

The Jews and the Mosaic Law

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There would have been less occasion to offer myself again to your notice, if the language I used in my late very imperfect essay had not been misconceived. The limits I had prescribed myself did not allow me sufficient room to express my meaning with all the clearness I could have desired; and I am therefore under the necessity of explaining my views more fully. Before I do this, however, permit me, my dear friend, (and I reciprocate the term with the utmost cordiality,) to express the gratification I feel that you were so well pleased with the spirit of my remarks. In return, I beg leave to offer my acknowledgements for the courtesy and kindness you have shown in replying to me. I am happy in having so generous and temperate an opponent. Indeed it was the presence of those estimable qualities in your vindication of the Jews from opprobrious and unmanly attacks, and not any predilection for controversy, that made me consent to claim your attention at all. I wish you every success in your attempts to allay the prejudice that exists against your nation; and I trust your appeal to the liberality of an enlightened people will not be in vain, so far, at least, as it may be enforced by the virtue and integrity of your lives. To this test I doubt not you will be perfectly willing to submit yourselves.

In the application I intended to make of the passage from Matthew, chap. v. v.43, "Ye have heard it said, thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy," you have entirely misapprehended my object; and I am the more grieved at it, as you have manifested so much generous sensibility on the occasion. I cheerfully acknowledge that, if war is admissible, the provisions of your law tended very much to mitigate its rigors, considering the principles on which it was waged by contemporary nations. When I quoted the precept - "But I say unto you, love your enemies," I did it for the purpose of showing, that not only war and every species of violence, but every thing like hatred, is opposed to the benign spirit of the gospel. To say the least, you cannot deny that war was tolerated under certain circumstances by the Mosaic law - indeed, you have defended it to a particular extent. But the gospel injunction, if I understand it, strikes at the very root of all discord and dissention, by inculcating brotherly love and peace; for if the passions and feelings which lead to strife are subdued, all contention must cease to exist (a). And in this view, the injunction is in perfect harmony with the angelic anthem chanted on the birth of Christ: "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men." In these few words the character and object of his mission are beautifully declared; and the whole course of his ministry, the whole tenor of his spotless life, go conclusively to show that it was for the attainment of this end that he labored and that he died. Our religion in its purity is emphatically a religion of charity and peace. This feature so strikingly pervades the whole series of the writings of the New Testament, that I believe (b) nothing can be found in them which will bear an opposite construction, when taken in connection with the whole. "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight." John xviii. 36. This language was uttered at a time when

Christians must all believe that it was in the power of Jesus to call down assistance even from heaven, to (c) protect himself from the violence of man. We can imagine no situation when the desire to avail ourselves of relief can be greater, than when we are in the act of being dragged to a cruel and ignominious death. And the apostle James asks, "Whence came wars and fighting among you? Come they not hence, even from the lusts that war in your members:" iv. 1. Now, my dear friend, though you say the Mosaic law is a superstructure of perfect symmetry, in which there is not the least disproportion, "nothing too much, and nothing too little," - you must either prove the advantages of a state of war, however modified, in favor of the happiness of mankind, (d) over the contrary state of peace and good will, to enable you to establish the superiority of that law, - or you must acknowledge its inferiority to the gospel. And I will endeavor to deprive you, from your own showing, of any argument you might advance in support of a justifiable resort to war. You say that the Jews considered peace as the greatest blessing, and that this doctrine was taught by the Mosaic law, inasmuch as God promised peace as a reward for their obedience to the divine will. You moreover state that, whenever the Jews were doing the will of heaven, they lived in perfect security; but when they were disobedient, God sent the surrounding nations to oppress them. Now, if peace is a blessing, and obedience to the divine will is a sure means of meriting and enjoying tranquility, my position is established, that war is not only no part of the divine economy in the government of mankind, but that it is in every aspect offensive in the sight of heaven. Is it not, moreover, a rational conclusion, that when the children of Israel had been guilty of a defection from the law of God, so as to call down his displeasure upon them, he would, even if they had not resisted the scourge sent to chastise them, have interposed his powerful arm in favor of his chosen people, as soon as their transgressions had been atoned for by suffering or repentance? (c)

I am sensible, my friend, and I shall not affect to conceal it, that you may retort with far more severity than you have indulged, and demand, in a voice of thunder, if universal love be so strongly inculcated by the gospel, why do not its followers practice it? It can only be accounted for on the supposition that they had fallen short of a complete and unreserved submission to the will of God. And wherever this disobedience exists, in every age and nation, the result is invariably the same, namely, aggression, insult, and injury, and a consequent subtraction from the sum of human enjoyment. Jews and Christians have alike been guilty of a departure from the spirit of the religion they have respectively professed; and if a comparison were instituted, it would be found that there is hardly any thing in the Jewish wars, down to the destruction of the holy city, to which a parallel might not be furnished in the butcheries which have been practiced at various times by the nations of Christendom. If Christ had commanded his followers to hate, not only their enemies, (for that, comparatively speaking, would have been mercy, if they had proceeded no farther,) but all mankind, and one another, they could scarcely in some instances have resigned themselves more completely to his will. Not only can the golden regions of Mexico and Peru attest the tender mercies of Christian warfare, but history records many a bloody conflict waged by one Christian power against another, in the holy cause of religion; and individuals have been subjected to martyrdom, and communities to massacre, for the ostensible purpose of promoting the glory of the God of love! Indeed, a faithful ecclesiastical history would, I fear, embrace one half the crimes

