

CHAPTER 10

DISAFFECTION AND REVOLT

From all this one important point emerges. Rabbinic Judaism, like the Judaism of the Bible, contained much variety. The Rabbis of the Talmud and their successors were men of their environments, sensitive to contemporary unrest; and in their sayings and writings we find parallels to (or echoes of) movements of general thought from the later schools of Greek philosophy to the mysticism of the Persian Sufis and the Provençal Cathars, even to the revivalism of the itinerant friars. Within the communities themselves there was continual unrest, whether prompted by external circumstance or from questioning within. A constant source of disquiet was the hunger for and the anticipation of the promised coming of the Messiah. The Rabbis of the Talmud counselled patience and tried to reason with those who tried to 'force the End'. But there were those even among the Rabbis who refused to be reasoned with.

Thus Rabbinic authority was not unchallenged. Controversies were always arising. The 'tradition of the elders' was always being questioned. The grounds were various, some political, some ritual, some credal, some (at times) personal. There was never one monolithic Judaism. There always existed, in various guises and in different degrees, dissidents, rebels, factions, sects, schisms. Some remained within; some went, or were thrust, without. On the one hand the Synagogue could expel; on the other it could be abandoned. Modern examples abound. Uriel Acosta in seventeenth-century Amsterdam was

excommunicated with terrible social and personal consequences because he wrote against the immortality of the soul. Isaac D'Israeli in nineteenth-century London left the Synagogue because he objected to the imposition of a fine.

We caught an early glimpse of political impatience when we were discussing the Kingdom of Heaven. The coming of the Kingdom was not uniformly accepted (as from Josephus's account one might think it was) as the desirable outcome of a constitutional change of government in the fullness of time under the benevolent auspices of law and order. The kingdom of the Saints was brought into being by blood and fire; and while the violence was commonly delegated to angels and miracles, there would seem to have been little objection to violence as such: Apocalyptic was not a pre-vision of Gandhi's principle of non-violent opposition! But difference of opinion was not confined to the sphere of politics, whether practical or ideal. There was dispute on such fundamental questions of theory as the nature and content of tradition and the nature and seat of authority. In this regard the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been of striking importance. If the Qumran community can be plausibly identified with both the supposedly quietist Essenes and the decidedly militarist Zealots, it would appear that both the accepted classification of the types of Judaism then extant, and the very criterion of the classification, stand in need of drastic revision.

It is clear at least that non-conformity with what we may loosely call 'official' Judaism (or rather, with the Judaism we now think of as 'official') was no rarity or oddity but an ever-present phenomenon; and fortunately so, since its many different appearances and changing varieties did not allow 'official' Judaism to slumber but forced it constantly to a further examination of its ways. Two instances can be named which have persisted, though in the last period miserably, to our own time.

The first of these was hardly inside Jewry. I am thinking of that queerest of all survivals, the Samaritans. The Biblical

account of their origin (2 Kings xvii) was rejected by them as tendentious. They claimed to be authentically Jews and representative of authentic Judaism. They were strictly monotheist, strict adherents of the Pentateuch, and, as the Talmud itself admitted, strictly observant of those practices of Judaism which they recognized as binding. They had their sacred books, their geographical centre, their doctrinal hope, their moral sanctions and their own theology; and for some time they had their own political importance in the then Middle East. They are now a very few families, about four hundred souls in all; yet they are still proud in their confidence that God is with them, and that the 'day of recompense' promised in the Song of Moses (Deut. xxxii, 35) will come.

