its prominent position among the powers of thought, and to be clearly understood by the modern world.

II.—THREE-FOLD DIVISION OF THE SUBJECT.

§ 2. Dr. Kohler points out that many attempts have been made to formulate the articles of faith of Judaism, but few, however, in his opinion, have succeeded in working out the entire content of the Jewish faith from a modern view-point, which must include historical, critical, and psychological research, as well as the study of comparative religion. Dr. Kohler adopts the following tripartite plan for his attempt to present the doctrines of Judaism systematically along the lines of historical development: I. God, II. Man, and III. Israel and the Kingdom of God.

Dr. Kohler does not explain how he arrives at this division of his subject. He does not state on what principles it is based. In the absence of any clear guidance, it appears at first sight to be drawn on arbitrary lines, and the thoughtful reader finds himself compelled to come to the author's rescue. The writer's first step has been presumably to take Theology in its literal sense as "theory concerning God." Therefore the first great section deals with "God." But as God cannot be said to exist unless there is man to recognise His existence, a second main division is devoted to "Man." Finally, as the work is a treatise on *Jewish* Theology in particular, and not on Theology in general, there follows a third and final portion entitled "Israel and the Kingdom of God."

§ 3. The first point we have to determine is the fitness of Dr. Kohler's plan for the exposition of his system of Jewish Theology. Does the author's division of the subject adequately help the earnest student in search

of truth to know in ready outline what are the real and outstanding problems of Jewish Theology? Does it enable him with reasonable quickness and accuracy to assign to every particular topic its right place in its proper department or sub-section, and to find there a solution propounded which, after examining its worth, he may accept or reject? It is one thing to collect, and then divide, all the material for the study of Jewish Theology. It is quite another thing to judge the method adopted for the ordered use of this amassed knowledge as the best one to meet the need of getting "a general hang of the thing." This colloquial expression, used in a reverent spirit, best conveys the real want. It may be doubted whether Dr. Kohler has been completely or uniformly successful in this direction of giving explicit interpretation of the scope of Jewish Theology, and of showing the essential thread of connection in his individual method of treatment.

Obviously, it is quite easy for anyone to make such a comment and raise such an objection, and then to shelter himself behind the veil of vagueness, and, when challenged for proof, to run away, after having cast his shaft of criticism. Therefore, in attempting to justify the opinion just hazarded that there may be a simpler and more easily intelligible way of getting "a general hang of the thing," let us approach the whole subject from a different avenue of thought. Let us for the time being forget that there is such a word or such a science as "Theology." Let us begin at the other extreme. Let Definition be the goal we hope to reach, and not the crease from which we start. Pursuing this method we may be led to a result different from that obtained by Dr. Kohler, and one which may win even less acceptance or approval. Dr. Kohler, however, claims that his work is the *first* complete systematic

presentation of Jewish Theology to appear in English. He would not stand in the front rank of scholars if he also made the smallest pretension or had the slightest ambition for it to remain the *last* word on the theme. All roads may eventually lead to the same destination, but each road may have a peculiar merit or quality of its own, deserving of respectful notice from those who reasonably demand the opportunity and the right of selection before they feel called upon to make the final choice. Nothing more, then, is claimed for the following suggested method of coming to close grips with the subject than a natural desire to be of some service in making a modest contribution to clearness of outline in visualising the whole field of Jewish Theology.

§ 4. We think, we feel, we act. Thought, Feeling, and Action sum up human consciousness. But all thoughts, all feelings, and all actions have not the same value. Once we bring in the idea of "value," we thereby introduce the notion of a "test" or "criterion" of value. The criterion of Thought is Truth, the criterion of Feeling is Beauty, and the criterion of Action is Goodness. Therefore, the world, to be regarded as the best of all possible worlds, must appeal to us as True, Beautiful, and Good. Truth as the test of the value of thought implies Unity or Self-consistency. So we may slightly amend the phrase and say that the world we know, if it is to be accepted by us as a harmonious whole, must appeal to us as One, Beautiful and Good.

If we now make the transition to Religion, we cannot fail to realise that the world, as grasped by the religious consciousness, must likewise be One, Beautiful and Good. Different religions and different shades of the same religion trace their characteristic features to their attitude towards that aspect of the scheme of the universe which the