and enormities of Christendom. But though this may be an awful truth, still it does not impair the intrinsic excellence of the gospel, any more than the iniquities of the Jews detracted from the purity of the law of Moses. No abuse of any blessing can constitute a valid objection against the use for which it was designed. (f)

But you may say all this is a Utopian scheme, incapable of being realized. In reply, my friend, I would again refer you to the pages of history, where, in "words that burn," you may discover that it has been triumphantly reduced to practice, under the auspices of the wise and benevolent Penn, who has been eulogized by the philosophic Jefferson as one of the greatest lawgivers of any age. One clear (g) and incontestable fact cannot be overturned by all the wit and ingenuity of man.

After this exposition of the peaceful character of the gospel, it may not be necessary for me to notice particularly your evidence to show that the oppressed part of mankind, namely, the slave, was more humanely provided for by the Mosaic law. If I have succeeded in convincing you that violence and injustice form no part of the gospel, it must follow that slavery, which is one of the most odious species of violence, inasmuch as its effect is to bind the free spirit of man, which should be left as uncontrolled in the exercise of its legitimate powers as the air we breathe, is at war with the whole genius of the gospel. If, after all, however, and contrary to my most sanguine expectations, it can be established that war and slavery are not incompatible with genuine Christianity, I should then enter upon a vindication of its excellence with extreme diffidence.

In enumerating the duties which the Mosaic law imposes, you divide them into three classes, namely, our duties to God, to our fellow-men, and to ourselves. That the gospel imposes solemn duties of the same character, cannot, I presume, be denied by its most inveterate enemies. Now, admitting the Jewish religion to be founded on the power of God, which I firmly believe, (though adapted in some of its details to the particular state of the children of Israel,) I may reasonably ask you to make the same concession in regard to our religion, in so far as it enjoins the same duties with yours. The same truths cannot be derived from sources contradictory in their nature. If any great moral duty is founded on the power of God in one instance, it must be equally so wherever it is known and acknowledged. If this concession is granted, I presume you will not withhold your assent to the following propositions: 1. That the object of true religion is to reform the heart, and cleanse it from all impurity. 2. That consequently no religion of which this is not the legitimate effect can be of any value. If, therefore, this be, in any degree, the effect of Christianity, which I have feebly endeavored to show, just so far is it entitled to respect, and no farther. (h) It is far from my intention, however, to be understood as confining the exercise of these redeeming virtues to those who profess the Christian name.

In every important discussion, it is proper that a definite meaning should be attached to particular terms. This is the more indispensable on the present occasion, as you seem to have taken a very limited view of the gospel. The New Testament is not the gospel of Christ, but a written testimony in support of it. "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation." Romans i. 16. Wherever, therefore, the power of God is manifested to

salvation, there is the gospel known. The apostle Paul says, moreover, that "it is preached to every creature under heaven." Col. i. 2,3. It follows of course that the law of Christ cannot be any external written law; and though many of my fellow-professors believe it to be essentially such, yet there is no evidence in the New Testament at all conclusive in support of such an opinion. We are never referred to it as containing in itself any redeeming power; but Christ and his apostles unceasingly directed the attention of the people to the spirituality of religion. "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another comforter, and he shall abide with you for ever, even the spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it sees him not, neither knows him; but you know him, because he dwells with you and shall be in you." John xiv. 16,17. (i) This spirit of truth was to teach his followers all things. v.26. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which is to be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it unto them." Rom. i. 18,19. And the same apostle goes on to say in the same epistle: "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart; that is, the word of faith which we preach" x.8. "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that by denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world," &c. Titus, ii. 11,12. "We have also a more sure word of prophecy (than the outward knowledge of Christ); whereunto ye do well to take heed, as to a light that shines in a dark place." 2 Peter, i. 19. There are a very few of the passages that might be cited from the New Testament to prove the entire spirituality of the gospel. And this gospel state is to clearly foretold by the sacred writers, that it will be unnecessary for me to refer to more than one or two passages in the Old Testament in evidence of it. "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: after those days, says the Lord, I will put my law in their hearts, and write it in their inward parts; and they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man this brother, saying, Know the Lord; for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest of them." Heb. xxxi. 33-34. "And it shall come to pass afterwards, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh." Joel. ii. 28. And Moses expressly speaks of this same spiritual guide and teacher, when in his last and solemn advice to the children of Israel he says: "This commandment, which I command thee this day, if not hidden from thee; neither is it far off: but the word is nigh thee, (k) in thy heart, and in thy mouth, that thou mayest do it." Deut. xxx. 11-14. Those passages are also referred to by the apostles, in proof of the religion of Jesus Christ. It is in this comprehensive law, that the beauty, the simplicity, and the efficacy of the Christian religion consist. It is this word of God "which is quick and powerful, even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit," that may be said to be the flaming sword which guards the entrance into the paradise of God, through which none can pass without having every thing slain that is opposed to the divine nature.