From the point of view of the theory of Judaism the Samaritans may be classed as fundamentalists, worshippers of the letter of the Pentateuch; and the same may be said of our second instance, the Karaites, though they accepted the whole of the Hebrew Bible as their authority and not the Pentateuch alone. The Karaites began to appear in the eighth century and spread rapidly till, in the tenth, their growth was checked by the efforts of the great Rabbinic scholar and polemist Saadyah (882-942). The nature of their schism is well indicated by their Hebrew name *Sons of the Text* and the motto of their eighth-century leader, Anan: Search the Scriptures. According to their own claim they go back to Biblical times and they are tacitly identified with the Sadducees by medieval Rabbinic writers. In theory they live by the plain Biblical text. They certainly rejected Talmudic interpretation. But they developed an interpretation and a tradition of their own and so acquired the essential instrument of adaptation to circumstance which enabled them to survive. And they survived for a long time with dignity, producing a number of distinguished writers, among them many theologians and grammarians. The very text of the Hebrew Bible used in the Synagogue as standard, that called Massoretic, is the work of the tenth-century Karaite family of Ben Asher.

The point to be remarked upon is not so much the emergence of the sect as its strength. In its early centuries it was so strong that there seems to have been a possibility that it might have swallowed up the greater part of Jewry. Since Karaite communities survive till this very day (there are said to have been about 25,000 Karaites in South Russia and about 3,000 elsewhere before the first world war), it appears that an organized non-Talmudic Judaism is a practical (although not necessarily a pleasing) possibility. We have thus in the Karaite movement a genuine and systematic revolt, and a revolt which might have succeeded. But it did not, and is therefore saluted with hard names. For

*Treason doth never prosper. What's the reason?
If it did prosper, none dare call it treason.*

There is one instance in the history of Judaism of revolt which 'prospered'. If it is to be considered a revolt, it is a very important and persisting one, and one that captured much of the heart of Jewry. I refer to the movements linked with the Kabbala. Kabbala is the 'received wisdom' [the word means 'what is received by word of mouth'; 'oral tradition'] of the mystical schools, and it has a long history behind it. In the early Rabbinic period it was frowned upon. In the medieval period it joined the stream of Neo-Platonism and enjoyed a fresh and quiet incubation.

The point of special interest for our enquiry is that its great exponents in the thirteenth century seem to have been rebellious students of Maimonides, much as some modern mystical movements in general religious thought originated in the revulsion against Hegel. Maimonides and his followers had certainly 'tidied up' Judaism, but they had tidied it up too well. The century of the flowering of the rationalistic spirit in Judaism was followed at once by that of the mystics, Maimonides's Code and Guide by the Zohar.

The Zohar, the 'Book of Splendour', in spite of its immense reputation, is only now being properly studied, and there is

still no scientifically edited text. Up to our own day its detailed structure was never adequately examined nor the nature of its composition explained. Its very language was not properly investigated. (All this is now being changed through the prolonged and systematic researches of Professor Scholem of the Hebrew University. A preliminary report on his principal findings is to be found in his English lectures *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. 3, London, 1955.) With the exception of the English version of Simon and Sperling, which however contains, according to the reckoning of Professor Scholem, only about half the original, the existing translations are unreliable and at times misleading.

Yet we may note some of its more general characteristics. First, it presents itself, in the main, as a commentary on the Pentateuch and thus claims to be an integral part of the tradition. Further, since it is put into the mouths of early Mishnaic Rabbis, it is offered as an *authoritative* part of the tradition, that is, as 'authentic' Judaism re-emergent.

The sense of Scripture expounded in the Zohar is not the obvious one. The Pentateuchal narrative is seen as one vast allegory. It has an inner subject, however much it may be concealed from the uninitiated view; and this subject is the three-fold one of God and his creative activity, the soul of man and its destiny, and the people of God and its Messianic function within the human and super-human world.

