



Woman in the Talmud: A Sketch of the Position Held by Women in the Old Jewish Days

Alfred T. Story

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From the beginning of the book.

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, ecclesiastical 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. Coeval 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.

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