Such a religion as this cannot be extended nor limited by the notions or opinions of mankind, concerning outward or temporal circumstances. This view is predicated on the fact, which is alike obvious both to Jew and gentile, that goodness or righteousness is the same thing in all; and is the effect of a power which proceeds from the same universal and blessed fountain; and produces the same fruits in every individual of the human family who submits himself to its influence. Doubtless it was by this efficient power that Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice; that Enoch walked with God; that Noah preached

and practiced righteousness; with all the other illustrious examples which are recorded in the Old and New Testaments. The histories of nations or individuals are religiously available to the rest of mankind, only because of the development of the principles by which they were actuated in what they did: and it would be as rational to deny, that the principle of honesty or piety would make men honest or pious in the present day (and without distinction as to nation or profession,) as that the sun shines with the same light, and produces the same effects upon the earth and all its inhabitants now that it did five thousand years ago. Permit me, my friend, to call your attention to the universality ascribed to this power in Isaiah, chap. xlix. v.6. "It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and thus restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation to the ends of the earth." I believe it is a pretty generally received opinion, both with Jews and Christians, that those passages which relate to God's saving power, both in the Old and New Testaments, should be interpreted as referring to a person. It is true that it is personified; but so is wisdom, so is death, and so is Jerusalem, and many other things that all men know are not persons. The words of the prophet, therefore, as I conceive, are only truly and adequately interpreted, when applied to the universal power and wisdom of God, (I) which indeed did raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel; and has been, is now, and always will be, the only saving power to the end of the earth. No matter in what person, or in what period of time it may be manifested, whether in Enoch, or Joseph, or Daniel, or Paul, or Peter; or in the supremely holy and blessed Jesus [sic!]; it is still the "only thing under heaven, given among men, by which we can be saved." It is the "fountain of living waters" streaming through all generations applied to all conditions, and perpetually performing the same glorious work of cleansing the defilements of the human mind; and producing a change in all its propensities and faculties: so that in the beautiful, figurative language of the prophet, "the wilderness" of human nature is changed into an "Eden," and the "desert" of human thought and affection "into the garden of the Lord," where "joy and goodness" spring up in the place of "weeping and wailing;" and "thanksgiving and the voice of melody" supplant the doleful Chorazins of "mourning and lamentation." As this great and momentous change is accomplished, the prophecies are found to be actually fulfilled in the experience of every individual who submits to the divine government. The mind is then no longer under the necessity of looking outward, or backward, or to futurity, for the coming or appearance of God's Messiah; but he is found to be present to rebuke all fierceness and contention: and by the introduction of peace and love, to cause them to "beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." For every impure, dishonest, proud, or revengeful temper becomes the object of his judgment; and as the creature submits to his blessed operation, he changes these dispositions into concord and harmony; so that those which were as ravenous as the "wolf, the leopard, and the young lion," become as innocent "as the lamb, the kid, or the fatling, and so gentle that a little child can lead them." And I appeal to the experience of all, if we have not witnessed the presence of this holy and heavenly being, conversing in secret, by means of thought and affection, with the heart; and producing all the righteousness we ever knew, and all the happiness we ever felt. In the operations of this living reality does the Christian religion consist, according to my belief, and not in the dogmas of men, nor in their conjectures concerning external historical events. He who becomes a subject of the government of the spiritual

Messiah, is introduced by him into holiness and purity, whether he call him by one name or another. For it is the thing that produces the effect; and not the name by which it is called. All the prophetic declarations of the reign of the Messiah, are predicated upon such a change in the human mind, as is above referred to; for it is impossible, in the nature of things, that righteousness should cover the earth as the waters do the sea, by any other means than the suppression of all unrighteousness. But the power which is alone able to perform these miracles of love and goodness, must be omnipresent; and, therefore, as Moses testified, it is not far from us: "it is very high thee, in thy heart and in thy mouth, that thou mayest do it." (m)

In conclusion, my friend, though these are my views, I always hope to be able to extend to others who see through a different medium, that charity which I am well aware I shall need on account of my own imperfections. You say you are determined never to change your faith. It is far from my desire to make proselytes, for the name is perhaps no essential part of Christianity. It is by "doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly;" doing to others as we would they should do us; loving God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves; that we fulfill the end for which we were created, at least during our present state of existence: and whoever does this I hope to regard him as a brother, let his name be what it may.