This attitude to the text of Scripture is of course no novelty, although it is carried out by the Zohar in a bold and original way. But so it is too by its models, the Talmudic Midrashim; while the works of Philo of Alexandria in the long distant Hellenistic period offer a close analogy in approach and at times close parallels in execution. In the same way, the groundwork of the Zoharistic doctrine of God and the soul is embedded in those strange streams of theosophical speculation called summarily by the name of Gnostic.¹ Here too there would seem

¹ So Scholem, *Major Trends* (e.g. pp. 49, 117, 230, 279, 298), although he is concerned, too, to point out the differences.

to be in essence little original or new, although there is much striking symbolism and picturesque imagery. The novelty of the Zohar and the allied literature lies rather, for the theory of Judaism, in their treatment of the Jewish people and its vocation. In this the 'reasons' for the precepts of the Law¹ take an important place; for it is the teaching of this literature that in fulfilling the precepts Jewry takes a required place in the divine economy and so participates in the workings of the cosmos. The practice of the precepts is no longer a discipline, a drill. It is the fighting of the battle itself. And the stake is the greatest of all. In performing the precepts we are not only, in some mysterious manner, influencing events. We are fulfilling some need in God himself.

One concomitant of these ideas was a system of 'practical' Kabbala which it is difficult to distinguish from magic. In particular, the presumed efficacy of the names of God and angels, used in the right way and on the right occasions, lent a spurious appearance of science to what appears to be an unfortunate vagary of the human mind. But all this apart (and every doctrine has its extravagance), it is the root conception which demands attention. It represents God as being in need of man and as depending on man for the maintenance, or restoration, of his divinity. When God brought out the children of Israel from Egypt 'in order that I may dwell among them' (Exod. xxix, 45), the secret (and true) meaning is the 'great mystery' (so Nachmanides tells us in his commentary on the Pentateuch) that the need was not man's but God's.

The magnitude of the change involved in this conception is reflected in the new approach it offers to the ever-present and ever-agonizing problem of the nature and cause of the Dispersal of Jewry (the 'Diaspora', see below, pp. 203 ff.). In the Bible the Dispersal is a punishment and it will come to an end with repentance. The stress is on the improvement and recreation of man. In the Kabbala, particularly in the shape it assumed in the hands of Isaac Luria (sixteenth century), the Dispersal is the outcome of a mysterious break in the cosmic

¹ Above cap. ix and p. 139.

order which reflects a break in God and a diffusion of his holiness. The Dispersal is the instrument for the mending of that break. Sparks of divine holiness have become lost in the four corners of the earth and it is the function of dispersed Jewry to seek them out and to rescue them and to re-assemble them. The stress is thus not on the re-creation of man but on the re-integration of God. Jewry is not the subject of God's justified anger but the tool for God's return to himself.

This doctrine, however much it can be propped up by references in the classical literature, may fairly be called a revolt. It runs counter to the basic assumption of Judaism as represented by the more obvious statements of the Hebrew Bible, the Talmudic Rabbis, the systematic account of Judaism given by the philosophers and the plain teaching of the traditional Prayer Book. The Pentateuch says: 'Be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy'; and the old Rabbinic commentary states squarely: 'If you make yourselves holy, I consider it as if you made me holy. Yet *do not understand from this* that IF you hallow me, I am hallowed, but if you do NOT hallow me, I am NOT hallowed. "I am holy", whether you hallow me or whether you do not.'

The Kabbala, or at least this side of it, represents another type of thinking altogether; and Professor Scholem is obviously right in drawing attention again and again (*Major Trends*, Index, *s.v.* Myth, mythology and mythical) to the mythical elements with which it abounds. These may result from the preservation and proliferation of ancient themes; they may be an accretion from environmental associations; or they may represent a recrudescence of the archetypal forms which some psychologists believe to constitute the permanent structure of human thought. But myth they are; and although in themselves they are of great interest, their presence poses the problem of the nature of Judaism in an inescapable way. The fact that their traces can be found in ancient literature and that they were accepted by many distinguished Jews, is no argument for their validity. The worship of nature gods, of Moloch, of Adonis

and of the 'queen of heaven', all existed within Biblical Jewry; and it was Aaron the high priest who fashioned, and built an altar before, the golden calf. But this did not make their worship part of Judaism. On the contrary, it was the special nature and achievement of Judaism to set its face against them and to attempt to eradicate them. For Judaism, as Maimonides (*Resp.* 373) says baldly of an early Kabbalistic classic, they are false gods, and must be clearly recognized as such and repudiated.

The two great periods of the emergence of the Kabbala (the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries) call for some attention. They were times of storm and trouble within and without the Jewish communities; and the fact suggests that we have in Kabbalism the phenomenon which Gilbert Murray made familiar to students of Greek religion by the name of 'failure of nerve'. Was it not, perhaps, a 'failure of nerve' which prompted the composition and the spread of the Zohar and allied literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and its reappearance from the sixteenth to the eighteenth; and is it not a similar 'failure of nerve', coupled with an understandable recrudescence of Messianic enthusiasm, which has caused its revival in our own day? It is clear that this revival, whatever the explanation of it may be and whatever one may think of its terms, is the most significant fact in the present world of Jewish learning. It is not a form of escapism as the interest in archeology can easily become. It is a genuine attempt to grapple with the religious problem. And it is characterized not only by dissatisfaction at received explanations. It is an endeavour to find or provide others.

Yet for all that it may be mistaken. The fact would seem to be that we must distinguish two sides in the so-called mystical doctrine. The one, the doctrine of God, is gnostic and mythological; the other, the doctrine of the *approach to God*, is emotional and pietistic. So far as the former (the theosophy) is concerned, enough has been said to suggest that its being accounted within Judaism is problematical. The latter, the approach to God, may contain a new emphasis, but it is not, in itself, a new

departure. To the reader of the Psalms, of the Aggadic literature, of Bahye's *Duties of the Heart*,¹ of Gabirol's *Royal Crown* (even, as we have seen, of Maimonides's '*Deuteronomy*' and *Guide for the Perplexed*), there is no novelty in the themes of the service of the heart, of the joy in the carrying out of the precepts of the Law, of the living ardour of worship, of the thirst for the living God. The Kabbalist can say no more than the Psalmist (and I wish he could always say it as simply and intelligibly) that God is our dwelling place, our light, our refuge, our portion for ever, our glory; that we are in the charge of God's angels who bear us up in their hands; that the very fountain of our lives is God—and not a distant God, a God far away, but a God who is very near, a God to be met in prayer and who himself goes out to meet man. This sense of nearness and yearning and tenderness of feeling is no discovery of the mystics, whether of the thirteenth or the seventeenth or the twentieth century. It is as Rabbinic as it is Biblical, as Maimonidean as it is Rabbinic. The whole tradition of Judaism is one continuous prayer to be taught the path of life which leads in joy to the presence of God.

This may be seen in the later moralistic literature, the great growth and expansion of which also commenced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There is in it not much freshness of new inspiration; but the old themes are sustained and reaffirmed to meet the situation of the day. An interesting sub-variety of it is easily accessible to the student in the so-called 'ethical will', a selection of which was published in Hebrew and English (Philadelphia, 1926) by the late Israel Abrahams, author of the illuminating *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* with its account of the lives of ordinary people. These 'testaments', like the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (above, p. 64) and the fourth chapter of the *Book of Tobit* in the Apocrypha, are written

¹ An eleventh-century popular classic voicing a protest against 'externalism' (the 'duties of the *Limbs*') in religion, much in the manner of the Persian Sufis; available in an English translation by M. Hyamson. The background of the book is strongly Neo-Platonic.

directions for the guidance of the coming generation. Unlike them however they are not public manifestos but personal documents; and anyone who wishes to know what Judaism meant to the plain man would do well to browse in Abrahams's collection. He will find it meant something sober and responsible. The high lights are dimmed. There is little excitement, much trite counsel. But the total effect is sound. Let us hear a couple of paragraphs from the last one excerpted by Abrahams. It is from the end of the eighteenth century, about the time when the 'medieval' period of Judaism, commencing with the massacres and expulsions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was coming to its long close:

'To be at peace with all the world, with Jew and Gentile, must be your foremost aim in this terrestrial life. Contend with no man. In the first instance, your home must be the abode of quietude and happiness; no harsh word must be heard there, but over all must reign love, amity, modesty, and a spirit of gentleness and reverence.

'This spirit must not end with the home, however. In your dealings with the world you must allow neither money nor ambition to disturb you. Forego your rights; envy no man. For the main thing is peace, peace with the whole world.

'Show all men every possible respect; deal with them in the finest integrity and faithfulness. For Habakkuk summed up the whole Law in the one sentence: "The righteous shall live by his faith."

'The root of all the commandments consists in the 248 affirmative and the 365 negative precepts. But the branches, which include all virtuous and vicious habits extend into countless thousands and thousands. To specify them is impossible, but the Scriptures have in many places reduced them to general categories. One of these is: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him." Another: "Keep thy feet in an even path."' (*Hebrew Ethical Wills*, vol. 2, pp. 344-5)

It is worth noting that 'faith' in this passage seems to be taken in the sense of honesty, reliability; while the 'countless

thousands and thousands of commandments' are accepted as the detail, in the path of our daily lives, of the acknowledgement of the presence of God. It is all very ordinary, humdrum, dull. It has no pretensions. It does not profess to penetrate the veil, still less to tear it asunder; and it is the tearing asunder of the veil, the forcing of the gates of heaven, the 'presuming to go up to the top of the mountain',¹ which is the characteristic element in the Kabbala and its present revival. The conception that the carrying out of the precepts by man is a cosmic need and in some way affects the divine essence is as doubtfully Jewish as it is humanly dangerous, as any student of the seventeenth-century messianic outburst and its antinomian excesses knows.

And it has all happened before, and elsewhere. Students of all religions know only too well the all-too frequent results of over-curious prying into the mysteries of the divine nature; and they know too how the fascination of sin has led men of all religions and in varying epochs and continents to see God not in spite of sin but in, through and even by, the act of sinning. As I think of these general facts and of their particular exemplification in the history of Judaism, I am reminded of a striking comment of Mr. Leonard Woolf on J. M. Keynes' *Memoir on his Early Beliefs*. Keynes says of himself and his friends: 'We were not aware that civilization was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved.' On this Woolf writes: 'The sordid and savage story of history has been written by man's irrationality; and the thin, precarious crust of civilization which has from time to time been built over the bloody mess has always been built by reason. It is not true that men are rational; but it is false that they are always and only irrational. That is why it is not unreasonable to hold that the world would, and

¹ A favourite Kabbalistical phrase taken from Num. xiv, 44. It is what Mr. C. S. Lewis has called the 'ravenous desire to break the bounds, to tear the curtain, to be in the secret' which characterizes the 'quasi-prurient interest in the Occult'.

even could, do better with a little less irrationality and with a little more of Keynes' thin and brittle reason.'

I incline to echo that in connexion with our subject. Indeed, the same might be said in the case of all religions. For religion is one of the great bridges, possibly the greatest of the bridges, which has been built over the human 'mess'. Whether it has been built by reason unaided, or in what sense the word 'reason' is to be understood, is a matter for debate. But it will be agreed that reason is to be contrasted with impulse and passion and with the myth-weaving which is their articulation. The return to myth-making will not help.

For religion, although *consonant with* human nature, is not necessarily a *manifestation of* human nature. Judaism would say rather that it is a manifestation of the *divine* nature directed to the *guidance and control of* human nature. It is a yoke, albeit of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is an imposition, and as such a command. The call of Abraham is typical. It is to *abandon* natural ties ('Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house'); and it was made in order that he should 'command his children and his household after him to keep the way' not of man or of nature but 'of God'. Religion is by its very essence uncomfortable. It is God breaking into our lives.

Of course he is breaking into what is his own. But how and when and where? We must seek for an answer in the three 'orders' of nature, of morals, and of revelation.

A consideration of these necessitates an incursion into some of the results in Judaism of what has appeared to many the misalliance between philosophy and religion, to others their saving union.